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## RESEARCH REPORT

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### Analysis on “Role Lettering” applied to nurses who have entered their third year of working in hospital

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**Abstract** One of Role lettering methods, “Time-machine message”, was applied to nurses who had entered their third year of working in hospital. As the result, writing down “Time-machine message” was useful for recognizing the problematic side of their inner selves and consequently for easing stress. Furthermore, it was found that the practice of this method was seen by them as an opportunity to reconsider their current situations and prospects. However, there were those nurses who could not concretely imagine themselves in the future, thus the necessity of support for such nurses was suggested.

*Key words* : role lettering, nurses, third year of working in hospital

#### Introduction

Nurses on duty in hospital are in a tense working environment in which they are always required not to make a mistake since their work relates to human life. In addition, although shortening of working hours and a five-day working week (two day-offs weekly) have permeated in Japan today, for nurses who are required to work on shift, improvement on their working condition is still regarded as an issue. Numerous occurrences such as fatigue, sign for mental anxiety, decline in the willingness for work, burnout and such are reported to have been experienced by the nurses under the above working condition<sup>1-6)</sup>. Thereupon, it is considered that they need an opportunity to stop a little while to look back on and rethink about themselves.

As one of the methods for it to be achieved, survey to the nurse was conducted by using Role Lettering technique in this research. The name “Role Lettering” was

a coined word inspired by the term “role-playing”. In the method, one stands on both of the perspectives of “oneself” and “other”, and by interchanging these two roles, both of the sides mutually communicate with each other by letter. Repetition of this mutual correspondence can lead one to recognize, in a form in which one can feel his/herself as considerate of the feeling and situation of “the other”, his/her own inconsistency and dilemma in his/her inmost heart. This method is a psychological technique for the purpose of enhance one’s own problem-solving abilities<sup>7)</sup>.

Role Lettering technique was firstly developed in the scene of correctional education, today it is widely used for instance in counseling and school education. However, there has been no report on the use of Role Lettering to a group of nurses who work ordinarily and do not show a particularly problematic situation. Nurses who are busy with enormous strain are assumed to be under stress even though it may not be apparent, thus some effects on them by applying Role Lettering are expected. Especially, nurses in their third year of duty in hospital are generally considered as being in one of the important stages in career; it is the period of career in which their responsibility becomes more weighted than the

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time when they were still new to the work<sup>8)</sup>, and their worries about the work increases. A quite large number of nurses consider for a change of job or going back to study in this period. Also in their private life, it is the time when nurses may start to think about marriage as well.

From the reasons above, the period can be thought as a turning point of life. Thereupon, in this research, one of Role Lettering methods "Time-machine message" is applied to nurses entering their third year of duty in hospital in order to examine what kind of effect may be observed.

### Purpose

The aim of the present research was to clarify what kind of effect may be expected from applying Role Lettering technique to nurses.

### Method

The subjects were 67 nurses who entered their third year of work in a general hospital with about 1000 beds. The purpose of this research was explained to them and the form for "Time-Machine Message" was distributed. The first half of the form was the space to write a letter "to myself in the future from myself in the present", and the last half space was to write a letter "from myself in the future to myself in the present". For entry on "Time-Machine Message", the subjects were asked "write a letter to 'yourself in the future' and then write a reply to that letter, acting as if you are the 'yourself in the future'". The content of the letter and the age of "the subject's self-in-the-future" were not confined. After "Time-Machine Message" was written, each of the subjects was asked to write his/her impression of the writing task, and the age and occupation of "the subject's-self-in-the-future". The subjects were informed in writing that the information obtained from the surveys was not to be used for any other purpose than for this research and was to be treated with sensitivity. It was conducted an anonymous survey. Also on inputting the data, it was encoded in order to prevent the subjects

from being identified. The KJ method was employed for analysis.

## Results

"Time-Machine Messages" were submitted from 50 of the subjects (the response rate of 74.6%). The number of the valid responses was 50 (the valid response rate of 100%).

### 1) The ages and occupations of "the subjects in the future" written in the letter.

The ages of the subjects in the present were 22 to 26 years old (22 Yrs Old : 7 subjects, 23 Yrs Old : 19 subjects, 24 Yrs Old : 13 subjects, 25 Yrs Old : 10 subjects, 26 Yrs Old : 1 subject), and all of them were female.

