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A survey of Australian psychologists in aged care: The relationship
between training, attitudes and professional practice with older clients.

Thesis submitted by

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in the Department of Psychology

James Cook University

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I would like to dedicate this work to them on behalf of those who have been denied an education on account of race, creed or gender. I hope the words contained within promote awareness of another form of prejudice: ageism.

ABSTRACT

The proportion of Australian adults aged over 65 years is due to increase over the next 20 years with corresponding increases in mental illness. A growing demand for clinical psychology services to older adults is expected yet overseas surveys indicate a low rate of specializing in working with the over-65 age group. The status of geropsychology in Australia is examined through exploratory analysis of survey data from a practising psychologist sample and from a post-graduate psychology trainee sample. Six published studies are reported that examine the relationship among training, personal contact and attitudes, and the relative contributions of these three factors to decisions on working with older adults among Australian psychologists. Pilot research highlights the importance of interest in working with older clients and additional training external to formal degree courses in discriminating between those psychologists who specialised in aged care compared to generalist practitioners. A national survey of psychologists identifies clinical exposure to older adults while training and negative expectations of subjective ageing as additional factors predicting specialist category membership. Low rates of professional involvement with older clients in general highlight the corresponding dearth of psychologists specialising in aged care service provision, a finding congruent with overseas research. The positive influence of clinical contact, as opposed to the absence of predictive ability for personal contact, is also emphasized in a survey of post-graduate psychology students. Professional attitudes, such as confidence and interest in working with older adults, are other predictors of interest in working with older clients among students. The use of the Reactions to Ageing Questionnaire in

several analyses also highlights the importance of affect in influencing behaviour, with professional attitudes predicting personal attitudes towards ageing, as opposed to personal contact or formal training. The final study underscores the role of contextual relevance, with training contributing to more variance in interest in working with older adults among trainees, as compared to practitioners whose professional interest was influenced more by attitudes. The contact hypothesis is not confirmed in this research in either the student or the practitioner samples. Strategies to promote the field of clinical geropsychology across a variety of settings, ranging from training to clinical service delivery are discussed.

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