SELECTING SUCCESSFUL WORKERS WITH AGED PERSONS:

AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION*

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Abstract

This study was an investigation of what qualities characterize a successful worker with elderly people. Four questionnaires designed to assess these qualities were completed by 58 aides and orderlies working with geriatric patients at four different types of institutions. The questionnaires were concerned with feelings towards and contact with elderly relatives, understanding of the aged, attitudes towards working with the elderly, and general job attitudes. Supervisors at each of the institutions supplied the names of the "best" workers under their supervision (N=18) and also the names of those whom they considered less successful (N=14). The better workers scored significantly higher on items concerned with the qualities of patience, acceptance, flexibility, tolerance, and respect. They also responded in a much less extreme manner to items descriptive of unfavorable stereotypes of elderly people. In addition, they appeared to enjoy their jobs more and to be more friendly and cooperative with their supervisors and co-workers. Based on the data obtained, a new questionnaire, utilizing the most discriminating items, has been constructed for use in future research. It is hoped that it will prove to be a valuable addition to existing procedures for selecting geriatric workers.
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The medical advances that have led to increased longevity have also produced a corresponding increase in the geriatric population requiring institutional care. A Bureau of Census survey (1973) disclosed, for example, that about one of every hundred persons counted in the 1970 census was an inmate of an institution, approximately half of whom were in nursing homes or homes for the aged and dependent.

There is, therefore, a growing need for personnel in the field of aging. As a consequence, much interest has been generated as to the characteristics of people who choose to work with the elderly, their motivations for so doing, and the qualities that make for a successful worker in contrast to an unsuccessful worker with the aged. However, while there have been studies concerned with the characteristics of successful psychotherapists (Cottle, 1953, Swenson, 1971), and teachers (Levine, 1973), there have been no comparable studies of those who work with the elderly.

Butler (1973) has suggested that some workers in the field are probably responding to a "societal need," and that others enter the field by chance and later develop an interest in working with the elderly. However, there has been no attempt at empirical investigation of the qualities of the "successful" geriatric worker. In addition, no attempt has been made to develop a means for
assessing the potential for success in work with the aged.

With these considerations in mind, the present investigation was undertaken in order to gain insight into those qualities that characterize a successful worker in the field. In order to accomplish this aim, a number of test instruments were constructed. It was hoped that they would discriminate between the most and the least successful paraprofessionals currently working with the elderly, and that eventually they might be used to predict the likelihood of success of an individual who is about to enter the field of aging.

Method

A number of steps were taken in order to determine what qualities characterize a successful worker with aged persons in contrast to an unsuccessful one. First, structured interviews were conducted with 10 senior supervisory personnel responsible for hiring staff at institutions serving the aged. These interviews were conducted at three different locations. One was a chronic care institution for aging patients with such medical problems as multiple sclerosis, cardiovascular accidents, and diabetes. The second was a municipal general hospital serving all kinds of patients. The third was a nursing home. The purpose of the interviews was to determine what these senior personnel believed characterized the most and least competent workers they had known in terms of personal characteristics and professional skills. They were also asked whether or not they were satisfied with current policies for hiring workers with the aged.

Such characteristics as warmth, patience, calmness, empathy, and understanding of old people were frequently mentioned as being highly desirable, as were the ability to achieve satisfaction from meeting limited goals. Also considered important was the ability to tolerate declining functions in the aged. Broad-based skills, with special emphasis on nursing, were also stressed. In addition, a majority of those interviewed emphasized the importance of close, warm childhood relationships with elderly relatives. Only three of the 10
interviewees claimed to be satisfied with current hiring policies, while four were definitely not satisfied, and three was satisfied only with some aspects of hiring policies.

Since no guidelines existed in the literature on aging, the questionnaires constructed for the purpose of this study were based on the data obtained in the interviews. They tapped as many behaviors, attitudes and feelings as seemed plausible, with the expectation that many items would not turn out to be discriminating. The first questionnaire, titled "Relationships to Elderly People," was designed to elicit information pertaining to the respondents' feelings towards and contact with their elderly relatives, both as children and at present. They were asked, for example, "As a child, how close did you feel to your maternal grandmother?" and "How often do you talk with the following elderly relatives?" Responses were scored 2, 1, and 0, depending on the degree of closeness or frequency of contact.

