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Ethnographic insights into safety communication for frontline workers

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Abstract

Recent calls for organisation studies to embrace ‘the practice turn’ (Whittington, 2011) have expanded into an understanding of the potential for ethnographic research in occupational health and safety (OHS) research (Pink et al., 2016). The ethnographic project described here, with fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2010, is one element of this growing appreciation of the potential for qualitative research in industrial settings. Ethnographies have not often been used in OHS settings, and ‘much practice-based knowledge remains undocumented, informal, unspoken and thus unaccounted for’ (Pink et al., 2016, p. 27). This study was motivated by an aim to make explicit the tacit safety knowledge understood and practised by a public service workforce subject to high injury rates. The research team, with Teague as field-based ethnographer, undertook a detailed investigation with customer-facing, frontline staff in a transport organisation. The article uses Teague’s ethnography to argue that new insights into improved safety practices are accessible via investigation of the everyday challenges and responses practised by frontline staff. It demonstrates the value of ethnographic research in opening up new avenues for understandings that can inform OHS policy development and the implementation of OHS procedures within complex organisations. In the context of this particular frontline customer service workforce, staff are positioned in an us-and-them relationship to members of the public through being required to work in pairs. The safety culture relies heavily upon partners looking out for each other, which can create social and emotional distance from the members of the public they are employed to serve. At the same time, the role appeals to people who have experience in security-based shiftwork, including former defence force personnel, firefighters and police. The physical fitness requirements of the role, and reliance on teamwork, complicate the communicative context when engaging with members of the public. This is particularly so when customers are verbally aggressive and/or impacted by alcohol or drugs.

Keywords: communication; ethnography; frontline staff; health; injury; safety

Introduction

Aggressive and substance-affected behaviour towards frontline (customer-facing) staff is no longer rare. In fact, most frontline staff report encountering at least one confrontational situation every day (Kokko & Mäki, 2009). This article is drawn from work with a particular cohort of frontline staff who will be referred to as 'transit officers', who were employed by an Australian public transport authority. Transit officers often face physical threats to their safety in a range of circumstances, but the majority of injuries sustained by them occur when they exercise their power to arrest people on the transit authority's land or property. Such arrests may be precipitated by a minor infringement, such as smoking on a platform or not having a valid ticket, and conflict is amplified where an officer responds to aggression with a 'caution' (which may be perceived as a threat) or an actual arrest. In the ethnographic research, older, more experienced officers suggested that many injuries could be prevented if recently recruited transit officers possessed the necessary advanced communication and conflict-resolution skills required to 'talk down' a confrontational member of the public (Teague, 2012, p. 230). Despite their role as intermediaries between the transit authority and the travelling public, with high value placed on customer relations skills, at the time of the research (2008–10), officers received very little training in advanced communication and conflict-resolution skills.

Methodology

This research was conceived as an ethnographic field-based project. Begun in 2007, it was delayed by perceived risks around researching the antecedent communication exchanges in a customer-facing organisation that can lead to injury. Ethics issues and clearances delayed the project until 2008, but it then proceeded with an emphasis on workforce-level research. The ethnography component involved the ethnographer (Teague) completing a twelve-week induction and safety training course alongside new recruits to the organisation, followed by four weeks in the CCTV control room and four months as a participant-observer working the late night shifts (8.00 pm to 2.00 am) during which injuries were most likely to occur. Within the context of the research, the ethnographer took extensive fieldwork notes; documented officers' interactions with the public; kept a research diary; and was a participant-observer for many weeks within the workplace context. Positioned as an employee by the organisation, the ethnographer was differentiated by her additional roles as researcher and PhD student. As such, she developed and used skills of reflexivity and self-analysis to remain critically aware of her own attitudes and perceptions. Teague's work consequently fulfilled Tutt and colleagues' (2013, p. 1028) requirement of involving 'combinations of observing behaviours, participating in activities, writing extensive notes, interviewing and reflecting on one's own role in the research process'.

Teague also conducted and analysed 41 in-depth interviews with frontline workers and key safety, management and union personnel. These data were then transcribed by a professional service provider and interrogated for this article to provide information around the transfer of safety messages and knowledge between management and the workforce; and within the workforce. A constant comparative analysis method was

used (Fram, 2013), which is one of a range of emergent inductive analytic methods available for identifying themes from qualitative data sets. Teague's research informed her PhD, which was one outcome of a larger research project. Although now an adjunct academic, and retired from the paid workforce, Teague's ethnographic contribution and thesis are explicitly recognised throughout this article, which includes research findings from the wider research team and integration with new work from this developing field.

