



Verbal and nonverbal emotional behaviour of staff: A first attempt in the development of an observation instrument

Wietske M.W.J. van Oorsouw^{a,b,*}, Petri J.C.M. Embregts^{a,c,d}, Jody Sohier^e

^aTilburg University, Department of Developmental and Clinical Psychology, Tilburg, The Netherlands

^bAmarant, Tilburg, The Netherlands

^cHAN University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Health and Social Studies, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

^dSZ Dichterbij, Oostrum, The Netherlands

^eRadboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

It is common to use questionnaires and interviews to assess the emotions of staff who serve clients with intellectual disabilities. Remarkably, observations of actual staff behaviour and assessments of nonverbal expressions are usually not involved. In the present study, we have made a first start in the development of an observation instrument that registers both verbal and nonverbal expressions of emotion. Following extensive literature reviews, interviews with clinical experts and pilot observations, we have created an observation system and observed a team of staff members during a period of three months. Results revealed sufficient to good interrater reliabilities regarding the observation of the three forms of emotional expression: body movement, facial expression, and verbal utterances. Low levels of explained variances between the different forms of expression showed that predictive values were weak. This means that there is a surplus value of the observation of nonverbal emotional expressions as compared to existing instruments that base their assessment on verbal and/or written responses only.

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1. Introduction

Staff members serving people with intellectual disabilities (ID) frequently report negative emotions that among others appear to be related to job demands, team climate within the organization, and challenging behaviour of clients ((Moore, Ball, & Kuipers, 1992; Rose, 1993; Rose & Schelewa-Davies, 1997; Rose, David, & Jones, 2003). In the last decade, results regarding negative effects of staff emotions on staff behaviour towards their clients have been reported frequently. High levels of so called “Expressed Emotions” from staff negatively affect both challenging behaviour and well-being of client (Tattan & Tarrier, 2000; Van Humbeeck & Van Audenhove, 2003). Staff members who experience negative emotions regarding challenging behaviour of clients are less willing to help their client, use less adequate coping strategies and as a consequence, show staff behaviour that maintains or even increases the persistence of challenging behaviour of clients in the long term (Hastings & Remington, 1994; Lambrechts, Petry, & Maes, 2008). Apart from the conclusion whether expressed emotions of staff are either positive or negative, high levels of emotional expression towards clients with ID are undesirable. We need to be aware of the fact that people with ID show deficiencies in their executive verbal functions and social

* Corresponding author at: Room P104, Tilburg University, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, P.O. Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands, Tel.: +31 13 466 8922; fax: +31 13 466 2067.

E-mail addresses: W.M.W.J.vanOorsouw@UvT.nl (Wietske M.W.J. van Oorsouw), P.J.C.M.Embregts@UvT.nl (Petri J.C.M. Embregts).

information processing, which leads to problems in the perception, understanding and control of emotions (e.g., [Schuengel & Janssen, 2006](#)).

Several measures are used in research regarding emotions of staff serving clients with ID. Within studies regarding emotions, attributions and beliefs of staff, it is common to use questionnaires like the Emotional Reactions to Aggressive Challenging Behaviour Scale ([Mitchell & Hastings, 1998](#)) and the Thoughts and Feelings Questionnaire ([Fletcher, 1989](#)). Within studies regarding expressed emotions of staff, investigators frequently use interviews (e.g., Camberwell Family Interview [CFI], The Five Minute Speech Sample [FMSS]) as well as questionnaires (e.g., Level of Expressed Emotion [LEE], The Perceived Criticism Scale [PCS]; [Van Humbeeck et al., 2001](#); [Weigel, Langdon, Collins, & O'Brien, 2006](#)). Beyond all doubt, these studies lead to a broad range of useful and interesting knowledge about emotional staff behaviour. It is however remarkable, that most measures are based on written responses to questionnaires and verbal utterances during interviews, instead of observations of actual staff behaviour (for a review, see [Lambrechts et al., 2008](#)). Measures that are solely based on verbal or written expressions have some limitations. Emotions can be expressed in several ways and the dominant influence of nonverbal expressions might be underestimated ([Navarro & Karlins, 2008](#)). Besides, it is not yet clear, if and how different forms of expression (verbal, face, body) cohere to each other. At present, a simple observation instrument that enables the observer to register both verbal and nonverbal expressions of emotional behaviour is not available.

