

ELDER ABUSE RECONSIDERED: AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Most scholars agree that there has been remarkably little advance in understanding of elder abuse, especially given the increasing attention it attracts throughout the world. Definitions of “elder abuse” have remained simple categorizations and descriptions of acts of physical abuse, psychological or emotional abuse, and financial abuse (or of omissions resulting in neglect). There is little exploration of matters such as the intent of the perpetrator, the degree of harm experienced or the social and cultural context within which abuse takes place.

It follows that estimates of abuse are difficult to make, although in Canada it is often said to affect at least four percent of seniors. In addition, explanations about why abuse occurs have changed little in the last thirty years. They chiefly focus on elder abuse as a manifestation of family violence, including parent-child and spousal abuse. Sometimes the violence is said to follow a shift in the balance of power within the family as the older person ages and becomes more vulnerable. Caregiver stress, whether manifest in paid or unpaid caregivers, is also widely believed to be associated with elder abuse.

While these explanations may seem intuitively persuasive, and indeed may reflect the experiences of some, they do not hold up well under scrutiny. This is either because the explanations are inadequate in themselves, the research does not support them or the research is conceptually and methodologically flawed. For instance, it has been shown that perpetrators of abuses in private homes are

most likely to be troubled people *dependent on the older person* rather than the older person being dependent on them. With regard to “caregiver stress” we must also ask why some caregivers in highly stressful situations do not become abusive and some do? Further, the explanations usually view abuse as being individually based rather than residing in society as a whole.

Existing frameworks

Responses to elder abuse and neglect follow from distinct ways of framing the “problem”: (i) as older people “in need of protection”, (ii) as victims of family violence or (iii) as subjects of illegal acts.

In need of protection: The increasing popularity of this view is demonstrated by the proliferation of provincial legislation that deals with the identification of older adults in need of protection from themselves and others. Legislation may indeed facilitate remedial action in some extreme situations; however, there are concerns about its ability to be effective in ambiguous cases. With regard to abuse in the home, most older adults are of sound mind and adult protection legislation places them in a situation where their judgments may be questioned if they do not meet community norms. This, in turn, raises serious concerns about human rights.

Where abuses occur in residential institutions, adult protection legislation may be used in support of reporting mechanisms and standardized investigations. It is likely to facilitate appropriate responses to severe cases of mistreatment, such as the removal of abusive staff. Where the forms of abuse are more subtle, such as verbal teasing or failure to provide food that is ethno-culturally

appropriate, or is associated with overall deficits in the quality of care and resources, legislation is unlikely to be of assistance.

'Victims' of domestic violence: Older people may live in violent spousal relationships. Sometimes this is domestic violence “grown old” as a couple ages. Instances of physical or psychological violence, or of neglect, also occur where older people live with their extended families. Families in general are regarded as a “safe haven” in society despite considerable evidence that this is far from always the case. However older people have many reasons to remain in abusive families. For instance, they may have a lifetime of emotional ties that they wish to sustain, a fear of exposure to shame, and sometimes a conviction that they need to care for the abusers, or indeed that they themselves deserve the bad treatment. In addition, they may fear reprisals if they expose mistreatment, or feel trapped by the lack viable alternative living situations.

Subjects of illegal acts: There are laws within the criminal code that can be used to address mistreatment, such as theft or fraud, physical or sexual assault. However, the laws are rarely used, likely for many of the same reasons named above that cause older people to tolerate physical or psychological abuse. One concern is that by not treating illegal acts perpetrated against older people as crimes, older people themselves become further marginalized in society, as less than full citizens.

So what can be done?

Professional needs: There is a growing consensus that action is needed on many levels. What actions should receive priority may depend on where one is located in relation to the issues. For instance, professionals who come into contact with instances of abuse want more training on how to recognize abuse, and what to do about it. Frequently, as one participant in a study by the Canadian Association of Community Care notes: there are “tons of resource materials but not adequate funds to pay staff” or to provide training.

Communities can help: One major strength of assistance through community efforts is the ability to focus on finding ways of responding to individual situations of abuse and neglect that are acceptable to the older people involved. This generally means that the older person will have confidence that the helper will respect his or her wishes about the assistance to be offered and will avoid making the situation worse. In researching how help was offered to older people living in situations of mistreatment in rural areas, our research team found that many lay and professional people were involved, and that they connected informally about what to do.

Seniors active in their communities supported and, where necessary, sought help for their peers. Local police kept an eye on “situations” where charges could not be laid. Adult protection workers, hired to deal with situations under Adult Protection Act, were valued as consultants about what best to do in the more frequent situations where the older person was mentally competent and not subject to

intervention under the Act. References were made to let someone know that the “community” was watching the behaviour that they considered unacceptable. But the sustainability of the efforts to deal with abuse in these communities was threatened by the emotional demands of the work, and by the decreasing ability of professionals to allocate their time to work that did not fit with standard agency requirements for accountability. In addition, seniors involved in offering assistance found themselves exhausted by the many claims on their time.

Action against ageism: As the 2004 survey Successful Aging Ottawa demonstrates there are many older people who feel good about themselves and their lives. However, there does need to be a concerted effort to address the many situations that allow older people to be devalued, and treated as “lesser” people or citizens with fewer rights. How often, for example, do we read and hear public complaints about the cost to society of caring for increasing numbers of older people? The devaluation of older people has been termed “apocalyptic demography” by some economists who debunk arguments that older people can or should be blamed for present or future economic problems. Similarly, why do we focus on “bad” driving by seniors and fail to make comparisons with the driving habits of younger age groups or drivers impaired by cell phones?

“Elder abuse” raises many issues both for individuals and society. As the actions and commitment of The Council on Aging of Ottawa demonstrate, all of us need to do our part to ensure that older people are offered respect for past and present contributions to society, and

good care when it is needed. This means taking action in political and policy arenas to ensure that older people can feel good about themselves, can recognize their rights, and are positively regarded by others. We must also find means to assist those who are already in abusive situations.

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