Pink and colleagues (2016, p. 27) note that practice-based knowledge is largely absent from

our understanding of how OSH knowledge is learned, enacted and communicated to others. In making such knowledge visible, ethnographic studies do not seek to privilege the local and practical over the institutional, but ... bring to the fore the unspoken and hidden forms of knowledge and experience that inform the ways people stay safe.

An ethnographic approach allows examination of any divergence between management, theory and workforce practice, and highlights differences in the cultural expectations of these groups. It allows a researcher to sidestep the cynicism with which many contemporary workers view formal OHS regulation, and instead collect stories around remaining safe and the experience of harm. In this case, the ethnographic perspective was particularly valuable for exploring the experience of frontline staff who are required to deal with socially aggressive and/or substance affected members of the public. Such staff have no wish to be injured, and have a range of practices that they believe help to keep them safe. Further, the ethnographic approach can uncover tacit knowledge and worker awareness of skill sets that these frontline staff believe are useful, and that have the potential to make a positive difference to everyday stress and injury faced by people like them who work with the public.

This article uses a case study approach (Yin, 2003) (discussed below) to present data underpinning one of the main findings of the research: the importance of verbal communication and conflict-resolution training as a mechanism for reducing the instance of injury during fraught encounters with the public. Verbal judo was identified by the transit officers themselves as a potentially valuable tool for deescalating confrontational episodes: 'Verbal judo comes in very handy for me and that's from what I learnt from the police not from what I learnt here' (Teague, 2012, p. 163). While this research focused on transit officers, the argument advanced in this article is that Verbal Judo and similar advanced communication training programs have the potential to benefit other organisations whose core business involves customer interaction, service and complaints resolution. The next section explores the potential contribution made by Verbal Judo to managing aggressive behaviour by members of the public interacting with frontline staff in the workplace.

Verbal judo as a safety mechanism

Verbal judo is a conflict-resolution and communication framework developed in the 1980s by Dr George Thompson (Keathley et al., 2012). As a rookie police officer,

Thompson recognised the need for a training system to better equip officers with the skills to communicate with the public and deflect the verbal abuse that they often encounter. Rooted in the Japanese martial art of judo, Thompson's philosophy is defined as 'the gentle art of gaining voluntary compliance through empathic persuasion' (Thompson & Jenkins, 2004). Originally developed for law-enforcement agencies, Verbal Judo focuses on educating participants on interpersonal skills, communication and conflict resolution, and maintains that use of force can often be avoided. The approach is based on a five-step process: listen; empathise; ask; paraphrase; and summarise (LEAPS) (Thompson, 2010). The underlying fundamental of Verbal Judo is that of empathy and respect, similar to that of physical judo:

Verbal judo is the principle of judo itself: using the energy of others to master situations. It contains a set of communication principles and tactics that enable the user to generate cooperation and gain voluntary compliance in others under stressful conditions, such as [with] hostile suspects, upset or frightened victims, or any action which places the officer and the community at odds with each other. (Teague, 2012, p. 162)

Training in conflict resolution, such as in the Verbal Judo approach, offers many benefits to both individuals and organisations including public image, community relations, fewer informal and formal complaints, diffusing situations, prevention of high-risk interactions, improved self-confidence, enhancing professionalism and a reduction in the number of verbal or physical attacks (Meyer, Paul & Grant, 2009; San Miguel & Justice, 2008).

Teague's ethnographic investigation of transit officers identified a clear lack of communication and interpersonal skills training. During the twelve-week intensive training course in which she participated as if she were a new recruit, she identified a large disparity between the training received and the fundamentals of the job. While trainees were given thorough instruction in the theory and skills required in the use of force (baton, pepper spray, hands and handcuffs), training in conflict resolution, interpersonal skills and communication was limited and classroom-based. The implication of the training provided, and a fact stressed by the trainers, was that the majority of situations could be resolved verbally, without the need for force, yet the communication training received by these new officers was to 'back up physical action with verbal communication' (Teague, 2012, p. 84). During this training, there was only one opportunity for trainees to engage in a role-play of a conflict scenario. In this case, the imperative was that the scenario should result in an arrest. Trainers used this role-play as an opportunity to move from the conflict scenario to a realistic mock trial, where the trainees had to develop a brief and present their evidence. There was no scenario in which the trainees resolved a high-stress situation, and no explicit teaching of strategies to reduce tension through a calm, reassuring verbal exchange. Once this was highlighted to the Research Transport Organisation, after Teague's experience of training, the twelve-week course was altered to include a talk-down scenario.

