A Systematic Review of Mental Health Professionals’ Attitudes to Personality Disorder

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Introduction

Personality disorders are highly prevalent within mental health services, with up to 50% of people treated by Community Mental Health Teams meeting diagnostic criteria (Koenen et al., 2003). Attitudes are “A psychological tendency expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour” (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) and are thought to be made up of cognitive, affective and behavioural components.

Psychiatric nurses’ attitudes to people with personality disorders have been studied most widely. Winship (2010) reviewed the literature on nurses attitudes to borderline personality disorder (BPD) in acute settings. Attitudes were found to be consistently negative, potentially impacting on practice and the quality of care this client group received. The current systematic review aims to synthesize and critically review the evidence more widely without focusing specifically on one professional group, or type of personality disorder.

Method

Electronic searches were carried out on three databases; Psych Info, Web of Knowledge and Scopus using a systematic approach. No date restrictions were applied and reference lists of retrieved papers were hand-searched.

Inclusion criteria: Empirical studies (both quantitative and qualitative) focusing on mental health professionals’ (MHPs) attitudes to people with personality disorder (PD) were included. There were no restrictions on type of profession or category of PD.

Exclusion criteria: Review articles, non-empirical papers, forensic studies and studies exploring countertransference reactions were excluded.

Results

The majority of the studies focused on BPD (n=19). MHPs attitudes to people with PD were more negative than to people with diagnoses such as depression, or schizophrenia (e.g. Markham, 2003).

Descriptive surveys found psychiatric nurses considered people with BPD difficult to work with (e.g. Cleary, 2003) but were willing to engage in further training. Cross sectional surveys found significant differences in attitudes between professional groups. Black et al. (2011) found nurses had lower caring attitudes, treatment optimism and empathy than other professional groups. Setting also had an impact on attitudes. Commons-Treloar and Lewis (2008) found clinicians in mental health services had more positive attitudes than those in emergency medicine. Training and experience was also positively correlated with positive attitudes (e.g. Black et al., 2011).

Qualitative studies identified the negative emotional impact of working with people with BPD and that perceptions were often negative. Miller et al. (2012) also highlighted positive feelings and perceptions. Attitude change studies (e.g. Krawitz, 2008) all found significant improvements in MHPs attitudes to people with BPD following training.

Discussion

There was a lack of consistency in the measurement of attitudes: Most researchers developed their own measures without reporting reliability or validity and a variety of constructs were covered by existing measures, precluding comparisons between studies. The meaning of “negative attitudes” differed depending on the questionnaire used. The Attitudes to Personality Disorders Questionnaire (APDQ Bowers & Allen, 2006) was the only validated measure utilised. However this focuses on the feelings component of attitudes, neglecting the cognitive and behavioural components. It looks at PD in general when the majority of the studies focused on BPD.

Overall the literature indicated MHPs have negative attitudes to people with (B)PD. This is concerning given the importance of the therapeutic relationship on treatment outcomes (Clarkson, 2003). However, the literature also indicates such attitudes are susceptible to change and MHPs are willing to engage in training. Therefore the challenge is ensuring such training is provided.

Future Research

Based on this literature review a new measure of professionals’ attitudes to BPD is currently being developed, which assess all three components of attitudes. The reliability and validity will be tested and an exploratory factor analysis carried out. Both service users and MHPs are involved in the development of this measure.

Can You Help?

I am looking to recruit a panel of experts in the field to rate the questionnaires face and content validity. If you are interested please leave your contact details today. If you would like further information on this literature review or future research please email Emma McQuillan on e.mcquillan@surrey.ac.uk.

References