For the ages of "the subjects in the future", the biggest number of 20 of the subjects entered 30 Yrs. old, and the second biggest number of 6 of the subjects entered 35 Yrs. old. Most of the other subjects entered the ages between the late 20s and 30s. Among the responses, one of the subjects wrote a letter to "the subject's self in the future" at the age of 80 Yrs. old (Refer to Table 1).

For the occupations of "the subjects in the future", the biggest number of 27 of the subjects entered "nurse", and the second biggest number of 9 of the subjects entered "housewife". Six of the subjects answered "unknown" as they could not think of it (Refer to Table 2).

Table 1 The chosen ages of "the subjects in the future" to whom the letters were written.

Age : No. of the subjects			
25 : 3	30 : 20	40 : 1	54 : 1
26 : 2	32 : 1	43 : 1	62 : 1
27 : 2	33 : 3	47 : 1	80 : 2
28 : 1	34 : 1		
29 : 1	35 : 6		Others : 3

Table 2 The chosen occupations of "the subjects in the future" to whom the letters were written

Occupation : No. of the subjects		
Nurse : 27	Unemployment : 4	Agriculture : 1
Housewife : 9	Service industry : 1	
Unknown : 6	Part-time worker : 1	Not answered : 1

## 2) The contents of "Time-Machine Message"

The written contents of "Time-Machine Messages" were analyzed by employing the KJ method and the results are shown in Table 3.

(1) The group of the subjects who wrote questions to "themselves in the future" (Refer to Table 4).

The most written questions were: "what do you do?" (n=14), "do you enjoy everyday life?" (n=9), "do you still work as a nurse?" (n=4), "how are you?" (n=4), "have you grown up?" (n=4), "are you happy?" (n=4) and so on.

Towards those questions, the replying messages from the future were: "have a positive view on what you do, hang in there" (n=10), "it may be a difficult time, but once you overcome it then your work will be enjoyable" (n=5) and so on.

(2) The group of the subjects who wrote wishes to "themselves in the future" (Refer to Table 5).

The most written wishes were: "I hope you are working hard and energetically" (n=4), "I hope you have a happy home" (n=3), "I hope you are doing what you want" (n=3), "I hope you are living a full life everyday" (n=3) and so on.

To those, the replying messages from the future were: "take things positively and hang in there" (n=10), "you may feel difficult from time to time, but it will be a good memory, so take it easy" (n=3) and so on.

(3) The group of the subjects who reported their present situations to "themselves in the future" (Refer to Table 6).

The written situations were the followings: "despite of all difficulties, I am glad that I have become a nurse" (n=3), "I am not sure what I really want to do" (n=2), "I am not confident in myself" (n=2), "I am too often worried about something" (n=2), and so on.

Table 3 The contents of "Time-Machine Messages"

1. The group of the subjects who wrote questions to "themselves in the future."
2. The group of the subjects who wrote wishes to "themselves in the future."
3. The group of the subjects who reported their present situations to "themselves in the future."

Table 4 The contents of "Time-Machine Messages"

— The group of the subjects who wrote questions to "themselves in the future" —

From the subjects in the present to "themselves in the future"	→ ←	From the subjects in the future to "themselves in the present"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· What do you do ? (14 of the subjects)</li> <li>· Do you enjoy everyday life ? ( 9 )</li> <li>· Do you still work as a nurse ? ( 4 )</li> <li>· How are you ? ( 4 )</li> <li>· Have you grown up ? ( 4 )</li> <li>· Are you happy ? ( 4 )</li> <li>· Have you become the kind of nurse you wanted ? ( 2 )</li> <li>· Have you taken any action for yourself ? ( 2 )</li> <li>· Have you found what you really want do ? ( 2 )</li> <li>· Have you grown up mentally ?</li> <li>· Do you work hard ?</li> <li>· Do you live a full life ?</li> <li>· What kind of things do you think of ?</li> <li>· What I am now is not wrong, am I ?</li> <li>· Are there more difficulties than pleasures from now on in my life ?</li> <li>· Do you try hard ?</li> <li>· Are you kind to patients and the colleagues ?</li> <li>· Do you have confidence in yourself ?</li> <li>· Do you work energetically ?</li> <li>· Have you got married ?</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Have a positive view on what you do, hang in there. (10)</li> <li>· It may be a difficult time, but once you overcome it then your work will be enjoyable. ( 5 )</li> <li>· Don't give up, hang in there. ( 3 )</li> <li>· I am thankful for my past. ( 2 )</li> <li>· The work is more enjoyable now than it used to be.</li> <li>· Now I am on a different job and I am more optimistic.</li> <li>· Enjoy your youth while you can.</li> <li>· You should have done more study.</li> <li>· Gain advices from many different people.</li> <li>· Do your best for your future.</li> </ul>