The practice turn

In recent years, workforce-based research has paid increasing attention to disparities between what organisations say they do and what they actually do. These disparities partly mirror differences previously identified between theory and practice. While accepting that an understanding of both is important, and that each is informed by the other, the practice turn, as it has been termed, has reinvigorated research into OHS issues. According to Tutt and colleagues (2013, p. 1029), this approach has ‘implications for situated learning and knowing in practice’, with the potential to reveal:

Deeper understandings of the realities and lived experiences of those within the industry [that] would enable problems to be reframed in ways which account for both the specificities of the contexts to which they relate and the socialities, materialities and experiences through which they unfold.

In identifying whether work is following practice turn precepts, Whittington (2011, p. 184) credits Rouse (2007) with labelling six themes agreed upon by practice theorists:

First, there is a commitment to shared practices, rules and norms. Practice theory is about practices ... Second is recognition of individual agency, the improvisational struggles of everyday life. This agency is not simply individual, but reliant on the social practices that it typically reproduces and occasionally re-forms. A third theme is the material, particularly the bodily and the artifactual. Agency and practices reside in the bodies and artifacts through which they happen. Practice theory’s fourth theme is the problem of language, or discursive practice. As something that depends upon shared understanding, language is the quintessential practice; yet, of course, a great deal of practice is fundamentally tacit, impossible to express discursively. This leads to the fifth theme, the limits of social scientific knowledge, itself a discourse. Practice theorists distrust observer-centred empiricism, valuing the understandings of the research subjects themselves and insisting on researcher reflexivity with regard to their own scientific practice. Reality is not found simply in going ‘micro’. Rouse’s final theme rejects the reductionism of the micro too, in emphasising the autonomous effects of the social. Practices have a social essence that is irreducible to the psychological or biological. (Whittington, 2011, pp. 184–5)

As can be seen in Whittington’s discussion of Rouse’s work, ethnographic research is particularly well suited to exploring the practice turn in emerging work around OHS. One aim of this article is to identify the case study that follows as an early example of a practice turn-led OHS investigation. This case study addresses the problem of transit officer safety within the context of the research organisation and explores the influence of safety culture (discussed below) on the risk of injury. It identifies that customer-facing staff recognise that, in practice, interpersonal communication and conflict-management skills are crucial for worker safety. As previously discussed, this only

became clear to managers as a result of Teague's engagement with the twelve-week training course, and her concern that the only scenario training provided was required to result in an arrest rather than a resolution.

Themes arising from the constant comparative analysis of the full-text interview transcriptions, field notes and ethnographer's reflective practice have been presented here as a case study. Case study research draws upon a wide range of evidence and materials: 'documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts' (Yin, 2003, p. 83), and is particularly indicated when matters of 'how' or 'why' are being addressed (2003, p. 9). The case study can function as means of consolidating and integrating evidence from a variety of sources in order to triangulate (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989) the development of insights and theoretical positions that may be applicable in a range of contexts and circumstances.

Yin (2003, p. xiv) argues that a case study requires several steps: definition and design; the preparation, collection and analysis of data; and the drawing of conclusions. In this case, the study has been designed to interrogate data already collected in order to capture information around transit officer safety; the influence of safety culture on the risk of injury; and the potential contribution of interpersonal and conflict-management skills as a means of promoting safety. A case study approach may be criticised on the grounds of brevity and the partial nature of the coverage of a complex phenomenon; however, a case study approach can provide insight and inform future research, from which more generalisable conclusions may be drawn. This is one aim of this article.

Case study

Transit officer safety

The Research Transport Organisation (RTO) is a government authority responsible for the management and provision of transport services in a large city. The research project focused on the safety culture and communication of transit officers working for the RTO. These transit officers have powers similar to those of the police, but limited to the transit network and property. Over a long period, their rate of injury has remained consistently high, ultimately resulting in the commission of this research to gain in-depth understanding and best-practice strategies in order to abate the risk of injury to officers in frontline positions (Teague, 2012).

