

Sense of Belonging: A Vital Mental Health Concept

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Sense of belonging is a concept that has not been researched in psychiatric nursing practice. Using a concept-analysis strategy proposed by Walker and Avant, the authors present a detailed description of the concept that evolved from a series of inductive and deductive strategies. Sense of belonging is defined as the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment. Sense of belonging has important applicability for clinical use as well as continued theory development in psychiatric nursing.
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IN AN ACCOUNT OF her experiences as a young woman with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, Sylvia Frumpkin asks, "Is there no place on Earth for me?" (Sheehan, 1982). Psychiatric nurses hear similar statements regularly from clients who are psychotic, depressed, anxious, or suicidal: "I don't fit in anywhere . . . I feel so unimportant to anyone . . . I'm not a part of anything. . . ."

The impetus for these types of statements has been attributed to a number of psychological concepts, including loneliness, alienation, and hopelessness. However, upon closer examination such statements appear to reflect a unique phenomenon that has received little attention in the mental health literature, sense of belonging. Using a concept-analysis strategy outlined by Walker and Avant (1988), this article presents an analysis of the concept of sense of belonging and describes its potential relevance for psychiatric nursing.

Walker and Avant (1988) presented a strategy for concept analysis that enables the attributes of a

concept to be identified and examined. The steps in this process are selection of a concept and determination of the aims of the analysis; identification of the uses of the concept; determination of the defining attributes; construction of a model case; construction of borderline, related, contrary, and invented cases; identification of antecedents and consequences; and definition of empirical referents. Sense of belonging is examined here using this process of concept analysis.

The analysis presented here is based on the authors' efforts to build a conceptual model of human relatedness using both inductive and deductive strategies. This methodology is in concert with the hybrid model of concept development described by Madden (1990). The hybrid model consists of (1) a theoretical phase with literature review and development of working definitions, (2) a fieldwork phase for data collection and clinical observation, and (3) an analytic phase in which findings are synthesized to clarify the concept. Over a period of 2 years, we developed clinical case studies based on observations and conducted small-group interviews with psychiatric nurses. Subsequently, we initiated an integrative research review of more than 2,500 articles to synthesize information pertinent to belonging and human relatedness. Currently, we conducted a series of four focus groups with individuals having no previous psychiatric treatment history. Analysis of the data

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from all of these activities guided our continued conceptualization of sense of belonging and human relatedness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A pervasive human concern is establishing and maintaining relatedness to others, social institutions, environments, and self (Berlin & Johnson, 1989; Birtchnell, 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Wynne, 1984). One component of connecting one's self into the fabric of surrounding people, places, and things is a sense of belonging. Maslow (1954) identified belonging as a basic human need, ranking it third in his hierarchy. Anant (1966) posited that belonging is the missing conceptual link in understanding mental health and mental illness from a relationship/interactional perspective. Belongingness is defined by Anant (1966, p. 21) as a "sense of personal involvement in a social system so that persons feel themselves to be an indispensable and integral part of the system". It is noteworthy that Anant emphasized an affective and evaluative rather than descriptive perspective of belonging. Indeed, recent research on such concepts as social support and reciprocity suggested that individuals' perceptions of their interactions and relationships may be far more powerful determinants of social disruption and mental disorders than actual network reports (Antonucci & Israel, 1986).

Belonging as a mental health concept has not been discussed or researched widely. Scant literature addresses the concept, and much of this is narrative rather than empirical. In an early paper, Anant (1966) wrote that belongingness implies recognition and acceptance of a member by other members in a group. In 1967 and 1969 reports, Anant described two studies in which the relationships between belongingness, anxiety, and self-sufficiency were examined. The first study was conducted with 47 nursing students; the second study was completed with four groups of Indian college students who were members of four traditional caste groups. Although the results of both studies supported an inverse relationship between belongingness and anxiety and intuitively appear valid, serious methodological flaws attenuate interpretations of Anant's findings. In addition to sampling and procedural concerns, there is no information on the validity and reliability or on sample items of the tool Anant developed to measure

belonging. Anant (1967) admitted that the measure may have tapped dependence rather than belonging.

Anecdotal accounts of belonging are numerous in the literature. Dasberg (1976) identified lack of a sense of belonging as the common denominator in the mental breakdown of Israeli soldiers during war. Every battle-stricken soldier described feeling cut off and uprooted, abandoned, rejected, and psychologically severed. Kestenberg and Kestenberg (1988), reporting on discussion groups for individuals who had been child survivors of the Holocaust, related that many child survivors felt that they did not belong anywhere in terms of country, social group, or age. The authors noted further that belonging is an important component of identity and object relationships. "As the child grows, he develops a sense of belonging not only to the family, but to the community, the nation, and a cultural group." (Kestenberg and Kestenberg, 1988, p. 536).