In the present study we made a first attempt in the development of an observation instrument that measures both verbal and nonverbal forms of emotional expression. Based on an extensive literature search, reviewing clinical experts and conducting pilot observations, we developed and observation instrument. During a period of three months, we conducted this instrument during shift change within one team of staff members serving clients with mild ID and challenging behaviour. This exploratory study was aimed to develop an observation instrument from which the content was based on scientific research regarding emotional behaviour. Also, we aimed to develop an instrument with sufficient to good interrater reliability scores. We did not take into account the nature (positive or negative) nor the type (fear, anger, happiness) of emotions. When sufficient interrater reliabilities would be achieved, we would additionally analyse whether the observation of nonverbal emotional behaviours next to verbal emotional behaviours would have a surplus value over the observation of verbal forms of emotional behaviour only.

2. Methods

2.1. Development observation instrument

2.1.1. Procedure

To our knowledge, there is no existing standardised observation instrument for the simultaneous assessment of facial, body, linguistic and prosodic expressions of emotions. Therefore, we cautiously attempted to develop one ourselves. The development of this instrument consisted of four phases.

First, we conducted two literature reviews. A preliminary literature review was conducted to clarify the concept of emotions. This research revealed that aspects of emotions can be divided into three categories ([Frijda, 1986](#)): the physiology of emotions, the emotional experience, and emotional behaviour. We focused on the last one. Emotional behaviour represents the expression of emotion, which are not mere movements, but various modes of interaction with the environment. Interaction occurs through nonverbal and verbal expression. Nonverbal expressions are therefore divided in facial expressions and body movements. Verbal expressions consist of both linguistic utterances (i.e., the content of a message) and prosodic features (e.g., loudness and pitch of voice). A secondary literature review was conducted to collect specific examples of expression of behaviour that contained verbal, facial, or body expressions. Nonverbal elements of emotional expression were described in multiple studies. Facial movement is the most extensively studied nonverbal expression. Movements of eyes, eyebrows, and mouth are frequently related to emotional expression (e.g., [Dornaika & Davoine, 2008](#); [Frijda, 1986](#)). The second form of nonverbal expression of emotion is interaction through body movement. Basic emotions can be recognised according to body movements such as shaking of the fists, raising the arms, and dropping the head (e.g., [Atkinson, Dittrich, Gemmell, & Young, 2004](#); [Frijda, 1986](#); [Navarro & Karlins, 2008](#)). Linguistic elements of verbally expressed emotions came from the CFI scale ([Brown & Rutter, 1966](#)). The CFI aims to measure expressed emotions by assessing the number of (a) critical comments, (b) hostile comments, and (c) emotional over involvement (EOI). Prosodic features of verbally expressed emotions were defined on the basis of a large body of research in this field (e.g., [De Gelder & Vroomen, 2000](#); [Frick, 1985](#); [Frijda, 1986](#)). The most frequently reported features of prosody are pitch, loudness, rate, and quality of voice. Despite large inter-speaker variability, there is general consensus that prosodic features of speech communicate emotions ([De Gelder & Vroomen, 2000](#); [Frick, 1985](#)). The secondary literature review resulted in a list of behaviour expressions that were found to be related to emotion. The behaviours on the list were categorized in aspects of (a) verbal, (b) facial, and (c) body expressions.

Following the literature reviews, we conducted interviews with three senior staff members to collect descriptions about communication outcomes of staff (phase 2). These clinical experts had experience with staffs' communication of emotion on a daily basis and were, therefore, considered to have valuable and useful information about specific behaviour that might be related to staff emotion.

In the third phase, specific behaviour descriptions revealed from the interviews were added to the list of behaviours that had been constructed in phase one. Then, we conducted direct and indirect (i.e., video) pilot observations, to test whether we

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