

Elder Abuse and Diversity: An Overview

By Andrea Lowenthal

Elder abuse is proliferating at an alarming rate, and is yet still drastically under-reported. Recognizing elder abuse is not always a matter of "I know it when I see it." Definitions and descriptions of the general categories of abuse vary among states, across research on the incidence of elder abuse, and in the literature generally. Elder abuse may be intentional physical, sexual, or psychological abuse; or it may be self-neglect, or neglect by a caregiver. Financial abuse, whether by "insiders," such as family members or appointed agents, or mass-exploiters, through broad-based schemes, is another form of elder abuse. While there are more similarities than differences, identifying an overt act or failure to act as abusive or neglectful also depends upon the experience of the individual perpetrator and victim.



There are many U.S. studies over the past four decades on the implications of race, ethnicity, culture and social orientation on elder abuse.¹ Researchers have attempted to identify and classify the effect of race and ethnicity of the elders and their caretakers on the incidence of elder abuse, reporting, and response. However, many variables, such as the locale and community in which the elders live, will cause variations even within members of any sub-group.² The effect of sexual or gender orientation has been explored, but not researched. Because elder abuse is also a global problem, the available research includes many international studies from which a better understanding of diverse American elders can also be obtained.³

Researchers are aiming at a moving target. The elders of one generation may not have had the same perceptions and understanding as their children and caretakers. Regardless of their background, the elders and their progeny will have been influenced by their different opportunities for education, employment, and mobility, by their community and their social acceptance. Racial, ethnic, and other cultural identifications may be fluid, and so too must be the approach to understanding elder abuse. However, the research to date provides a starting point.

Defining Elder Abuse

There are neither national nor universal definitions of types of elder abuse, and some authors use the word "maltreatment" or "mistreatment" instead to encompass both abuse and neglect as distinct conditions.⁴ For that matter, how old is an "elder"? In a 1998 report, *The National Elder Abuse Incidence Study*,⁵ the authors attribute the difficulty in collecting data to inconsistent definitions of abuse, neglect and exploitation resulting not only from 50 different U.S. state and territory law systems, but also from disagreement among experts. Based on their review of these laws, on roundtable discussions, a consensus meeting in Washington, D.C., and pilot testing in local Adult Protective Services agencies, they proposed a set of "standard" definitions, and list some of the most important signs or symptoms of each.

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Briefly, these include seven categories of abuse: physical abuse (the use of force as well as restraint through drugs or otherwise); sexual abuse (nonconsensual, unwanted touching and coerced nudity or exposure to photographing); emotional or psychological abuse (infliction of anguish, emotional pain or distress, including isolating the elder from persons or activities); neglect (refusal or failure to fulfill obligations or duties to the elder, directly or indirectly); abandonment (desertion); financial or material exploitation (illegal or improper use of funds or other property); and self-neglect (to the extent health or safety are threatened, but excluding competent and voluntary choices).⁶ In 2001, the National Center on Elder Abuse defined elder abuse as five of these (omitting abandonment and self-neglect),⁷ these five presumably encompassing all the foregoing acts or forms of neglect, and in 2003 the National Research Council defined abuse to include intentional acts causing or creating a serious risk of harm or failing to satisfy an elder's basic needs or protect them.⁸

Implications of Culture and Orientation

The value of any particular study is necessarily limited by the methodology and scope of the research conducted, by reliance upon information extrapolated from statistical studies, and, as importantly, by the inherent fluidity of the subjects studied, as discussed

above. In “Multiethnic Perspectives on Elder Mistreatment,”⁹ the authors concluded from their focus group study that interpretations of elder abuse are affected by “social expectations” (gender role, filial obligations, marital fidelity, and ageism), “caregiver expectations” (skilled professionals versus unskilled, lay providers), “victim characteristics” and the “characteristics of the interactions.” They did not find “different levels of tolerance across cultures,” but did observe “nuances” among members of these groups “when discussing both the severity and the factors determining abuse.”¹⁰ The perception and understanding of elder abuse held by a particular group, and by such group in relation to others, is affected by many factors particular to the group, the time, the community and other variables. There may be a closer identification between members of one community regardless of their race or ethnicity than among members of the same racial or ethnic group in another community.¹¹ There are quite a few studies of certain groups—African Americans, Koreans, etc.—while others have not been studied as extensively; in many cases, later research on any of these has found fault with the cultural misapprehensions of prior researchers.¹² The following overview is therefore offered with the caveat that no one study defines the attributes of any particular group, but merely contributes to our understanding generally.

Among the many sources on diversity is *Understanding Elder Abuse in Minority Populations*, edited by Toshio Tatara, Ph.D. (including contributions from twenty-one others).¹³ The contributors to *Understanding Elder Abuse* focus on four groups: Black/African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, and American Indian. The rate of growth of the elder population (60 years and older) indicates that approximately 25% of the U.S. population will be 60 years of age or older by 2030, an increase of 99% from 1997. As baby boomers age, and opportunities for better health and longevity increase, 70 may become “the new 60,” but the numbers are increasing.¹⁴ Of the overall rate of increase, White elders will increase almost 73.7%. The Black elders will increase 131.1%, Hispanic elders 350.3%, Asian/Pacific Islander elders by 334%, and American Indian elders by 141.7%, with these ethnic groups representing 26.8% of the total U.S. elder population by 2030.¹⁵

Tatara notes that the collection of data on race and ethnicity among the elderly is improving so that earlier conclusions about differences among these groups can be better studied. In a study of data reported from 31 states, it was found that 32% of the victims were in a minority group despite such groups representing only 16.2% of the nation’s overall population in 1997.