Some studies alluded to belonging as a component of other constructs. Steinkamp and Kelly (1987) equated subjective social integration with feelings of belonging and being loved. Lindgren (1990) concluded that social support "allows one to believe that he or she is cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and belongs to a network of mutual obligation" (p. 469).

Building on the definition of belonging proposed by Anant, we have defined sense of belonging as the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment. A system can be a relationship or organization, and an environment can be natural or cultural. Through the process of concept analysis, we have delineated two dimensions of sense of belonging: (1) valued involvement: the experience of feeling valued, needed, accepted; and (2) fit: the person's perception that his or her characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment. These dimensions are in concert with Kestenberg and Kestenberg's (1988) notation that belonging implies object relationships (valued involvement) and identity (fit).

USES OF THE CONCEPT

Walker and Avant (1988) cited the need to identify as many uses of the concept as possible during the initial stage of concept analysis. Belonging

should be considered from psychological, sociological, physical, and spiritual perspectives. Psychologically, belonging is an internal affective or evaluative feeling, or perception. This could best be described as sense of belonging; that is, a person's experience of being valued or important to an external referent and experiencing a fit between self and that referent. Sociologically, belonging connotes membership in groups or systems. Using this perspective, belonging can be observed and described through behavioral referents such as membership in groups and social networks. These behavioral referents are the physical signs of belonging. Another connotation of belonging, when used in the physical sense, is the possession of objects, persons, or places. Spiritually, belonging depicts a metaphysical relationship with a being or place that exists at a universal level.

This analysis focuses on the psychological aspect of belonging or sense of belonging. We propose that sense of belonging occurs in relation to various external referents. These referents include other persons, groups, objects, organizations, environments (both physical and social), and spiritual dimensions. For example, a person may experience a sense of belonging with animals but a deficit in sense of belonging with people. Therefore, discussion of a person's sense of belonging requires identification of a corresponding referent.

DEFINING ATTRIBUTES

Applying the framework proposed by Walker and Avant (1988), sense of belonging occurs when the defining attributes, or characteristics of the concept, are evident. The defining characteristics assist the clinician to identify when the phenomenon is occurring. Based on the literature review and analysis of interviews and focus group data, we have derived two defining attributes of sense of belonging: (1) the person experiences being valued, needed, or important with respect to other people, groups, objects, organizations, environments, or spiritual dimensions; and (2) the person experiences a fit or congruence with other people, groups, objects, organizations, environments, or spiritual dimensions through shared or complementary characteristics.

MODEL CASE

A model case is an example of the concept under investigation and represents the characteristics as-

sociated with that concept. The model cases presented here depict real instances of sense of belonging and include all of the defining attributes.

A retiring nurse is given a farewell party by her colleagues. They tell her how important she has been to them and to the unit. The nurse states that she feels overwhelmed and proud to be a part of this wonderful group of nurses. Not only does the nurse feel as though she fits with this group, she experiences being valued by the nurses.

A young man, a liberal Democrat, enjoys talking with his neighbors and feels himself to be an important part of the community. His neighbors are all conservative Republicans. They tease the Democrat but affectionately comment that he "keeps them honest in their views." In this example, sense of belonging occurs in spite of apparent differences because these conflicting views are perceived as complementary characteristics that promote fit and value.

ANTECEDENTS

Antecedents are those incidents that must occur before the existence of the concept. We propose that the antecedents to sense of belonging are the person's (1) energy for involvement, (2) potential and desire for meaningful involvement, and (3) potential for shared or complementary characteristics. We posit that these antecedents are vital to the identification of deficits in sense of belonging and subsequent interventions. A client who is experiencing major depression, for example, may not have these antecedents because of the clinical, biochemical nature of the disorder. Thus, deficits in sense of belonging in clients with major depression may reflect different deficiencies than in clients such as adolescents or young adults who, from a developmental perspective, are actively searching for belonging.

CONSEQUENCES

Consequences are incidents that occur as a result of the concept. Identification of consequences allows the researcher to begin examining relationships between the proposed concept and resultant incidents. The proposed consequences of sense of belonging include (1) psychological, social, spiritual, or physical involvement; (2) attribution of meaningfulness to that involvement; and (3) fortification or laying down of a fundamental foundation for emotional and behavioral responses.

RELATED CASE

Related cases present concepts similar to the one being examined but have different attributes, antecedents, or consequences. Some concepts that are related to but different from sense of belonging include loneliness, alienation, attachment, and affiliation. The following case illustrates loneliness, a concept described as an emotional state with unpleasant, negative connotations. Loneliness implies a need for another person or group that has been disrupted and is discussed in the context of absence or loss (Copel, 1988; Welt, 1987; Weiss, 1974; Fromm-Reichmann, 1959; Russell, Cutrona, Rose, & Yurko, 1984).