The second form was called "Understanding the Aged," and it asked for the respondents' opinions about 23 statements descriptive of elderly people. They were asked to respond "Always True," "Often True," "Sometimes True," or "Seldom True" to such statements as "Old people cry a lot," "Old people can do a job as well as young people," and "Old people are confused about where they are." Three practicing gerontologists were asked their opinions about these questions and the questionnaire responses were scored according to what the gerontologists believed to be the correct answers.

The third form was titled "Attitudes Towards Working with the Elderly." It consisted of 21 items that described ways people sometimes feel and act when they work with the elderly. The following is an example of one of the items: "When an old person tells stories about when he (she) was young:

   a. You are interested

   b. You are bored
c. You distract him (her) with something else

d. You walk away

e. You tell him (her) to stop rambling

f. You listen

Respondents were asked to describe their own behavior on a frequency scale of "Always," "Often," "Sometimes," or "Seldom." Scores could range from 0 to 3.

The fourth form, "Job Attitudes," was designed to elicit opinions concerning the respondents' general attitudes towards their jobs. It consisted of 19 items such as the following: "I try to finish a job once I start it," "I get satisfaction from my job," and "I mind working late." Items were answered "Always," "Often," "Sometimes," or "Seldom." Scores ranged from 0 to 3.

These four questionnaires were completed by a total of 58 aides or orderlies working with geriatric patients at four different locations. Fifteen worked at a chronic care hospital, 15 were on the geriatric service at a State hospital, 14 were aides and orderlies at a medical center, and 14 worked at a nursing home. Forty-nine of the respondents were female and nine were male. All were Black and had an average age of 36.74 years (SD=10.16). In addition, supervisors of these geriatric workers, two at each institution, were asked to supply the names of the "best" workers under their supervision and also the names of workers who were "less successful" at their jobs. There was no significant difference in mean age between these two groups. The data were analyzed for the four groups separately, and comparisons were made between the "best" (N=18) and the "less successful" workers (N=14).

Results

A separate analysis was conducted for each of the four questionnaires. Comparisons were made among the mean total scores of the aides and orderlies at the four institutions. In addition, for each questionnaire, an item analysis was performed in order to determine which items significantly discriminated
between the more and the less successful workers.

**Relationships to Elderly People** There were no significant differences among the groups in terms of mean total scores \(F = 0.49, 3/54 \text{ df}\). When an item analysis, comparing the responses of the 18 "best" with the less successful workers was performed, again there were relatively few differences. However, on one item that concerned enjoyment of being with elderly relatives during childhood, the workers considered to be the best by their supervisors scored significantly higher \(t = 2.20, p < .05\) than did the less successful workers. That is, the best workers indicated greater enjoyment in being with their maternal and paternal grandmothers and grandfathers and other elderly relatives than did the other group.

A possible explanation for this questionnaire's relative lack of discrimination between the more and less successful workers is that many questions were unanswered or only partly answered. This was due to the fact that many of the respondents' elderly relatives died before the respondents were born or were not currently living.

**Understanding the Aged** Although the more successful workers scored higher on this questionnaire than did the less successful ones, the difference was not significant \(t = 1.40\). Two items, however, did discriminate between these two groups \(p < .05 \text{ and } .10, \text{ respectively}\). The mean response of the "better" group to the statements "Old people are cranky" and "Old people need to have the same thing told to them more than once" indicated that they believed the statements to be true "Sometimes." This was in accord with the gerontologists' opinions. The less successful group, however, indicated the statements to be "Often True."

In fact, this group gave a significantly greater percentage of "Always True" responses (23%) than did the group of more successful workers (11%). This difference is significant at the .001 level. Since the statements described generally unfavorable stereotypes of elderly people, this finding suggests that
less successful workers viewed their patients in a less favorable light than did the better workers.

There were no significant differences among the mean total scores of three of the four groups of aides and orderlies. However, workers at one of the institutions, the nursing home, scored significantly lower than did the workers at the other three institutions ($p < .01$).

**Attitudes Towards Working with the Elderly** There were a number of differences between the more successful and less successful workers in their mean responses to the items of this questionnaire. Table 1 presents the most discriminating items, ranked in order of their ability to differentiate between the two groups.

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**Insert Table 1 about here**

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The first and third items, which concern an elderly person's taking a very long time bathing or eating, provide indirect measures of the workers' patience. It is evident that the highly rated workers tended to be more patient with and accepting of an elderly person's inability to perform these tasks rapidly. In addition, the second item indicates that they were more flexible in their attitudes. The less successful workers indicated that they would "Always" encourage an elderly person with a body odor to bathe, whereas the better workers appeared to realize that there might be times when this would not be possible.