The RTO operates a number of lines within the metropolitan area. Each transit officer is assigned to an individual line, working from a home base located at the furthest station of the line. The transit officers conduct their patrols in pairs, performing the core functions of customer service and passenger safety on trains and stations. Similar to many customer-facing employees, these officers are often confronted with aggressive, anti-social or substance-affected individuals, which can result in conflict that may lead to officers being injured. One of the key findings of this research was that inadequate training in customer communication and conflict resolution was a major factor in the escalation of such situations, resulting in injury to officers. More

experienced officers believed that advanced training in conflict resolution and communication skills, such as the Verbal Judo program, could reduce the number and severity of incidents that occur on the lines. This finding concurred with, and was based upon, the views and experience of the officers themselves, and participant-observation research in the workplace. The data gathered via this ethnography, and their presentation as part of this case study, provide an evidence base for the assertion that the delivery of high-level communication skills training, such as Verbal Judo, is an important safety intervention.

In contrast to the officers, RTO management argued that the fundamental reason for transit officer injuries was that standard work procedure and safety rules were not followed, resulting in a situation where:

These combined thoughts of management, looking for fault in officers' behaviour on the one hand, and being fatalistic about injuries on the other, have resulted in an attitude that the system generally is functioning well, but that the officer has done something wrong and is 'the problem'.
(Teague, 2012, p. 222)

This perception of officer fault was reinforced by occasional reviews where injured officers were required by management to review key episodes with (silent) CCTV footage of the precipitating incident. Being silent, the CCTV tapes provided little additional information around possible improvements to communication strategies. In addition to these findings, Teague identified that each of the lines had developed an insulated and distinctive safety culture that reflected the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of its close-knit team. These differences were not apparent in the CCTV footage. Officer training and the role of transit officers were interpreted differently in each of these cultural groups, and these aspects also influenced the risk of injury. Denied the benefit of one-on-one mentoring and training in the workplace in favour of group classroom settings, new officers quickly adopted the behaviours and beliefs of their work groups once they were assigned to their lines. Custom and practice became more influential in teaching officers how to fulfil their role than class-based instruction.

Chan (1996, p. 114) notes 'the transmission of this [safety] culture is not by a process of socialization and internalization of rules, but through a collection of stories and aphorisms which instruct officers on how to see the world and act in it'. Even the suggestion that experienced staff mentored rookies for a period of some weeks at the start of their careers was deemed to be too operationally complex.

Influence of safety culture on the risk of injury

The concept of 'safety culture' was introduced and coined by the International Nuclear Safety Group (INSAG) in relation to the Chernobyl nuclear reactor incident in 1986 (Guldenmund, 2010). Despite a great deal of interest in the concept, along with the term's widespread use, there is no commonly agreed definition of safety culture (Antonsen, 2009; Clarke, 2000; Glendon & Stanton, 2000; Guldenmund, 2010; Haukelid, 2008; Hopkins, 2002; Zhang et al., 2002). Influentially defined by INSAG in 1991 as 'that assembly of characteristics and attitudes in organizations and individuals

that establishes that, as an overriding priority ... safety issues receive the attention warranted by their significance' (Guldenmund, 2010, p. 1467), safety culture nonetheless remains a contested term. Although a plethora of definitions are available, common themes link many of these definitions, including shared and learned meanings, experiences and interpretations of work and safety; the capability to reflect and learn from safety practice, incidents and accidents; management involvement and commitment; patterns of behaviour; an environment of trust where all parties accept that safety is a priority and an effective driver of organisational activity; and the fact that safety culture is shaped by people within an organisation through the structures and social relations both within and outside the organisation (Antonsen, 2009; Clarke, 2000; GAIN, 2004; Haukelid, 2008; Hopkins, 2002; Mearns & Flin, 1999; Zhang et al., 2002).

Safety culture is particularly relevant for customer-facing frontline staff who are physically proximate to members of the public who may be impacted by substance use and/or feeling frustrated/aggressive. Where safety is aligned with physical strength and personal defence skills, as with transit officers, and the workforce is proud of these capacities and identifies group solidarity through their display, workforce members might rely significantly upon physical and occupational authority. This shared understanding regarding physical prowess runs the risk of becoming the primary resource for inexperienced workers in such a safety culture, as one long-time transit officer told Teague:

You get the young ones who rush into it like a bull at a gate. I try and speak to the young first and say, 'This is the way I operate. I want to have a nice safe night. Yes, sure, we might deal with a few violent situations, but I want to have a nice safe night. I don't want you to get hurt and I don't want myself to get hurt. I just want to get home safely in one piece.' That's why I try to explain to them, 'Just take it easy. Just because you've got a uniform on, doesn't mean you're a Superman.' A lot of them think they are – they think they're supermen. We're impregnable, we are. (Teague, 2012, p. 7)

As this officer implies, relying on physical presence may precipitate a significant risk of escalating interpersonal conflict however, rather than resolving it. Consequently, it is important to investigate how a safety culture operates, particularly when it is associated with comparatively high injury rates.

