



When the plate is full: Aggression among chefs

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Aggression
Bullying
Chef
Culinary industry
Occupational stressors

ABSTRACT

Aggression within the culinary industry has been an ongoing and underreported issue among professional chefs, not only in Australia but also internationally. Limited research suggests that there is high prevalence of aggression/bullying within the culinary industry, and that this may be a product of a unique combination of physical, psychological, and environmental demands embedded in a culture where such aggression is normalised. The current, survey-based, study aimed to assess whether chefs were indeed more aggressive than the general population, and if so, to examine the factors of perceived stress, rank within the kitchen hierarchy, gender, and licit substance use to identify where any differences may lie. Ninety-one Central Queensland based, Australian, chefs were recruited as participants in this study, consisting of 67 males and 24 females. Participants were asked to complete a self-report survey containing the Buss–Perry Aggression Questionnaire, a Workplace Stress Scale, and demographic questions pertaining to gender, rank, and alcohol and tobacco use. Results revealed that chefs were significantly more aggressive than a geographically similar general population. It was found that when looking at rank within the kitchen hierarchy, common chefs/line cook, particularly male chefs, were significantly more aggressive than other ranks within the kitchen. Conclusion and directions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Recently there has been an increased interest in cooking and the culinary arts not only in Australia, but also internationally. This is evident in the popularity of television programmes, such as *Masterchef* and *My Kitchen Rules*, and the saturation of food related media where the life of a chef is portrayed as creative with the ability to express feelings openly through food. However, this portrayal of chefs may result in false impressions of the demands and expectations within the culinary industry.

While [Harris and Giuffre \(2010\)](#) assert the role of the chef originated in the military others attribute modern kitchen practices to Chef Escoffier (e.g., [Gillespie, 2001](#)) both of which involve hierarchical structures and an emphasis on discipline. Rank within the kitchen hierarchy denotes the varying levels of control an individual may have over creativity and business matters ([Bloisi and Hoel, 2008](#)). The sous chef, or the second-in-charge, generally is responsible for the day-to-day tasks of operating the kitchen, which includes ensuring that the common chefs/line cook on different stations and apprentices are working efficiently and to the head chefs

expectations ([Harris and Giuffre, 2010](#)). Researchers have suggested that this strict, hierarchal, environment promotes opportunity for bullying and workplace aggression and violence ([Johns and Menzel, 1999](#)), however the issue of aggression prevalence is somewhat of a taboo subject within the culinary industry. Many victims of bullying within the industry suffer in silence with acts of aggression rarely reported ([Bloisi and Hoel, 2008](#); [Johns and Menzel, 1999](#)).

Anecdotally, employment in the culinary industry requires unwavering dedication, responsibility and repetition ([Bourdain, 2000](#)). The daily occupational activities of a chef frequently expose them to negative physical and psychological demands, such as tight time constraints and high levels of perfectionism within a hot and cramped working environment ([Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons, 2007](#)). This can take a toll on the chefs' emotional and cognitive capacities, and research suggests that this may be expressed as aggression ([Johns and Menzel, 1999](#)). Aggression within the culinary industry may be distinct from other industries, as aggression in commercial kitchens is often a product of daily duties and stressors rather than being considered a hazard in and of performing occupational duties, such as working in the police force or nursing ([LeBlanc and Kelloway, 2002](#)). The kitchen environment and the occupational workload demands are arguably unique to the culinary industry ([Bloisi and Hoel, 2008](#); [Kang et al., 2010](#)).

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2. Literature review

2.1. Aggression and bullying in the kitchen

Aggression is usually typified by verbal or physical behaviour that has the intent of harming or humiliating another person (Anderson and Bushman, 2002). Bullying within a commercial kitchen context may include both direct and indirect aggression (Bloisi and Hoel, 2008) and it may also be reactive, such as an impulsive angry outburst, or proactive, such as a premeditated and calculated scheme to harm and humiliate a co-worker (Baumeister and Bushman, 2011). The use of both verbal and physical aggression is reported to be common within commercial kitchens (Bloisi and Hoel, 2008; Johns and Menzel, 1999; Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons, 2007). While verbal abuse may be used to motivate and intimidate co-workers who are not keeping up with the high standards or fast-pace of the service period (Bloisi and Hoel, 2008), physical aggression (including behaviours such as throwing hot pans and food, punching or kicking co-workers or kitchen equipment) is reportedly part of the culinary cultural norm (Johns and Menzel, 1999).

Despite aggression being considered an antisocial behaviour by general society, aggression within the culinary industry thrives due to the occupational environment and the normalisation of aggression within culinary culture (Bloisi and Hoel, 2008; Mathisen et al., 2008; Rowley and Purcell, 2001). This differs from other industries with similar shift-work like rosters such as nursing (Kessler et al., 2008). According to Kessler et al. (2008), the emphasis in most occupations is to reduce the incidence of aggressive behaviour, rather than promoting it, however this trend is not readily apparent within the culinary industry.

