2009

The interpersonal dynamics of aggression and violence in mental health inpatient units

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The Interpersonal Dynamics of Aggression and Violence in Mental Health Inpatient Units

Jane L. Middleby-Clements

Bachelor of Science (Psychology)

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

The University of Wollongong

School of Psychology

2009
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Thesis Certification

I, Jane L. Middleby-Clements, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Psychology, University of Wollongong, is entirely my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Jane L. Middleby-Clements

May, 2009
Acknowledgements

This work was supported by an Australian Research Council, industry partner scholarship.

First, and foremost, I extend my deepest appreciation to Associate Professor Brin F.S. Grenyer for his tireless support and encouragement in assisting me with this research. His calm and thoughtful approach, in allowing me to express my ideas, is a quality that has enabled me to think extensively about the area being investigated in this dissertation.

I also sincerely thank the participants of this study, both Area Health Service staff and patients, who generously gave of their time and thoughts in the data collection phase of this work. It is ultimately for these individuals that this work hopes to make a contribution.

Similarly, I thank the South Eastern Sydney and Illawarra Area Health Service management for their support of this research, both financially as an industry partner and for the ease with which I was provided with practical support during the data collection phase of this research. In particular a debt of gratitude to Aggression Management Trainer Philip Biro, who assisted me diligently and patiently with data collection. I would also like to thank Olga Ilkiw-Lavalle for her conscientious effort as Project Officer during the data collection phase of
this work. Thanks also to Professor Frank Deane from the Illawarra Institute for Mental Health for his support of this research.

Most significantly my sincere and heartfelt gratitude is extended to my partner in life Gregory and our daughters Jessica, Lillian and Isabelle, for their enduring patience and loving support as I have worked to complete this thesis. Finally, many thanks to both sides of my extended family and to my closest friends for their unwavering encouragement.

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents Michael and Lesley Middleby, whom I admire and owe so much. Michael for his boundless enthusiasm for life, his ability to think beyond the conventional or established, and to dream of endless possibility. Lesley for her passionate optimism, and her inclination to see humour and feel joy along the ‘roller-coaster of life’. Together they have inspired a love of learning and taught me more about life than any academic pursuit could ever aspire to accomplish.
Abstract

Rationale: Mental Health professionals' ability to manage aggression and violence in mental health units is hampered by a lack of evidence-based research.

Aim: The research aimed to investigate the relationship between Health Professional attitudes and subsequent aggression by mental health inpatients.

Method: An interpersonal model specific to inpatient mental health units guided three empirical studies. Study one investigated patient views on staff management of aggression. Study two examined specific staff variables such as rigid attitudes in dealing with aggression. Study three investigated the impact of a management philosophy upon staff attitudes in a controlled design.

Results: In study one, patients reported that interpersonal factors with mental health staff were salient contributors to their aggression. Study two extended this and found that high staff rigidity was associated with low tolerance for patient aggression. Interestingly, staff characterised by low rigid attitudes were found to be more involved in high severity aggressive incidents. Study three found training in zero tolerance had the unintended consequence of increasing rigid attitudes, while reducing tolerance toward aggression.

Discussion: Staff play a role in helping or hindering inpatients with aggressive impulses. Staff with less rigid attitudes were those most likely to assist in difficult incidents, those incidents that are likely to be unavoidable. More rigid staff were involved in a greater proportion of low-medium severity incidents,
those incidents likely to be more easily avoided if managed well. Management approaches that reduced tolerance toward aggression appeared to have a negative impact on variables most likely to help patients manage aggressive impulses. Together these studies highlight that staff and management policy are critical variables in understanding and responding to aggression.
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