To those letters, the replying messages from the future were : “consider the present importantly” (n=1), “hang in there little by little” (n=1), “I feel that things are better now than they used to be” (n=1) and so on.

Table 5 The contents of “Time-Machine Messages”  
 – The group of the subjects who wrote wishes to “themselves in the future” –

From the subjects in the present to “themselves in the future”	→ ←	From the subjects in the future to “themselves in the present”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· I hope you are working hard and energetically. (4 of the subjects)</li> <li>· I hope you have a happy home. (3)</li> <li>· I hope you are doing what you want. (3)</li> <li>· I hope you are living a full life everyday. (3)</li> <li>· I hope you enjoy working. (2)</li> <li>· I hope you have become wonderful. (2)</li> <li>· Please be an excellent nurse. (2)</li> <li>· I hope you have a boarder outlook than what I have now.</li> <li>· I think you are busier than I am now.</li> <li>· Please do the work of nursing with the feeling of happiness in what you do.</li> <li>· I hope you are brightened up with joy.</li> <li>· Even in a difficult time, please don't be hard on other people.</li> <li>· I want you to be what you want to be.</li> <li>· I want you to be free.</li> <li>· Please be able to make full use of bitter experiences for other chances.</li> <li>· Don't try too hard, take a rest when you are tired.</li> <li>· Please be kind to younger colleagues and newcomers.</li> <li>· Please live happily.</li> <li>· Please do your work as well as study.</li> <li>· Please continue your job as a nurse.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Take things positively, and hang in there. (10)</li> <li>· You may feel difficult from time to time, but it will be a good memory, so take it easy. (3)</li> <li>· You may be in the most difficult time of your life, but hang in there. (2)</li> <li>· Please take firm steps one by one for your life. (2)</li> <li>· For the moment, you should think a lot and deeply.</li> <li>· You are doing your best.</li> <li>· Please act on things calmly.</li> <li>· Let me remind you that communication is important.</li> <li>· Please be thankful to people around you.</li> </ul>

Table 6 The contents of “Time Machine Messages”  
 – The group of the subjects who reported their present situations to “themselves in the future” –

From the subjects in the present to “themselves in the future”	→ ←	From the subjects in the future to “themselves in the present”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Despite of all difficulties, I am glad that I have become a nurse. (3 of the subjects)</li> <li>· I am not sure what I really want to do. (2)</li> <li>· I am not confident in myself. (2)</li> <li>· I am too often worried about something. (2)</li> <li>· I feel mentally tired.</li> <li>· I am busy.</li> <li>· Nowadays I feel painful and do not enjoy everyday life.</li> <li>· I don't really feel that I am happy.</li> <li>· My feeling is not stable from time to time, and my attitude toward work reflects on it.</li> <li>· I am worried about my future as I am not confident in what I do.</li> <li>· I am full of anxiety and expectation.</li> <li>· Although I feel stress often, I find funs also.</li> <li>· I am doing my best not to make you (the subject's self-in-the-future) regret the past.</li> <li>· I am trying hard to be a nurse whom people can trust.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Consider the present importantly.</li> <li>· Hang in there little by little.</li> <li>· I feel that things are better now than they used to be.</li> <li>· I am very much satisfied with what I am.</li> <li>· I am doing what I want to do.</li> <li>· Take courage on what you do.</li> </ul>

Table 7 The impressions of the subjects after writing "Time-Machine Message"

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· It was difficult to imagine myself in the future. (12 of the subjects)
· It was a good opportunity to look back on myself in an objective way and consequently to remind myself of my own dream. (10)
· I feel better as it led to encourage myself. (5)
· I realized my own anxiety, worry and cause for stress. (4)
· It was enjoyable to write. (4)
· Now I can see an objective worth trying hard. (4)
· It was a good opportunity to think about my future. (4)
· Now I can gradually see what to do for my future. (2)
· I was able to write as I wished. (2)
· It is good if my future will turn out to be what I wrote. (2)
· I became worried about my future.
· Though I am worried much now, I will think about my future carefully before I make an action.

