The psychology of nursing care

Psychology Applied to Nursing series
Series editor: Dave Müller, Suffolk College

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Psychology and Mental Health Nursing *Derek Milne*

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The psychology of nursing care

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In memory of my father, Alexander Farquharson Niven, who helped during the preparation of this book, but unfortunately was unable to see the finished product

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Series Editor's Foreword

This book series is designed for the nursing profession and those responsible for teaching nurses on both pre- and post-registration programmes of study. The linking of the nursing curriculum with higher education and the implementation of Project 2000 has led to a radical revision of nurse education. Many nurses on pre-registration courses will be studying at degree level and will be gaining an academic qualification as well as entry to the nursing Register. These forward looking and exciting changes have led to the need to develop new reading material for nurses to progress both academically and professionally.

This is equally true for those nurses post-registration who are committed to enhancing their qualifications base. The expansion in higher education has led to a wide range of part-time degree courses for nurses as well as the linking of post-registration courses such as health visiting and district nursing with higher level academic qualifications. The introduction by the English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting of the Higher Award for experienced professionals is an important step to facilitate continuing professional development for the nursing profession. This, in turn, has led to the need to bring together nursing and those disciplines akin to professional practice.

It has long been recognized that the study of psychology in applied contexts is of major importance both in learning to become a nurse and in moving towards becoming a reflective practitioner. Psychology as the scientific study of human behaviour provides a methodology through which individuals can evaluate the effectiveness of the provision of care within hospitals and the community. Psychology and nursing are both characterized by adopting a scientific and hence an empirical approach to the collection of information and using it to make informed decisions. The importance of research within the fields of psychology and nursing has led to psychologists and nurses working together both in terms of curriculum design and in carrying out research to help provide high standards of patient care.

All the books in the series are characterized by the emphasis placed on the critical examination of research evidence. Each volume aims to review current practice from a psychological perspective in the light of current research being undertaken by nurses as well as other

professionals. The authors, in bringing together this information, all seek to offer recommendations to inform nursing practice not in a prescriptive way but in a way in which nurses themselves can evaluate their practice. All the texts are ideal for students studying psychology and nursing for the first time and are written at the appropriate level for inclusion on reading lists for students studying at diploma and degree level. At the same time, the applied research nature of the texts makes them invaluable as a source to support nurses gaining further qualifications as part of their professional development.

The texts are contemporary, derived from a strong research base and written by authors with considerable experience of teaching nurses and working with them professionally. I hope that you enjoy this volume in the series and are attracted to the related texts which, taken together, provide nurses with a resource base from which to study psychology as applied to nursing.

Professor Dave Müller
Suffolk College, Ipswich

Foreword

Most nurses will agree that an understanding of psychology is an important outcome of current nurse education and that psychological theory contributes to effective nursing practice. Nursing is essentially an interactive occupation and considerable importance is given to the interpersonal aspects of therapeutic nurse–patient relationships. Psychology has a central role to play in understanding those relationships. It can assist in developing strategies to enhance patient care and help nurses understand patients' behaviour.

Fewer nurses, however, agree about what elements of mainstream psychology are most relevant to practice and whether or not they can simply be superimposed, unchanged, on nursing curricula. This is no less true for the many subject areas which contribute to an overall theory of nursing. However, the starting point of these others has been to ask what can a particular discipline offer to nursing practice, rather than the more appropriate question of what is it that nurses do and what do they need to know in order to do it better and improve patient care.

The whole issue of the role of disciplines like psychology was the topic of a memorable conversation I had on a long train journey with a sociologist who taught nurses from time to time. Nursing, he claimed, was not a discipline in its own right. What was taught under the broad umbrella of nursing theory was just a hotchpotch of theories, borrowed from the biological and behavioural sciences to articulate what was essentially a set of practical skills applied in a particular way to a range of different circumstances. If the journey hadn't been so long I might have let it pass as the uninformed comments of an outsider. I was, however, in no hurry, the train already being caught, and I chose instead to consider his perspective. In some respects he was right, but his analysis had captured only half the picture.

Nursing is, and must be, first and foremost a practice. It is about the behaviour of nurses towards patients and that behaviour is about both the actions of nurses and the thinking processes which generate and support those actions. The extent to which nursing is an academic discipline in its own right with its own empirically derived theory is quite rightly open to challenge. There is still insufficient nursing research which has generated evidence through direct observation of

what nurses actually do to adequately theorise nursing practice in the context of everyday workplace constraints.

The essence of my challenge was not to dispute that there is a central role for academic disciplines in nursing curricula, but that the mix and application of these subjects was *not arbitrary* but organised around nursing events and nurse–patient relationships to create something uniquely nursing in orientation.

By the time our journey had ended, we had reached some agreement that nursing theory was not merely an aggregate of free-standing elements of academic subjects which could be taught as such. We concluded that nursing practice could not easily be extricated from the subjects which underpinned it. What made the theory of nursing more than just a collection of borrowed theories was the unique mix of subjects, and the relationships which bound each subject to the *practice* of nursing and to each other in order to create a way of thinking quite different from a mere aggregate of its parts. It is no wonder then that separating out the parts to try and offer readers pure psychology with nursing tacked on has left many nurses and nursing students feeling alienated from the theoretical parts of their courses.

What nursing courses and the texts that support them need to provide is an explication of those aspects of psychology which nurses are required to understand and utilise in any given nursing context in order to practise most effectively. *That* is the starting point in this text. We have used examples of nursing care, not merely to illustrate the psychological concepts covered in this text as others have done, but rather as a guide for selecting what is most relevant to an applied psychology of nursing. This book has attempted to refine the application of psychology to nursing care by taking *nursing* as the guiding framework. In this context readers have been provided with a repertoire of psychological theories and skills which will be useful tools in solving uniquely nursing problems.

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