Clinical Psychologists in Aged Care in Australia: A Question of Attitude or Training?

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Background

- A growing proportion of Australia over age 65, predicted to reach 20% by 2020

- Few psychologists see older people
Comments from Psychologists

- “I won’t see elderly clients: it’s too hard”
- “What’s the point of seeing older clients for therapy – I’d rather spend my time doing assessments. It takes too long with agoraphobics. It’s not worth it.”
Ageing and Psychological Disturbance

- 1 in 5 older Australians estimated to have a major psychiatric diagnosis by 2020 (Brodaty, 1991)
- Depression in 30% - 50% of elderly in institutions
- High suicide rate among elderly, notably men
Psychologists in Aged Care

- Few positions for psychologists to deliver services to older people: 1 to 66,200
- Ratio lowest of major health care professions
- Payment for services under U.S. Medicare
Psychological Treatment

Psychological interventions have demonstrated efficacy with older people:
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Behaviour management in dementia
- Reduced use of anti-hypertensive medication
- Shorter hospital stay following cardiac surgery
Organizational Responses

- Need for more psychologists recognized by
  - Australian Psychological Society
  - Directors of clinical training programs at Australian universities

- Increase of research interest, PAIGE membership (Wells, 2004)

- Ethical practice guidelines
Only 4.4% of psychologists specialize in geropsychology (Gatz et al, 1991)

- Solutions have focused on trainees, increasing exposure.
- Reluctance to treat & negative predictions of outcome in previous study (Helmes & Gee, 2003)
- Dye, 1978: survey correlating attitudes and influence on role of psychologists
Methodological issues

- Various attitude measures exist, but most are obvious
- Little consensus on best measure
The Present Study

- Reactions to Ageing Questionnaire (Gething, 1994) as a more indirect, but validated measure of attitudes
- Survey of registered psychologists in the Sydney, Australia region from telephone directory and at a local conference; specialists via APS interest group
Research Questions

- Is there a dearth of psychologists working with elderly clients?
- Are ageist attitudes inherent among psychologists?
- What is the relationship between ageism and the delivery of psychology services to elderly clients?
Method: Measures

- Reactions to Ageing Questionnaire
- Demographic questions
- Satisfaction with training, clinical model, setting, services to older clientele
- Attitudes toward therapy with older clients
Method: Participants

- 516 surveys distributed
- 201 surveys returned (39% response rate)
- 83.6% sample classed as generalist; specialist ($n = 33$) if over 50% of clientele over 65
- 73.7% female, ages 27 to 80, with 1 to 52 years experience
Chi-square, t-test for independent group comparisons

Discriminant function analysis to examine variables separating 2 groups
Results: Demographics

- Age Specialists more likely:
  - younger
  - have specific geriatric training outside of psychology degree
  - completed placement in aged care setting, high level of satisfaction with placement
  - shorter time working with clients
Results: Demographics

- No difference for:
  - gender
  - type of practice
  - satisfaction with overall training
  - geriatric content inside psychology degree
Results: Attitudes

- Age Specialists more likely:
  - have greater interest in such work
  - have more confidence in such work
  - have more positive attitude toward therapy with the aged

- No difference on Reactions to Ageing Questionnaire

- DFA successful in discriminating specialists: specific courses, interest, years spent working best predictors
Attitudes toward Therapy with Older Clients

![Chart showing comparison between Generalist and Specialist groups in attitudes toward therapy with older clients.](chart.png)
Only a small proportion sampled (16.4%) specialised in working with older people.

This group had higher response rate, likely due to sampling bias or differences in approach to sampling.
Attitudes or Training?

- Specialist group was more positive towards engaging in therapy with older people
- No difference in overall attitudes
Attitudes or Training?

- Specialists more likely to have specific training & clinical contact in geriatric work outside of their psychology degree

- Results suggest more training for work with older adults necessary to increase numbers of psychologists working in geriatric settings
Attitudes or Training?

- Experience in U.K. with required placements in aged care settings

- Experience in U.S.A. with funding under government Medicare