Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
Older adults and alcohol: A study of registered social workers’ assessment practices

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

the degree

of

Master of Social Work

At Massey University, Manawatu,

New Zealand.

Lee Henley

2016
Abstract

Difficulties resulting from alcohol use are a pervasive social issue across New Zealand, affecting people from all walks of life and ages. Registered social workers (RSWs) are ideally placed to breakdown taboos, support people to address difficulties arising from their use, and ultimately to improve our relationship with alcohol in New Zealand.

This thesis explores eight registered social workers’ understanding of older adults’ (OA) alcohol use and alcohol assessment processes. It is a qualitative study using a grounded theory method to interpret data gathered from semi-structure interviews.

The research initially focused on four core aims: a) whether participants asked OAs about their alcohol use, b) whether participants’ perceptions of OAs affected assessment processes, c) whether participants had received any training in this area and d) whether agency assessment tools supported participants in assessment processes. A range of additional findings, extending these aims, were made and are included in the study’s analysis. Some of the study’s findings endorse current evidence, while some are surprising and sit outside of current literature.

Participants’ practice was largely affected by ‘perception based practice’ possibly leading to negative assessment outcomes for OAs. In fact, alcohol was seen as outside the RSW scope of practice. It is recommended that education, training and supervision be used to develop an ‘evidenced informed’ model of practice; moving away from a single hypothesis to a multi-hypothesis approach and perception based to standardised questions. This would support an ability to challenge individual and system-wide perceptions, and intervention in-line with what is expected in Codes of Practice.

Recommendations are made for a range of agencies including: District Health Boards (DHBs), the Ministry of Health (MOH), Health Promotion Agency (HPA), Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), and for the social work profession itself.
Acknowledgements

My most sincere thanks must firstly go to the eight social workers who very generously gave up their time and laid open their understanding and knowledge regarding older adults and alcohol use, without them I would have had no project at all. I was humbled by their openness and honesty.

I have had significant support from many people along the way, several require special thanks: Kristie Saumure Librarian at Ministry of Health, many thanks. Thanks must go to Jan Duke and the Social Workers Registers Board for agreeing to disseminate my initial request for participants. Mention should also go to Chris Sinclair and Suzy Morrison, you both do a great job at furthering knowledge regarding this subject and to Andy Towers for your support.

Thanks to my Boss Toni Atkinson for supporting my study time through a significant period of my Masters and to Gina Lomax for support while at ACC.

Many thanks to my wife Zoey Henley for putting up with the huge amount of time spent in the study room!

My biggest thanks need to go to Associate Professor Kieran O’Donoghue and Dr Michael Dale, who must be the best supervisors a student could have. Thanks for the support and for encouraging me to pursue the particular approach taken; I have learnt an incredible amount undertaking this study.
Contents

Abstract.......................................................................................................................................... i
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................... ii
List of Figures and Tables............................................................................................................ vi
Chapter One: Introduction............................................................................................................. 1
  Research aims and questions ............................................................................................... 2
  Researchers interest in topic ................................................................................................. 3
  Background to study and key concepts ................................................................................. 5
  Structure of the thesis ............................................................................................................ 8
Chapter two: Older adults and alcohol use: A review of the relevant literature ................. 9
  Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 9
  Part one: Assessment ............................................................................................................. 10
    Defining assessment ........................................................................................................... 10
    Social work assessments .................................................................................................... 11
    Assessment approaches ..................................................................................................... 14
    Risk assessment .................................................................................................................. 16
    Social work assessment of older adults ............................................................................... 17
  Part two: The older adult and alcohol ...................................................................................... 19
    Asking OAs about alcohol use ............................................................................................. 19
    Perceptions .......................................................................................................................... 25
    Training ................................................................................................................................ 27
    Assessment tools and practical considerations .................................................................. 32
    Relationship between assessment and treatment ............................................................... 35
    Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 36
Chapter Three: Methodology ...................................................................................................... 38
List of Figures and Tables

Figures
Figure 1: First stage of reflections ................................................................. 49
Figure 2: Second stage of reflections ............................................................. 54
Figure 3: Process to evidence informed practice .......................................... 87
Figure 4: Interconnected nature of research completed .................................. 113

Tables
Table 2.1: Skills required to undertake effective assessments ...................... 12
Table 2.2: Personal qualities required for effective assessments ................. 13
Table 2.3: Assessment framework ............................................................. 14
Table 2.4: Different assessment models ..................................................... 15
Table 2.5: Physiological changes to consider .............................................. 22
Table 2.6: Healthcare and individual barriers to identifying use .................. 24
Table 2.7: Patterns of use .......................................................... 29
Table 3.1: Open coding example ............................................................. 45
Table 3.2: Selective coding results from interview of participant one .......... 47
Table 3.3: Coding results from first two interviews ................................. 48
Table 3.4: Selective coding results from interview of first three participants .. 51
Table 3.5: Selective coding results after six interviews ............................ 53
Table 3.6: Selective coding results after eight interviews .......................... 56
Table 3.7: Final selective codes ............................................................... 57
Table 4.1: Participants details ................................................................. 60
Table 4.2: Reasons for OA’s alcohol use .................................................. 63
Table 4.3: Risk factors for using alcohol .................................................. 67
Table 4.4: Practical considerations .......................................................... 79
Table 5.1: Training stages regarding OAs and alcohol ............................... 97