The better workers also appeared more tolerant and respectful of an old person's reminiscences and complaints. In addition, they were more realistic about an elderly person's attitudes towards his deformities. For example, they seemed to understand better than did the less successful workers that it was natural for elderly people to be concerned about their appearance.

**Job Attitudes** The item that best discriminated between the more and the less successful workers on this questionnaire was "I try to get along with my supervisors even when I don't care for them" ($t = 2.79, p < .01$). This finding
implies that supervisors tend to characterize a friendly, cooperative worker as more successful than one who permits his more negative feelings to show.

Other differences between these two groups that fell just short of significance were as follows. The better workers, in contrast to the less successful workers, indicated that they more often tried to get along with their fellow workers even if they did not care for them, more often tried to finish a job once they started it, and more often tried to learn new things about their job.

A cumulative frequency distribution of total scores on the Job Attitudes questionnaire for all workers at each of the four institutions was plotted and is presented in Figure 1. As may be seen, the median score is approximately 43, with scores ranging from 28 to 55. The workers whom supervisors considered more successful had a mean score of 44.28 (SD = 4.10) and those whom supervisors considered less successful had a mean score of 41.00 (SD = 6.65). Because of the small number of subjects, this can hardly be considered as normative data. However, with refinement, it is possible that this questionnaire could be used as part of the procedures for the selection of geriatric workers.

There were no significant differences among the mean total scores for workers at three of the four institutions. Interestingly, however, the mean score for workers at the only institution that currently employs a screening procedure was significantly higher (p < .01) than were the mean scores of the workers at the other institutions. This suggests that the introduction of a screening program, even though not specifically oriented towards geriatric workers, has had a beneficial effect on the quality of the staff. It seems, therefore, likely that the introduction of a formal screening program explicitly oriented towards work with elderly patients would be even more effective.
Discussion

Items that discriminated between workers that supervisors described as more and less successful tended to be those concerning the qualities of patience, acceptance, flexibility, tolerance, and respect. The better workers tended to score considerably higher on items designed to assess these characteristics. In addition, they responded in a much less extreme manner than did the less successful workers to items descriptive of unfavorable stereotypes of elderly people. As indicated by their responses to the Job Attitudes questionnaire, the better workers also appeared to enjoy their jobs more and to be more friendly and cooperative with their supervisors and co-workers.

Some of the difficulties concerned with this research should be mentioned. First, because of the fact that it was not known in advance what would be considered a correct, best, or ideal response to many of the items, it was necessary to rely on the judgments of experts in the field. This sample of experts may or may not have been typical of a larger group of experienced professionals in the geriatric field. In the future, a larger, and perhaps more representative sample will be polled for their opinions.

Secondly, the selection of the more and less successful workers was based on nominations of supervisors. Some were reluctant to make such judgments, particularly for the less successful workers, and some made them very casually. It is possible, therefore, that two extreme groups were not, in fact, obtained. This is perhaps a justification for considering for follow-up use items that fell short of significantly discriminating between the two groups of workers.

Based upon these considerations and the data obtained, a new questionnaire, consisting of the relatively most discriminating items, has been constructed. This will be used for further research on new samples of geriatric workers. Considering the current lack of knowledge of variables that relate to effective work with the elderly, the present study provides an important step toward the
identification of predictor variables. With progressive refinements, it should be possible to devise a reliable and valid instrument which will prove to be a valuable addition to existing procedures for selecting geriatric workers.
References


Table 1

Attitudes Towards Working with the Elderly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>&quot;More Successful&quot; Workers</th>
<th>&quot;Less Successful&quot; Workers</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If an old person took a very long time bathing, you would bathe him (her) yourself.</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If an old person had some noticeable body odor, you would encourage him (her) to take a bath.</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If an old person took a very long time eating you would let him (her) finish at his (her) own speed.</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When an old person tells stories about when he (she) was young, you walk away.</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If an old person complains all the time, you ignore the person.</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If an old person took a very long time eating, you would help him (her) to finish.</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One of the nice things about working with old people is you get satisfaction out of helping people who can't help themselves.</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If an old person complains all the time you tell that person that his (her) complaints won't do him (her) any good.</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old people with physical deformities should not worry about what other people think of them.</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since adequate nourishment is necessary to health, old people should be encouraged to satisfy their appetites whenever they feel like it.</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When an old person tells stories about when he (she) was young, you tell him (her) to stop rambling.</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

p < .05
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Cumulative frequency distribution of total scores on the Job Attitudes questionnaire.