

A combined drama-based and CBT approach to working with self-reported anger aggression

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ABSTRACT

Background A drama-based programme, called 'Insult to Injury', was designed to explore the processes of anger, aggression and violence. The aim of the programme was to enable offenders to identify and generate strategies and skills for dealing with potentially volatile situations, and to provide a safe and supportive environment in which to practice and evaluate these strategies.

Aims An active drama-based approach combined with cognitive-behavioural techniques was used to explore issues such as masculinity, power and control, pride and shame and victim awareness. Reductions in anger were hypothesized.

Method A single group pre/post design assessed the levels of anger before and after the course.

Results Sixty-two adult male offenders from six prison establishments in the UK took part in the nine-day course. As hypothesized, significant reductions in anger were found in pre- to post-course assessment.

Conclusions These results suggest that a drama-based approach may be a promising adjunct to traditional anger management programmes for violent offenders. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

Anger has been associated with a number of negative behaviours, such as interpersonal conflict (Baumeister et al., 1990) and offending behaviour (Novaco, 1997; Zamble and Quinsey, 1997). The impact of ineffective management of anger and aggression can be devastating, with a high cost to both society and to the individual, with physical, emotional and interpersonal consequences experienced (Dunbar, 2004).

Deffenbacher (1999) described anger as an experiential state embodying cognitive, emotional and physiological elements that co-occur and reinforce each other, and tend to be experienced as a singular phenomenon. Anger is a reaction to precipitating events, elicited by anger-related memories, external events and the cognitive appraisals made. Distinct from anger, aggression is an action, a motor behaviour often defined as a goal-directed behaviour with a deliberate intent to harm a person or object and typically violating social rules (Berkowitz, 1993). Arousal of anger is not a necessary precursor for aggression, although it is a significant antecedent of aggression. If there is high arousal intensity, this can disrupt information processing and override inhibitory controls (Novaco, 1994). Therefore in reducing anger arousal, a subsequent reduction in aggression should follow.

Findings from meta-analyses suggest that anger management is effective, with at least a moderate effect sizes reported (Beck and Fernandez, 1998; Edmondson and Conger, 1996; DiGiuseppe and Tafrate, 2003). However, the majority of studies included in meta-analyses fail to include, or do not focus on, high risk populations such as violent offenders or offenders in general, but focus rather on less serious client groups with anger problems, such as angry students, who are likely to differ substantially from violent offenders (Howells, 1998, 2004). The results of the few studies addressing the effectiveness of anger management programmes based on offender populations so far have been contradictory and somewhat limited (Novaco et al., 2001). Dowden et al. (1999), for example, reported that an anger management programme given to high-risk offenders, significantly reduced recidivism compared to untreated controls over a three year period. Similarly, after completing an eight session anger management programme, adult male prisoners were found to attempt to control their anger and suppress their angry responses (Law, 1997). Ireland (2004) found significant improvements on a self-report anger questionnaire [Anger Management Assessment (AMA) questionnaire] following a brief group anger management intervention for young male offenders and a checklist completed by wing officers showed a reduction in angry behaviours. In contrast, Watt and Howells (1999) found little evidence for an impact of anger management on violent prisoners using a range of anger-related clinical outcomes.

Howells (2004) argued that anger management can produce change at a psycho-educational level but not at a therapeutic level with offender groups. Thus, it would seem that there is a need to investigate the effectiveness of other anger management interventions in producing change in high-risk individuals, such as repeat violent offenders (Howells, 2004). The drama-based approach described here places particular emphasis on identifying the cognitive processes and distorted attitudes that are suggested to facilitate the violent expression of anger (Baim et al., 2002), and additionally provides a safe and supportive environment in which to practice and evaluate control strategies.

Drama has a number of significant advantages over the discussion-based or instructional approaches used by most anger-management programmes, as the drama-based methods are more personal and practical, less reliant on literacy and verbal expression, and help address thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Baim et al., 2002). Drama furthermore enables participants to practise newly-acquired skills and roles, as well as self-reflection (Baim et al., 2002). It is therefore an efficient tool for exploring destructive behaviours and practising alternatives, thereby enhancing social skills, problem solving, and self-control skills (Baim et al., 2002). Furthermore, role-play, skills training, role rehearsal, and live practice of cognitive self-talk have been found to be essential components of successful rehabilitation programmes for offenders (Antonowicz and Ross, 1994).

Drama-therapy, and the use of drama techniques, is an adjunct approach that has been applied in custodial, community, and secure hospital settings for offenders over a number of years (Jennings et al., 1997), but is a relatively under-researched field in the criminal justice system (Hughes, 2004). Evaluation studies on drama-based interventions have tended to be based on qualitative methodology, small samples, reliance on self-report measures, and a lack of comparison groups (Hughes, 2004). However, reported results show drama-based interventions to be a promising method of treating offenders with anger problems. For example, Balfour (2003) found an increase in anger control and a decline in anger expression using the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI; Spielberger, 1999) in a drama-based approach to anger management with adult offenders. Reiss et al. (1998) examined changes in levels of anger associated with a drama-therapy project that was provided to 12 mentally disordered offenders in Broadmoor Hospital, a maximum security hospital. They found that levels of trait anger were significantly reduced after the theatre week and these improvements were maintained at a three-month follow up.

