

SOCIAL WORK DEPARTMENT

Student Research Brief

The Relationship between Elder Abuse and Caregiving

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Introduction

This research included five studies about elder abuse and caregiver interaction. According to the 2004 Survey of State Adult Protective Services, the majority (89.3%) of elder abuse occurs in a domestic setting, and 52.7% of alleged perpetrators are females (Administration on Aging, 2004). Elder abuse is defined as a single or repeated act or a lack of appropriate action occurring in any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which can harm or distress an older person (Dyer & Rowe, 1999). Abuse is not easily discerned and can be in the form of physical, emotional, or material which includes financial abuse. Non-action such as neglect and benevolent actions can also be a factor in defining abuse. Benevolent abuse can include using restraints to keep the older adult safe or insistence in helping with personal care needs which can result in embarrassment (Reis, 2000).

Summary of Primary Findings

The majority of caregiving occurring in the home is provided by women who are unpaid (Koenig, Lutz & Rinfrette, 2006). Caregiving can bring the caregiver and care recipient into closer contact as the result of assistance with daily living activities; closer contact can result in old conflicts returning to the surface (Anetzberger, 2000). Most studies have focused on the older adult being victimized and protected, and the focus should remain on prevention of abuse; however, little information is known about perpetrators. More data collection about the perpetrator, as well as the older adult being abused, can improve methods of prevention, intervention, and advocacy (Administration on Aging, 2004). Because of the lack of focus on conflict within the family as an underlying factor of elder abuse,

the Indicators of Abuse (IOA) screening was developed and used in a three-year study called Project Care. The research was a qualitative study involving 341 older adults who were over 55 years old and had an unpaid caregiver giving them assistance on a regular basis. Research findings revealed that elder abuse is strongly related to a caregiver's personal and emotional problems. Abuse is also more likely to be present in homes where family conflict exists, where there is a lack of support of the older adult, and where there has been past abuse of the older adult (Reis, 2000). (narrative)

Implications for Social Work Practice

Because elder abuse involves the caregiver the majority of the time, social workers need to be aware of the fact that they will come into contact with caregivers who may have experienced domestic violence from the frail elder; therefore, caregiver stress and decision-making may be poor at the time of assessment. All assessments need to address the quality of the relationship prior to the incident of abuse. Development of caregiver options such as the use of sitters and the use of resources such as formal and informal support groups may be beneficial to help empower the caregiver; as a result, intervention measures will benefit the older adult as well. (narrative)

DATA AT A GLANCE

ELDER ABUSE IS NOT CAUSED BY CAREGIVER STRESS BUT BY THE INTERPLAY OF CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PERPETRATOR AND THE OLDER ADULT.

TO RESOLVE ABUSIVE SITUATIONS SOCIAL WORKERS NEED TO PAY ATTENTION TO THE INTERACTIONS OF THE PERPETRATOR AND THE OLDER ADULT IN ORDER TO PROMOTE SAFETY FOR THE VICTIM.

10 Recommendations for Practice with Systems of All Sizes

1. Social support should be given both the older adult and caregiver through resources.
2. Boundary setting skills should be worked on by the older adult toward perpetrators.
3. Caregivers and care recipients should maintain outside relationships.
4. Assessments should address past abuse issues.
5. Use caregiving options such as a

sitter or aid if possible.

6. Empower the older adult to make decisions for himself/herself.
7. Assess relationships for conflict issues that may not be resolved.
8. Explore counseling or rehabilitative services if substance abuse is involved.
9. Empowerment is preferred when seeking to resolve financial abuse.
10. Target the entire family system for improvement of the abuse. (narrative)

Conclusion

The cause of elder abuse has more to do with the characteristics of the perpetrator and the relationship with the older adult than it does with caregiver stress and burden. When doing an assessment of the family, one should not forget that the older adult may have been the perpetrator in the past whether it is a marital relationship or a parent/child relationship. Support services may need to be extended to the caregiver as well as the care recipient. (narrative)

References

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About the Author

My name is Joan Benefield, and I am a senior-level BSW student at UTC (The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga). I am currently working as an intern with Partnership for Families, Children and Adults in the Elderly Services with clients who have been victims of abuse (VOCA).

FIGURE 1 INDICATORS OF ABUSE FORM

Indicators of abuse are listed below, numbered in order of importance.(FN*) After a two- to three-hour home assessment (or other intensive assessment) please rate each of the following items on a scale of 0 to 4. Do not omit any items. Rate according to your current opinion.

Scale: Estimated extent of problem:
0 = nonexistent 00 = not applicable

1 = slight 000 = don't know

2 = moderate

3 = probably/moderately severe

4 = yes/severe

Caregiver age ___ years
Caregiver and care receiver kinship ___ spouse

___ nonspouse

CAREGIVER

CARE RECEIVER

___ 1. Has behavior problems

___ 4. Has been abused in the past

___ 2. Is financially dependent

___ 5. Has marital/family conflict

___ 3. Has mental/emotional difficulties

___ 8. Lacks understanding of medical

___ 6. Has alcohol/substance abuse problem

___ 7. Has unrealistic expectations

___ 11. Is socially isolated

___ 9. Lacks understanding of medical

___ 15. Lacks social support

___ condition

___ 16. Has behavior problems

___ 10. Caregiving reluctance

___ 18. Is financially dependent

___ 12. Has marital/family conflict

___ 19. Has unrealistic expectations

___ 13. Has poor current

relationship

___ 20. Has alcohol/medication problem

___ 14. Caregiving inexperience

___ 21. Has poor current

relationship

INSERT GRAPH/TABLE HERE