The safety culture within the RTO appears fragmented and paradoxical. It is also subject to significant secrecy. The only figures relating to actual days lost through workplace injuries were made public as a result of a parliamentary costing review. The RTO, at this stage of its history, declined to publish injury rates. This meant that a reduction in injuries could not be used as key performance indicators for managers. Although the RTO were committed to benchmarking, this was with an international partner and no public reports were made available. One argument for the international link was that data were not comparable with those for equivalent organisations in Australia.

The values and beliefs held by management around how injuries occurred were at odds with those expressed by the officers themselves. For example, officers believed that managers were generally trying to find fault and blame whenever an officer

became injured. They felt that managers did not really understand their working conditions and looked after their own interests rather than those of the officers. 'The officers are instructed only to take action if it is safe to do so, thus any injury that may result is seen as a failure on the part of the officer to assess the situation and follow regulations,' said Teague (2012, p. 236). While subcultures within an organisational were common, the lack of communication between rail lines, and the assignment of officers to particular lines, had resulted in the development of a 'silo mentality', and a distinct safety culture on each of the five lines. Each team believed that its line was best, preventing the development of a cohesive and consistent culture of safety among the transit officer cadre (Teague, 2012) and frustrating the development and sharing of best-practice injury-avoidance strategies.

Teague also identified a mismatch between the safety culture visible 'on the tracks' and that of the training environment:

Often, safety management is viewed as a one way communication system from managers to employees, which may not be congruent with the informal system that exists amongst the workers. In the informal system (on the tracks), transit officers may adopt working methods that differ from those they were taught. These methods may not promote safe work practices, but do fit with the culture on the line, and are in keeping with the practices of their peers. (Teague, 2012, p. 235)

In an environment that is structured so that a fellow worker 'has your back', fitting in with peers becomes an important safety strategy.

Interpersonal communication and conflict management skills for safety

Positioned as an employee by the organisation, the researcher was differentiated by her additional roles as researcher and PhD student. As such, it was imperative that she honed her skills of reflexivity and self-analysis, and stayed critically aware of her own attitudes and perceptions.

Following discussions around the lack of 'talk-down' scenario work as part of the twelve-week training and induction course, Teague identified several officers who had undertaken Verbal Judo training as part of their previous employment. They described Verbal Judo as a self-defence technique used to improve relationships and interpersonal communications based on understanding and respect. These officers found their communication and conflict-resolution skills very useful in confrontational situations, and argued that the training would be invaluable for all transit officers:

Verbal judo comes in very handy for me and that's from what I learnt from the police, not from what I learnt here, because it teaches you not to just get straight hands on, like wrestling someone to the ground. Try and talk them out of a situation. (Teague, 2012, p. 163)

Once you've worked with someone you can kind of see the way they talk to people and sometimes you just want to walk away from the train or platform. Because sometimes it's just downright embarrassing and

dangerous, because you're just going 'why do you have a need to make this person so angry', you know? 'Just talk to them. Yeah, they might be a piece of shit, but kill them with kindness'. Because I mean, I don't understand people that want to be doing [court] briefs and action reports. (Teague, 2012, p. 163)

Given the different skill sets possessed by staff with advanced communication training, the officers who had not received Verbal Judo or equivalent instruction felt that the safety programs offered by the RTO were insufficient and flawed, and did not allow them to operate in an optimally safe manner when confronted with abusive or aggressive passengers. Experienced officers believed that it was difficult to develop and use these skills in confrontational situations without the benefit of specific in-depth, scenario-based training:

I see a lot of new guys come out and I recognise it, it's the same mistakes that I made when I came out, but they don't really know how to talk to people ... I just think a lot of it sort of comes down to the way we're trained. Because we're not trained to talk to people. (Teague, 2012, p. 207)

Teague encountered two officers who had taken it upon themselves to acquire a copy of the book *Verbal Judo*, as they felt that their skills needed improvement, and they had been forced to seek their own education in advanced communication skills. Indeed, a number of participants indicated their desire to complete training in this area:

If I was to have a training course you'd have the Verbal Judo for a week before scenario training and then try and apply the Verbal Judo in two weeks of scenario training ... Maybe that extension would be what you'd expect to kind of get the habit going. It's kind of [like] having a habit and then keeping it intact and utilised. (Teague, 2012, p. 230)

Unfortunately, the RTO management believed that a 'proprietary product' such as a Verbal judo course was too expensive an option to be justified, and that the organisation's training was regularly reviewed and fit for purpose.