The aim of the current study was to add to this small literature by examining the effect of drama-based therapy on the levels of anger reported by a prison inmate sample. It was hypothesised that significant reductions in anger would occur after completion of the programme.

Method

Participants

Participants were 62 adult male offenders recruited from six prisons. The mean age of the sample was 31.2 years [standard deviation (SD) = 7.7 years, range 19–49 years]. The participants had been convicted of violent and aggressive offences, which ranged from assault, wounding with intent, and assault with a weapon. Specific information regarding each group members' offending history (such as the length of their current sentence and offence type) was not recorded as access to file information was restricted.

Measure

State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory-2 (STAXI-2; Spielberger, 1999)

The STAXI-2 measures the experience, expression, and control of anger and consists of six scales – State Anger, Trait Anger, Anger Expression-In, Anger Expression-Out, Anger Control-In, Anger Control-Out – and an overall Anger Expression Index. All 57-items are scored on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always). The STAXI-2 is based upon a strong conceptual model of anger (Eckhardt et al., 2004). The internal consistency alphas of the STAXI-2 scales range from 0.73 to 0.95.

The programme

The programme was run by the Geese Theatre Company. Geese Theatre has worked within the criminal justice system since 1987, performing in various custodial institutions and probation settings. Using dramatic and theatrical techniques, the project's purpose was to help inmates with problems of emotionally-driven violence to identify strategies and skills for dealing with potentially volatile situations in an appropriate way. Drama-therapy techniques were employed in combination with some of the key principles of cognitive behavioural anger management training. The project involved an exploration of cognitive models of behaviour, incorporating techniques involving the use of active exercises, role-play, and theatrical metaphors such as the 'the mask'.

The programme was nine days long, consisting of three three-day blocks over consecutive weeks, with two sessions per day. The average session lasted two and a half hours. Each nine-day course was facilitated by two members of the Geese Theatre Company. Participants progressed from working at one step removed, i.e. focusing on fictional characters and situations, to working directly with their own behaviour.

The structure of the programme was as follows. Block 1: Aggressive and violent behaviour and the immediate internal processes which affect subsequent behaviour were explored. Self-reflection was encouraged to help participants understand their own anger cycles, understand the ways in which their own thoughts and feelings impacted on their behaviour, and the recognition of personal trigger situations. Block 2: Issues around masculinity, power and control, pride and shame, the consequences of anger related behaviour for others and victim awareness were explored. Participants gained an understanding of how their underlying beliefs and rules impacted on their behaviour. Block 3: Learning from the first two blocks was consolidated whilst also exploring notions of choice and alternative behaviours, including problem-solving, positive self-talk statements and anger management techniques.

Throughout the course, participants were invited to consider potential future high risk situations, identify with facilitators possible methods of dealing with

those situations differently, rehearse and practise the skills associated with those methods and evaluate their effectiveness. At the end of each session, time was provided for the participants to reflect on the process they had been engaged in and offered an opportunity to consider any significant moments/learning points. The final session of the course was dedicated to closing the programme. This involved creating a forum in which individuals could reflect upon their own progress and the progress of the group.

Procedure

Men having a violent conviction and problem behaviours related to anger were identified and approached by prison staff and given an information sheet about the course which outlined the aims of the course, suitable participants, and information about Geese Theatre Company. Those men that expressed an interest were interviewed and assessed by the prison staff to identify those that needed help with their anger. During this interview the men were asked about their motivations to change. To be recruited, inmates needed to have a problem with anger-driven aggression, show some motivation to change and be willing to explore their own behaviour.

Prior to the start of the course there was a half-day staff briefing for those who would be involved in delivering the course. The Geese Theatre facilitator briefed prison staff on the content and delivery style of the programme and outline their role within that programme. Prison staff were encouraged to actively participate in the course by becoming involved in the exercises and group discussions, and also to provide a supporting role to both the Geese Theatre staff and the offenders involved.

Anger was assessed using the STAXI-2 at the beginning of the programme and again a week after the conclusion of the programme.

