Lateral and Vertical Violence in Nursing
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The January 2010 edition of the South Carolina Nurse featured a series of articles on lateral violence in the nursing profession including one that summarized the many terms currently used to describe negative nurse behaviors. After careful consideration, the MUSC lateral violence research team has decided to include the concept of vertical violence in our proposed study so that we can more accurately capture the varied experiences of individuals at all levels of the nursing hierarchy. We will be using a revised version of the instrument developed for our 2005 study to examine the prevalence, severity, causes, and experiences of lateral and vertical violence among nurses.

We describe both lateral and vertical violence as nurse-on-nurse aggression expressed as abusive verbal and nonverbal behaviors intended to inflict psychological pain. Lateral violence occurs between peers at the same power level on the nursing hierarchy (e.g., staff nurse to staff nurse; nurse manager to nurse manager). Griffin has identified the ten most common forms of lateral violence behaviors. We believe these are also forms of vertical violence behaviors. Vertical violence occurs between individuals at different power levels on the nursing hierarchy and may be directed downward (e.g., nurse manager or charge nurse to staff nurse) or upward, (e.g., staff nurse to nurse manager or charge nurse). Vertical violence behaviors are intimidating and/or undermining and reflect either an abuse of legitimate authority or abuse of informal power. The abuse of legitimate authority includes behaviors such as excessive criticism, unreasonable work assignments, and withholding opportunities. Abuse of informal power by individuals or cliques of coworkers are behaviors that undermine the work of a nurse leader, e.g., talking to other nurses or members of other disciplines about the leader in a negative or demeaning manner rather than speaking directly to the leader; influencing others to overtly or covertly oppose the direction of the leader.

Vertical violence differs from bullying in that it does not require a pattern of repeated behavior over 6 months, it is not limited to “top down” behavior, and it does not include physical violence.