Even so, a number of instances were recounted to Teague in which an officer's work partner had been injured due to a breakdown in communication that was initiated by that partner's poor communication skills. Research indicates that there is a positive correlation between the amount of aggression an officer uses and the risk of resistance the officer faces (Fridell et al., 2009). A perceived 'small issue' may quickly escalate to a confrontational situation because of a lack of conflict resolution and communication skills available to the officer involved.

Where aggression was responded to with more aggression, for example, the situation could escalate and get out of hand – a situation that could have been diffused and managed with verbal communication resulted in an arrest. Developing advanced communication skills was seen by these participants as a way to enable the resolution of a fraught situation in a win-win manner, rather than the incident escalating to an arrest and potential injury. They felt that a greater emphasis on empathic

communication strategies would better equip them to deal with aggressive, non-complying passengers, thereby improving safety in the field.

Many studies conducted with law enforcement agencies have shown that the use of Verbal Judo-like approaches can prevent the escalation of high-risk situations (Johnson, 2004; Keathley, Kupritz & Haas, 2012; Meyer, Paul & Grant, 2009; Teague, Leith & Green, 2013). Unfortunately, an increasing number of personnel are required to deal with, and control, these types of situations with limited training and minimal conflict-resolution skills. Further, frontline staff at risk are not confined to law-enforcement agencies, but include health workers, hospitality and beverage employees, and public service workers such as librarians. When confronted with an emotional, hostile or angry customer or member of the public, frontline personnel require a level of professionalism that is generally associated with long-term experience or advanced training (Kaminski & Martin, 2000).

Discussion and conclusion

Transit officers are essentially frontline staff who are in the business of providing a service to the public. As in many other service organisations, these frontline staff are required to manage confrontational situations where members of the public may be aggressive or argumentative. The research aimed to identify ways in which transit officer safety could be improved. Transit officers themselves argued that they need an understanding of communication and conflict resolution. This paper indicates that the lack of advanced communication and conflict resolution skills in the transit officer cohort is detrimental to the safety, confidence and professionalism of these frontline workers. Inadequate training in customer communication and conflict resolution was identified as a major cause of the escalation of problematic situations, resulting in injury to officers. Management's failure to respond to these suggestions was constructed by frontline staff as one indication of an unwillingness to engage with the real challenges that transit officers face. As a result, new recruits adopt the practices, view and behaviours of established officers on their line, without taking their recent management-sponsored training injunctions into the field. Without a formal policy of partnering staff with low incidence of injury with new recruits, it is a matter of chance whether a rookie's early experiences build a safety-first approach to their role and a win-win mindset to interactions with the public. The lack of active management engagement with key skill sets associated with lower injury rates risks building a staff of inadequately trained officers who feel ill-equipped to deal with high risk and high tension situations, leaving them feeling frustrated and helpless when dealing with aggressive members of the public.

Verbal aggression, such as insults, yelling, swearing and abuse, are the most frequent aggressive behaviours directed at frontline staff. This aggression can be challenging, emotionally draining and hazardous. Frontline employees are the intermediaries between an organisation and the wider public, with a significant requirement for customer relations skills. In the RTO, officers are often required to manage aggressive or confrontational situations, and to regulate their response in order to avoid escalating the incident. Staff exposed to higher levels of verbal aggression

often consider these situations to be more threatening, increasing their own levels of stress and lowering feelings of well-being within the workplace. Emotional exhaustion and workplace absences are associated with being a more frequent target for public hostility. Difficult members of the public, often acting on an emotional level, can be viewed by service staff as extremely demanding. It may require a significant output of emotional energy and high-level communication skills to achieve a successful resolution. This research could have a practical application for improved safety of frontline staff in a range of customer-facing industries such as retail, hospitality, nursing and service centres. This article has contributed to the research conversation around appropriate OSH training, the importance of a shared and responsive safety culture with open communication between management and staff, and the value of advanced communication skills development.

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