Marie moved to a town where she knew no one. The first several weeks she spent much of her time unpacking and finding her way around. She did spend time with her new neighbors and coworkers, all of whom seemed to really enjoy her company. Yet Marie felt very alone, unhappy, and isolated without her friends and family. Marie's experience with the new neighbors did not necessarily relate to fit and valued involvement, but rather to the loss and disruption of relationships with family and friends.

BORDERLINE CASE

This type of case illustrates only a portion of the defining attributes of the concept. Below are two borderline cases. The first presents the experience of being valued but not fitting, and the second describes fit but negates being valued.

Ann joined a sorority and knew that the other members valued her participation. However, all of the women were from wealthy families and had had very different lives than Ann, who grew up on a farm. At times, Ann wondered if she really belonged in the sorority.

Mary joined a sorority that her mother and two sisters had belonged to in college. Her mother made yearly financial donations to the sorority. Mary knew that she fit in with the women even though she knew that many of them did not like her or value her presence.

CONTRARY CASE

The contrary case illustrates a situation in which none of the defining attributes of the concept are present.

David worked with a group of people who went out every Thursday night for pizza. Even though David was often ignored, did not feel valued by his colleagues, and felt that his specific computer skills were not really rel-

evant to the group's tasks, he went out with the coworkers and supervisor, thinking that it would help him keep his job.

INVENTED CASE

The invented case depicts the concept under investigation in an imaginary situation. This type of allegory allows the researcher to examine if the antecedents, attributes, and consequences of the concept can be illustrated in a non-reality-based situation.

The toy clown was so excited about being brought home from the store by the little girl. He could now be with other toys. He had new batteries and could play games all day and all night. After arriving home, the little girl put him in her room and went off to dinner. The toy clown looked around and saw all of the other toys: balls, dolls, stuffed animals. Each one was so different, but they were all toys for the little girl to play with. "Welcome," said the talking doll. "Another toy for us to play with. We're glad to have you here. The more the merrier!" The toy clown smiled and knew that he was truly home.

EMPIRICAL REFERENTS

Empirical referents are those observed phenomena that show the presence of the concept. For sense of belonging, the empirical referents would be (1) statements from the person that he or she feels valued, needed, or important with respect to other systems or environments; and (2) statements from the person that there are shared or complementary characteristics that promote a sense of fitting with other systems or environments.

These empirical referents reflect the experiential, affective nature of sense of belonging. Behavioral observations must be used with caution because participation, activity, and proximity do not necessarily constitute sense of belonging as defined in this analysis but are more aligned with belonging as defined sociologically. As evidence by David in the contrary case presented above, it is possible for people to go through the motions of belonging without incorporating the critical attributes of the concept. This is an important factor to consider in working with clients who appear to be actively involved but who describe internal experiences of deficits in sense of belonging. Thus, behavioral observations may be suggestive of sense of belonging but cannot be considered definitive measures.

RELEVANCE TO PSYCHIATRIC NURSING

Analysis of concepts relevant to psychiatric nursing allows us to develop and advance the conceptual foundations on which we base our practice. Through identification of phenomena, definition of concept attributes and characteristics, and generation of theory, psychiatric nurses will be able to reframe and augment practice approaches from a tested, scientific perspective (Hall, 1988). Theoretical analysis of the characteristics of sense of belonging allows researchers and clinicians to discuss the phenomenon and to develop further a base of knowledge on which to build relevant applications with clients.

We assert that sense of belonging has important applicability for clinical use. Clients can be assessed for the extent to which they show sense of belonging with respect to individuals, groups, organizations, environments, and spiritual dimensions. For example, is there any referent with which the client experiences a sense of belonging? If so, can the nurse build on that? If not, what interventions can be implemented to help the client develop a sense of belonging? With the development of valid and reliable measures, deficits in sense of belonging can be identified and subsequent interventions tested and implemented. Specific approaches might include helping the client identify the deficit in sense of belonging and generating actions that address the experience of being valued or the experience of fit. Clearly, opportunities exist to devise innovative nursing actions that facilitate client development of the antecedents or attributes of sense of belonging.

We are presently creating and testing an instrument that will measure clients' self-reports of sense of belonging. We expect that this process will promote our understanding of the conceptual foundations of sense of belonging. For example, how is sense of belonging related to psychiatric diagnoses such as major depressive disorder? Does sense of belonging differ through developmental stages? Are deficits in sense of belonging related to certain types of behaviors such as suicide? We anticipate that this instrument will be a potentially useful screening tool for identifying the presence or absence of sense of belonging and those clients requiring interventions to address belonging deficits.

This analysis represents an initial effort to develop conceptual foundations for sense of belonging as an important mental health phenomenon. Continued analysis of the concept and development and testing of empirical measures will be necessary for further refinement. Psychiatric nurses, as well as nurses in other specialties, provide care daily for clients whose sense of belonging is an issue. Theory generation and subsequent clinical application will assist nurses in maximizing their impact on the client's well-being.

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