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### 3) The impressions of the subjects after writing "Time-Machine Message"

The most written contents by the subjects were the followings: "it was difficult to imagine myself in the future" (n=12), "it was a good opportunity to look back on myself in an objective way and consequently to remind myself of my own dream" (n=10), "I feel better as it led to encourage myself" (n=5), "I realized my own anxiety, worry and cause for stress" (n=4), "It was enjoyable to write" (n=4), "now I can see an objective worth trying hard" (n=4), "it was a good opportunity to think about my future" (n=4) and so on (Refer to Table 7).

## Discussion

Probably due to the fact that most of the nurses who participated in this research as the subjects were in their early twenties, they chose to write a letter to themselves-in-the-not-so-far-future whose ages were mostly 30 and 35. Because of this, about the half of the subjects imagined their occupations in the future as a nurse and that they-in-the-future would continue the work which they-in-the-present are actually at.

The contents of "Time-Machine Message" were divided into three groups: 1) "the questions", 2) "the wishes", and 3) "the reports of their present situations". First, in the group of "the questions", the nurses were at the age of a crossroads in their lives, and probably due to this, many of their letters were on questioning what they-in-the-future were doing. To those letters, they-in-the-future replied, "I am happy with the situation I am in. So although it is a difficult time for you, hang in

there!" Then, in the group of "the wishes", the nurses wrote the lifestyles of their dreams they would like to possess in future. In the replies, messages of encouragement toward fulfilling their wishes were sent by themselves-in-the-future. Lastly, in the group of "the reports of their present situations", the nurses' worries and lack of confidence were written honestly to themselves-in-the-future. In the replies, they-in-the-future wrote to let themselves-in-the-present know that they-in-the-future overcame the difficulties which they-in-the-present were dealing with.

As the above shows, positive and encouraging messages were returned from themselves-in-the-future to all of the three groups. Also, from the impressions of the nurses on "Time-Machine Message", it can be inferred that "Time-Machine Message" was helpful in easing stress of the nurses. For instance, some of the nurses were able to feel more energetic and some found causes of their stress.

In the concept of "Time-Machine Message", the subject-in-the-future, who has overcome the problematic situation that the subject-in-the-present is in, writes a letter to the subject-in-the-present. Accordingly, the subject is able to see him/herself calmly in an objective way and give an advice to his/herself. That is how it can demonstrate the effect of that one can realize the nature of his/her own problem.

In the analysis of the most given impression "it was difficult to imagine myself in future", the current situation of the nurses can be inferred as that the nurses can't afford to think about their future and dream as they are swamped with work. The third year of the

nurse duty in hospital is the time when third-year nurses start guiding younger nurses and making nursing judgments on their own<sup>8)</sup>. It is a transition period from the self who can be dependent on the older nurses to the new self who is independent as a professional nurse, therefore it is apparent that third year nurses feel the need to work as hard as possible. For nurses like them, it is necessary from time to time to organize an opportunity like "Time-Machine Message" to stop for a while and think about their future.

In addition, a quite large number of subjects reported that "'Time-Machine Message' was a good opportunity which learned about my-self from a new perspective and to rethink about my future". This is because the nurses' dreams of future they had been thinking vaguely were clarified within the nurses' selves by putting down the dreams in words in the form of letter. It is an evidence of the effect of "Time-Machine Message" by which the nurses were enabled to clarify their future objectives.

### Conclusion

These results suggest that the application of "Role Lettering" to the nurses is usefulness in easing their stress by receiving advices from themselves-in-the-future. Also, writing "Time-Machine Message" is found to be an opportunity for the nurses to look back on themselves and to consider their desirable prospective situations. On the other hand, some of the nurses reported that they were so preoccupied in their present situations that they could not concretely imagine themselves-in-the-future when they wrote "Time-Machine Message". For nurses like them, a support such as a number of "Time-Machine Message" exercises may be necessary. In future research, I would like to develop techniques and strategies for Role Lettering as a support technique for nurses as individuals.

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