According to researchers, aggression/bullying is seen by chefs to serve several purposes including as a means to enforce discipline, to increase productivity and to maintain the existing hierarchy within a given kitchen (Alexander et al., 2012; Bloisi and Hoel, 2008; Johns and Menzel, 1999). For example, interviews conducted by Johns and Menzel (1999) found that chefs' justified their aggressive behaviour as a protection against a loss of personal and organisational professional reputation, feeling the need to maintain the production of high quality food and their view of 'themselves on the plate'. The researchers further suggested that much of the aggressive behaviour shown by head chefs was due to frustration with, and the need to control, their kitchen and staff. One noted effect of this was staff of lower rank imitating the aggressive behaviours of a head chef and thus perpetuating the cycle of aggression within the culinary industry, a similar observation was made by Mathisen et al. (2008) following a large study of restaurant employees in Norway.

Harris and Giuffre (2010) suggest that the use of aggression in the industry may be 'part' of being a chef. Bloisi and Hoel (2008) similarly argued that aggression within commercial kitchens stems from the expectations of culinary social structures and a workplace culture where aggression is seen as part of a process of 'toughening up' novice chefs. Mathisen et al. (2008) reported that apprentice chefs were most frequently the targets of bullying within the restaurants they surveyed, and that the rate of bullying experienced far exceeded that seen in other industries. This in turn promotes a tolerance of aggressive behaviour as a means of ensuring personal and professional growth (Bloisi and Hoel, 2008).

Aggression may also be a psychological reaction to the occupational demands placed upon chefs in the workplace (Bloisi and Hoel, 2008). The kitchen environment itself can be seen as a catalyst for aggressive behaviour given the high demands inherent in quality food production and presentation, exposure to hot temperatures, long irregular working hours, and cramped workstations (e.g., Bloisi and Hoel, 2008). To better comprehend the prevalence and maintenance of aggression within commercial kitchens, the

factors that may contribute to elevated levels of aggression among chefs need to be explored. Admittedly a number of these factors are not exclusive to the culinary industry, such as long irregular working hours or the predominance of one gender (Payne et al., 2012), however when combined with the occupational activities inherent to the culinary industry, a situation results which has been suggested to only exist within the culinary profession (Bloisi and Hoel, 2008; Kang et al., 2010).

2.2. Stress in the kitchen

Stress is an important factor when investigating aggression and aggressive behaviours within the culinary industry (as it is within other industries), as it is an integral part of the chefs' daily occupational activities (Kang et al., 2010). According to Rieger (2011) stress can be a difficult term to define and she suggests that stress can be conceived as a stimulus or event external to the individual, such as distressing things happening during an undefined period of time, with a biological or physical reaction, such as an increase in heart-rate or the release of adrenaline. Alternatively, stress may also be defined as a psychological state in which the individual perceives that the demands of a particular stressor are greater than his/her coping resources, making the individual feel overwhelmed and unable to cope (Rieger, 2011). The daily occupational activities of a chef can fall under both of these definitions, because the stimuli are often external, induce a physical response, and may outstrip the chefs' physical and psychological resources (Bloisi and Hoel, 2008).

Several researchers have argued that the potential for a chef using aggression and aggressive behaviours is large, as this may be an inevitable way of dealing with the stressful demands of professional cooking without affecting the mass production of quality food (Johns and Menzel, 1999; Rowley and Purcell, 2001). Problems with staff, high standards of food production, and the fast-paced nature of service periods (from the time the restaurant opens to the public to kitchen close) are, according to one anecdotal source, the most common stressors found within commercial kitchens (Bourdain, 2000). Pressure to maintain one's reputation and frustration with fellow staff were also identified by Bloisi and Hoel (2008) as stressors that may lead to elevated aggression.

According to a survey of 40 UK-based chefs conducted by Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons (2007), the fast-paced nature of the service period often leads chefs to feelings of being out-of-control and under-qualified, or frustrated from working alongside unqualified colleagues. Stress may also be caused by the pressure to conform to the norms within not only a particular restaurant, but within the wider culture of the industry, with chefs reporting feelings of being undervalued by superiors, of excessive workloads, and frequent breakdowns in communication with co-workers (Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons, 2007).

Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons (2007) argue that chefs often use aggressive behaviour and/or licit and illicit substances to cope with these sources of stress – however these coping strategies were often ineffective for the chefs in their sample (Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons, 2007). Research by Chuang and Lei (2011) indicates differences between the short- and long-term coping behaviours chefs use in response to occupational stress, which in turn have both physical and psychological effects on the health of the individual chef similar to that found in other industries, such as nursing, office working, and teaching (e.g., Payne et al., 2012). The qualitative, survey-based research of Chuang and Lei (2011) suggests that long-term coping behaviours occasionally used in commercial kitchens, such as listening to music or exercising, tended to have positive outcomes on health. In contrast, the more common use of short-term strategies, such as aggressive behaviour or substance use, tended to be negative and often led to detrimental effects on both physical and mental health.

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