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Mental health work: Enacted narratives in milieu therapy

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Introduction: Milieu therapy enhances recovery through everyday occupation, by that staff and patients are doing things together that create healing experiences. We need to know more about the content and quality of such emerging occupational relations.

Objectives: This study explore how staff and patients relate in milieu therapy and how encounters emerge and become therapeutic in a narrative sense.

Approach: Narrative interviews and participant observations where conducted through an ethnographic approach. Four staff members participated in the narrative interviews. They recollected outstanding stories or episodes emerging when doing things together with patients at the ward. Both the interviewer and the research project was known among the staff members due to the yearlong ongoing ethnography.

Data was analysed using theoretical resources of enacted narratives (Ricoeur, Mattingly) and we conducted narrative analyses of staffs stories, applying a narrative-hermeneutic methodology.

Results: Findings show how, through stories and episodes of narrative imagination, the staff initiate narrative meaning through their exquisite abilities to situate themselves in emerging encounters with patients. An overall plot show how staff recognize and act upon situations that occur in the occupational environment at the ward. Further, our results show how to support a devastated patient through occupation, how occupations ground significant relation between staff and patient, and how stories of change emerge from occupation.

Conclusion: The results highlight and develop new understanding of how staff can use occupation to facilitate change through enacted narratives in a mental health setting.