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Community Attitudes Toward People with Mental Illness:
The Effects of Time, Location and Demographic Variables

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Abstract

Deinstitutionalisation in New Zealand followed the worldwide trend of transferring mentally ill patients from psychiatric institutions into community-based care. The closure of psychiatric hospitals in favour of community care relied on positive and accepting attitudes of community members. At the time of the closure of Lake Alice psychiatric hospital in 1995, the remaining 12 chronically mentally ill patients were transferred into a community mental health facility in Wanganui. The present study investigated whether community attitudes towards mental illness change over time and if attitudes are influenced by geographical proximity to community mental health facilities. The study also investigated the influence of demographic variables, and prior contact, awareness and agreement with the community mental health facility on attitudes. Attitudes among the Wanganui community were measured by survey using the Opinions about Mental Illness scale (OMI, Cohen & Struening, 1959) and the Comfort in Interaction Scale (CI, Beckwith & Mathews, 1994). There were two samples used in the present study, one taken in 1995 comprising of one hundred and fifty seven respondents, and one taken in 1996 comprising of one hundred and forty-one respondents. Time was found to be a partially significant influence on attitudes among the respondents. Geographical proximity was not found to be significant. The results were consistent with the hypothesis that time, awareness of the community mental health facility, occupation and prior contact with people who have a mental illness produced a significant effect on attitudes toward people with mental illness among community members. Overall, attitudes as measured by the OMI and CI were positive and accepting of people with a mental illness.

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Table of contents

AbstractII
AcknowledgementsIII
Table of contentsIV
List of tablesVIII
Chapter One	
Introduction	1
<i>General overview</i>	1
<i>Present Study Direction</i>	5
Chapter Two	
A New Zealand Context	7
<i>Overview</i>	7
<i>Oakley Investigation</i>	7
<i>Deinstitutionalisation</i>	8
<i>Lake Alice Psychiatric Hospital 1950-1995</i>	11
<i>Intensive learning centre (ILC) program</i>	13
<i>Conclusions</i>	15
Chapter Three	
Synopsis of Research on Community Attitudes Toward Mental Illness	17
<i>Overview</i>	17
<i>Rationale for Research</i>	17
Patterns and Trends of Research	18

Chapter Four

Empirical Research on Community Attitudes Toward Mental Illness	23
<i>Overview</i>	23
<i>General Findings in the Literature on Attitudes Toward Mental Illness</i>	24
<i>Research on the Impact of Time and Geographical Proximity on Attitudes Toward Mental Illness</i>	29
<i>Variables that Influence Community Attitudes Toward Mental Illness</i>	31
<i>Studies conducted in New Zealand</i>	36
<i>Conclusion</i>	40

Chapter Five

Methodological Issues in Conducting Research on Community Attitudes	43
<i>Overview</i>	43
<i>Methodological Issues</i>	43

Chapter Six

The Present Study	47
<i>Overview</i>	47
<i>Aims and Objectives of the Present Study</i>	47
<i>Hypotheses</i>	48

Chapter Seven

Method	53
<i>Respondents</i>	53
<i>Measures</i>	55
<i>Opinions about Mental Illness Scale</i>	56

<i>Comfort in Interaction Scale</i>	62
<i>Design and Procedure</i>	64
<i>Statistical Analysis Procedure</i>	66
<i>Data Screening</i>	70

Chapter Eight

Results	73
<i>Effects of Time on Attitudes</i>	73
<i>Effects of Location on Attitudes</i>	74
<i>Effects of Location and Time on Attitudes</i>	75
<i>Effects of Age on Attitudes</i>	77
<i>Effects of Gender on Attitudes</i>	79
<i>Effects of Occupation on Attitudes</i>	80
<i>Effects of Awareness on Attitudes</i>	81
<i>Effects of Awareness and Agreement on Attitudes</i>	82
<i>Effects of Contact on Attitudes</i>	83

Chapter Nine

Discussion	85
<i>Review of the Main Aims and Findings</i>	85
<i>Limitations to the Present Study</i>	91
<i>Further Research</i>	97
<i>Conclusions</i>	99

REFERENCES	101
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: New Zealand Government Legislation for Mental Health	121
Appendix B: Community Placements in New Zealand	127
Appendix C: Questionnaire used in the Present Study	133
Appendix D: Map of Targeted Areas 1, 2, 3	143
Appendix E: Comparison Table of 1991, 1996, and 2001, Income And Demographic Data (Statistics New Zealand)	147
Appendix F: Statistical Assumptions of MANCOVA	151
Appendix G: Newspaper Clippings From Wanganui Chronicle (1995)	155

List of Tables

Table 1.	Sample Demographic Information54
Table 2.	Socio-economic Characteristics of Income Per Area... ..	.65
Table 3.	Scores of the OMI and CI Measures for 1995 and 1996 Data Collections... ..	73
Table 4.	Scores on the OMI and CI Measures by Location and Time... ..	74
Table 5.	Scores on the OMI and CI Measures as a Function of Age	78
Table 6.	Mean Gender Scores on the OMI and CI Measures79
Table 7.	Mean Occupation Scores on the OMI and CI Measures80
Table 8.	Respondents Agreement and Awareness of the Community Mental Health Facility81
Table 9.	Scores on the OMI and CI Scales by Awareness of the Community Mental Health Facility and Attitudes... ..	.82
Table 10.	Scores on the OMI and CI Measures as a Function of Prior Contact84
Table 11.	Socio-economic Characteristics of Income Per Area (1991, 1995, 1996)	149
Table 12.	Population Count (1991, 1996, 2001)	150