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NURSING HOME ETHNOGRAPHY

Introduction

It has become a truism in gerontological research that, as one gets old, the external environment plays an increasingly significant role as a variable determining one's experience of the world. In June of 1984, several researchers will gather to examine one old age environment in particular - that of the intermediate care nursing home. Moreover, this group will address an understanding of that environment from the perspective of ethnography, which is seen as a yet unrecognised but valuable complement to other methodological approaches. The proceedings of this symposium were presented to participants of the IAPS 8 in West Berlin.

The study

One and one-half million citizens in the United States of America now reside in institutions commonly referred to as nursing homes. This represents 5% of the elderly (over 65) population of the country - a percentage similar to that found in other industrialised nations (especially of the West). Moreover, when considered across the span of the years of old age (65-100+), fully 20% of the U.S. population can expect to spend a period of time residing in a nursing home. It is now getting difficult to find any adult citizen who has not had a direct experience with the institutionalisation of an elderly relative.

Beyond our phenomenal experience with nursing homes, the U.S. taxpayers spend a tremendous proportion of the national budget for custodial care of the elderly in 'intermediate care' nursing home facilities. Most Americans enter nursing homes fully expecting to exhaust personal financial resources within one or two years. They then expect to become dependent on government insurance programmes such as Medicaid and, in fact, Medicaid is the primary funding mechanism for long-term inpatient nursing care in the United States, consuming % of the federal budget!

With these facts in mind, it seems almost unbelievable that research into the nursing home scene is so poorly funded. It has recently been pointed out that for every \$1,000 spent on maintaining an individual in a nursing home, \$1.00 is spent on research into treatment and humane forms of care. (Source: Dr. David Drachman, quoted in Newsletter, Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, #1, 1981). While the disproportion is only now being addressed through large increases of funding in medical research at the National Institute on Aging, there remains a huge need for research advances into psycho-social aspects of nursing home care.

A very recent national conference designed to set research priorities in the area of mental health and nursing homes (October, 1983) did indeed help to set the tone for future efforts. Clearly, the influence

of the environment in nursing home care is seen as a crucial area for research yet this often is implicated as a background or residual area, in deference to research related to assessment and treatment of the internal state of nursing home patients.

It is the primary objective of the upcoming American Symposium on Nursing Home Ethnography to draw together researchers who have, from an ethnographic perspective, spent many rigorous months and years scrutinising and observing the nursing home environment broadly defined.

It is the primary objective of this proposal to present the findings of the above mentioned symposium to participants of the 8th International Conference on People and Their Physical Surroundings, in July of 1984, West Berlin.

While still in the planning stages, as of October 1983, the American Symposium on Nursing Home Ethnography is expected to take place at the Sun Coast Gerontology Center, Tampa, Florida, in June of 1984. The premise of the symposium involves the belief that while a good deal of excellent ethnographic or participant-observation research has been accomplished within the nursing home setting, the results of these research efforts have not been drawn together nor given wide recognition. Hence, the symposium conveners will invite those persons who have done excellent research to meet for a 2-3 day period in order to:

1. Summarise their research.
2. Identify crucial issues which relate to methods, methodology and findings.
3. Share reference materials for eventual publication of a bibliography.
4. Identify important areas for future research.
5. Discuss the complementary relationships of ethnographic and/or qualitative approaches and quantitative approaches to nursing home research.

In July of 1984, the symposium conveners will travel to West Berlin to begin presentation of findings and seek to foster international discussion of these issues.

Some highly significant areas to be addressed by symposium participants will likely include the following:

1. How closely do nursing homes (here defined as 'I.C.F.'s') approach Goffman's model of 'total institutions?'
2. Can we as researchers substantiate the presence of an 'inmate culture' within nursing homes? If so, what are its features? If not, why doesn't it emerge?
3. Can we as researchers do a better job of describing the phenomenal experience of life/work within the nursing home?

4. What are the roles of the built and social interactional environments in the creation/maintenance/destruction of dependency and disabling conditions of patients?
5. What techniques are available to the ethnographic researcher who has interest in learning about nursing home life and documenting research findings?
6. Are there constant organisational features of nursing home life which allow for authentic comparisons from one institution to another, or from one type of institution to another?
7. How can ethnography contribute to more general research conducted through other disciplines, with the aim of improving care, implementing training, setting policies for the future?

Invited participants will vary by discipline, but will share a common interest and similar 'ethnographic' contributions to this emerging sub-field. They will, for example, come from anthropology (Stafford, Vesperi, Henderson, Kayser-Jones), Sociology (Gubrium, Posner, Marshall), Psychology (DeLong), etc.

It is proposed, herein, that three persons will make presentations to the IAPS 8. This group will require approximately 3 hours for the presentation and could profitably expand the format to allow for the offering of a 1/2 day 'mini-symposium' within the IAPS format. This would enable greater participation of audience members and opportunity for cross-national sharing of information and ideas. Such tangible plans would be negotiated with the conference planners as the time draws nearer.