Participatory action research using photovoice to explore user experiences of recovery in acute mental health occupational therapy facilities

Key findings

- Service users explored their experiences of occupational therapy together, enabled by the Photovoice method.
- While the focus was on the environment of the occupational therapy department, the overall findings suggested that the staff approach was an important aspect of occupational therapy.
- Specific aspects of the environment were valued for different reasons.
- Informal social contact in the garden contrasted with monitoring on the wards.
- Goals, such as writing a book, could be negotiated in the internet café.
- Difficult feelings and hallucinations could be self-managed in the art room and in the garden.
- A sense of achievement was associated with the gardening group, the gym and cooking in the kitchen.
- Being able to drink from a china cup in the kitchen was associated with feeling normal and doing normal every day activities.
- There was a shared view that the findings should be accessible to future inpatients and staff as a priority.
- All five participants sustained their involvement despite experiencing acute ill-health during the ten weeks of the research meetings.

Project aims

The project aimed to understand more about why service users valued occupational therapy in an acute mental health setting. The design built on the findings of a previous study (unpublished).

The researchers aimed to investigate how specific occupational therapy environments were experienced by service users and to generate more evidence to inform and develop occupational therapy in acute care.

The research question was: *How are specific occupational therapy environments, such as the kitchen, art room, gym and internet café, experienced by service users in an acute mental health unit?*

Background

This research explored the environment for occupational therapy in an acute mental health unit in an outer London Borough, from service user perspectives. Within acute units, occupations are increasingly monitored and restricted to minimise risk, leading to concerns about the increasingly custodial role of staff based on wards (Andes and Shattell 2006, Papoulis et al 2014). A previous unpublished study at the unit indicated that service users valued being able to leave the ward and participate in sessions in the occupational therapy department, using facilities such as the kitchen, art rooms and gyms. This research built on those findings.
Methodology

A visual participatory method, Photovoice, was used (Lal et al 2012). This involves taking photographs to represent shared experiences, usually aiming to influence how services are developed and improved. A group of five service users and two facilitators met for ten weekly meetings in the kitchen of the occupational therapy department. The service users were all current or recent inpatients. The facilitators were a service user researcher and an occupational therapist. The group had access to all areas of the department and the occupational therapy team supported the research by recruiting participants and providing ongoing support. From week two onwards, analysis involved scrutinising all the photographs taken in the previous week, identifying the important images and discussing possible themes and categories. Short statements describing a final set of images were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Once the meetings had finished, an advisory group of service users and therapists analysed the statements further. Ethical approval was obtained from the local NHS Research Ethics Committee, the University of Essex ethics committee and the NHS Research and Development Committee. Some of the funds from the UKOTRF Institute of Social Psychiatry Scholarship were used to purchase shopping vouchers for participants, to thank them for their involvement in accordance with the Trust User Involvement policy.

Conclusion

The findings confirmed the importance of the staff approach and occupations in an acute mental health unit, from the service user perspective. Participants valued spaces away from the ward for specific activities and occupations. Other units, which do not have separate facilities, might need to review what this means for service users. Time and space are required to regain skills and motivation, because of the impact of severe mental health issues. Future research could explore how to make the most of staff and their impact on the environment for recovery in an acute unit.

Publications


This study, conducted in 2014-2015, received funding via an Institute of Social Psychiatry Scholarship grant from the UK Occupational Therapy Research Foundation

Grant holder: Dr Wendy Bryant

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Acknowledgements

Particular thanks are given to the service user participants, occupational therapy staff at the unit and sponsorship from CNWL NHS Foundation Trust.

References

