

Included or not included? A qualitative study exploring mental health service users' experiences of participation and inclusion in their community.

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This paper presents the Phase Two results of a two phased study that explored mental health users' experiences of participation and social inclusion in their communities utilising the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) as a framework for enquiry (WHO 2001). People with long-term mental illness are among the most excluded in society (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004). Parr et al, defined exclusion as a negative consequence of rejection, avoidance and distancing from other community members (2004, p.405) associated with stigma, prejudice and discrimination. Keenan and McKay (2006) highlighted that Irish service users regularly experienced both stigma and discrimination and this led them to feel isolated and excluded from participation in community life. Participation is a central concern of occupational therapy, and refers to involvement in a life situation (WHO, 2001).

Method

This study further examined participation and social inclusion for individuals with mental health difficulties within the communities of Limerick (Ireland), London (Canada) and Newcastle (Australia) their personal experiences were explored through qualitative interviews.

The research objectives were to:

1. Examine and explore activities and participation and the environment as experienced by mental health service users.
2. Examine social inclusion as experienced by mental health service users.

Qualitative interviews uncover and explore the meanings that underpin people's lives, routines, behaviours and feelings, providing a rich description of participants' experiences of social inclusion and exclusion. The interview structure was devised from the ICF framework and focuses on two components: Environment and Activities and Participation, Interviews were electronically recorded and analysed using Nvivo software.

Results and Conclusions

Research data are being collected and will be analysed through 2009/10. Initial findings indicate that generally, people feel more socially included than excluded however, stigmatising attitudes do exist due to a lack of public understanding about mental health.

This study will contribute to practice/evidence base in several ways, the findings will further examine ICF components relevance to this population. It will enhance our understanding of service users' experiences of participation and inclusion. It will offer insights into how practice can be shaped to address participation and inclusion.