Results

Treatment impact was assessed by examining whether participants in the sample had significantly improved STAXI-2 scores following treatment. Here, multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used, as this deals with more than one dependent variable at the same time and yields an overall F value for the construct in question (State Anger, Trait Anger, Anger Expression, Anger Control) as well as univariate- F values for the subscales making up these constructs. It was found that there was an overall significant difference in STAXI-2 scores for State Anger [$F(4,48) = 9.41, p < 0.0001$], Trait Anger [$F(3,49) = 12.36, p < 0.0001$], Anger Expression [$F(2,50) = 12.48, p < 0.0001$], Anger Control [$F(2,50) = 15.89, p < 0.0001$], and Anger Index [$F(1,51) = 44.35, p < 0.0001$], where an ANOVA was used as there was only one scale here. Table 1 shows the decomposition of each of the univariate- F comparisons for each of the STAXI-2

Table 1: Univariate *F* scores for each of the subscales on STAXI-2 scores ($N = 52$)¹

Scales	Subscales	<i>F</i>	Pre-treatment			Post-treatment		
			Mean (SD)	Median	Range	Mean (SD)	Median	Range
S-Ang	S-Ang	31.54	21.8 (7.7)	19	15–40	17.1 (5.1)	15	15–44
	S-Ang/F	27.71	7.7 (3.2)	7	5–17	6.1 (2.3)	5	5–17
	S-Ang/V	20.62	7.5 (3.4)	6	5–17	5.6 (2.2)	5	5–19
	S-Ang/P	15.12	6.5 (2.5)	5	5–17	5.4 (1.1)	5	5–12
T-Ang	T-Ang	36.33	22.4 (6.7)	22	13–37	17.4 (6.0)	16	10–35
	T-Ang/T	36.33	8.8 (3.2)	8	4–16	6.8 (2.6)	7	4–16
	T-Ang/R	20.09	9.0 (2.8)	9	3–16	7.1 (3.1)	7	4–24
AX	AX-O	21.74	18.2 (4.6)	18	9–30	15.8 (3.8)	16	9–26
	AX-I	15.87	19.7 (4.5)	19	9–30	17.8 (4.5)	17	9–28
AC	AC-O	20.00	20.7 (5.3)	20	11–32	24.1 (5.4)	25	13–32
	AC-I	19.00	19.5 (5.8)	19	8–32	23.8 (5.9)	25	9–32
AX Index	AX Index	44.35	45.6 (15.9)	48.5	8–88	33.7 (16.12)	32.5	5–63

¹Ten men did not complete either the pre- or the post-intervention measure.

Note: S-Ang, State Anger; S-Ang/F, Feeling Angry; S-Ang/V, Feel like Expressing Anger Verbally; S-Ang/P, Feel like Expressing Anger Physically; T-Ang, Trait Anger; T-Ang/T, Angry Temperament; T-Ang/R, Angry reaction; AX-O, Anger Expression-Out; AX-I, Anger Expression-In; AC-O, Anger Control-Out; AC-I, Anger Control-In; AX Index, Anger Expression Index.

subscales. The pre-post treatment mean scores and SD values are also shown in Table 1.

Discussion

The results of this single group pre/post design study show that the drama-based intervention aimed at enhancing anger management with offenders with a history of violence was associated with significant improvements on all scales of the STAXI-2. These results indicate the potential usefulness of a drama-based approach for work with violent offenders. The results support the work by Reiss et al. (1998), who found that levels of anger were significantly reduced after drama

therapy. However, in the Reiss et al. study only improvements in trait anger were found, whereas this study showed changes across all subscales. Important differences between the current study and Reiss et al. need to be considered. The study by Reiss et al. (1998) evaluated a week-long drama project called 'The Violent Illusion Trilogy' for 12 mentally disordered offenders, making comparison difficult given that different projects with different types of offenders were evaluated.

Despite positive changes, methodological limitations need to be taken into consideration. As with the Reiss et al.'s (1998) study, the single group pre/post design makes it difficult to determine whether the results are attributable to the drama intervention or to other factors, such as external events or other interventions conducted within the prison at the same time. Therefore, interpretation of the results needs to be made with caution. Responses to the questionnaires may have been biased by socially desirable responding as they were administered and collected by Geese Theatre staff. Independent evaluation is preferable. Although positive changes were found on a self-report measure, this does not necessarily mean that there will be a change in violent behaviour. Longer term follow up using behavioural measures in addition to self-report measures is necessary.

Controlled evaluations using multiple measures are now required to establish the effectiveness of drama-based approach aimed at reducing angry aggression with offenders. It is recommended that any further study would benefit from the inclusion of self-report questionnaires, self-monitoring, and behavioural observations (Hollin and Bloxson, 2007). For instance, rates of anger outbursts, disciplinary reports, and behavioural checklists are all potentially useful short-term measures. More than one psychometric test would be preferable when assessing anger, so that different dimensions of the anger construct can be assessed. Ultimately, violent reconviction rates are the test of the effectiveness of the treatment.

Despite the limitations, this is the only study to date on drama-based intervention with violent offenders that includes a moderate sample size from different prison establishments within the UK. The results suggest that drama-based projects may be a promising treatment approach for violent offenders and may be useful in improving responsivity for offenders whose language and literacy levels may make more mainstream anger management programmes inaccessible to them.

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