

## **Abstract**

Staff at a residential therapeutic community working with adolescent male perpetrators of sexual abuse had been unable to effectively contain and control the aggressive and violent behaviour of a group of disturbed boys. An unprecedented number of expulsions had resulted and staff morale was low. A qualitative study, using a semi-structured interview and an emergent themes analysis, was conducted to investigate the theoretical and practical frameworks staff members described as using in conceptualising and responding to incidents of violence and aggression in the community. A review of professional literature yielded a wide body of relevant theory and practice. Drawn from this, several frameworks of conceptualisation, particularly therapeutic community, psychoanalytical, attachment and social care management models, were used for discussing the findings. It was found that a low incidence of theoretical constructs and a high incidence of practical methods of control were specified in staff descriptions of their cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses. In the main, dyadic and group unconscious processes were not recognised by staff, yet were noted by the researcher as affecting intrapsychic and interpersonal dimensions of experience, possibly rendering practice ineffectual. Recommendations for further research and suggestions for facilitating more effective practice in the therapeutic community are put forward.