If this trend continues, the abused elders from these groups will constitute more than 26.8% of the total U.S. elder population by 2030. With an increase in the rate of incidence reporting, data collection becomes more refined, so that these numbers will become more reliable.¹⁶

In her article, “Abuse of Black Elders in Rhode Island,” Joyce Hall relates case studies of specific victims.¹⁷ She writes that abuse within the Black community is hidden to protect the community’s public image, and that Black elders are more likely than others “to hide or deny any notion of abuse or maltreatment occurring within their community, whether the elder is in a group or meeting privately with a caseworker.”¹⁸ Deference to the elder, particularly a matriarch, is diminishing, while the number of Black households with multi-generational residents is increasing, many of whom are being financially supported and otherwise cared for by the eldest among them.¹⁹ Neighbors may become aware that a drug-abusing daughter is taking her mother’s Social Security checks and leaving her mother with little to sustain herself and to care for the grandchild, and yet be reluctant to report the situation to mistrusted authorities. Turning to local religious leaders may be comforting, but it may not lead to getting publicly available services.

Linner Ward Griffen makes similar points in her article, “Elder Maltreatment in the African American Community: You Just Don’t Hit Your Momma!!!”²⁰ Griffen identifies ten themes from her study of Southeastern Black elders and families, among them that physical and sexual abuse of elders was considered unacceptable, that social conditioning may lead to unrecognized financial abuse and neglect, and that dependent, mutually beneficial relationships may result in neither party viewing the use of the elder’s financial resources as abuse despite the deprivations the elder may suffer as a consequence. Other “themes” include the incidence of nontraditional families, geographic isolation, minimizing or neutralizing abusive behavior, psychological demoralization, and resistance to institutional help.

The studies of the Hispanic elders in *Understanding Elder Abuse* highlight the importance of religion, the centrality of the family and ties to the community, and pride and its obverse, shame. In “Elder Mistreatment in Mexican American Communities: The Nevada and Michigan Experiences,” Yolanda Sanchez observes that the Detroit subjects identified themselves much more strongly with the local Mexican American community than did the Nevada subjects, perhaps, she surmises, because more of the latter were native born or of longer residence in the U.S. Among her observations is that

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the extended family system (*la familia*) has positive implications for family care of the elderly, but may lead to the protection of intra-family perpetrators and a reluctance to contact authorities. A sense of shame would make reporting unlikely except in extreme circumstances.²¹

In "Issues in the Provision of Adult-Protective Services to Mexican American Elders in Texas," it was observed that while the younger generation seemed somewhat more likely to seek and accept help in caring for elders, the cultural norm of keeping the elders at home meant a greater number of cases of neglect, whether because of poverty or other factors limiting the family's ability to provide care.²² After citing similar findings, the author of "Elder Abuse in the Puerto Rican Context" notes the importance of incorporating the family into services for maintaining and treating the elderly to prevent and address issues of neglect, especially when so many of them are sharing households and limited resources.²³

Asian Americans are a very diverse group, and this is reflected in the way the different ethnic sub-groups recognize and experience elder abuse. In "Elder Abuse and Neglect Among the Korean Elderly in the United States," Ailee Moon notes that the significant numbers of Korean immigrants in the later decades of the twentieth century was typified by the immigration of adult children, followed by their parents. By virtue of their age and difficulty in assimilating, these older Koreans became dependent upon the younger members of the family, resulting in their diminished status and greater vulnerability to abuse. Filial piety may have been the traditional belief and practice in Korea historically, but is becoming less so there and in the United States. The historical entitlement of sons to family inheritance, while changed under law in Korea in 1989, continues by tradition in some cases.²⁴ Financial exploitation was revealed to be the most frequent form of elder abuse among Korean Americans, particularly among those who immigrated here. Financial dependency to the detriment of the parent's needs was not necessarily viewed as abusive by the elders. However, psychological abuse, generally identified with acts that suggest a lack of respect for the elder, was more readily understood as abusive, and must be understood in relation to traditional expectations of treatment of elders by the children and in-laws.

These elders and their family members are not likely to seek outside help at the risk of causing disharmony in the family, as well because of language and other barriers faced by the elders themselves.²⁵ It is unclear whether the low rate of reporting results

from a lack of awareness of community services (by comparison to Caucasians in the same community), or from the cultural expectations of the elders in dealing with their family and with others, or perhaps from service organizations inappropriately equipped to serve these elders.²⁶

In "Exploration of Elder Mistreatment Among the Japanese," Susan Tomita designed the study to determine the "cultural and structural factors [that] encourage the Japanese to seek help or keep the Japanese from seeking help for interpersonal conflict," and whether there was any difference between younger and older Japanese.²⁷ Elder mistreatment was studied in the context of interpersonal conflict generally. "Group above self" was the category that was determined to encompass sub-categories of behaviors: Never Complain, Endure, Hold Back Desires, Silence, Don't Retaliate, Accept Fate, etc.²⁸ Adding to the complexity are the cultural notions of multiple selves (e.g., inside/outside) and the tendency to hide problems to avoid dishonor. Generational perceptions did vary; for example, the younger generation articulated negative views of the multiplicity of self (e.g., "two-faced"). Among elders, females described aggression, alcoholism, male dominance and unaccountability, and other behaviors that they were taught to tolerate but clearly resented. If certain behaviors are expected to be tolerated, and responsibility for them denied, then addressing abuse must focus on the family dynamic rather than on directly exposing the abuser and victim by assigning blame and empowering the individual to respond.²⁹

Understanding elder abuse in the Native American family, discussed by Arnold S. Brown in "Patterns of Abuse Among Native American Elderly," first requires an understanding that there are hundreds of different tribes, widely varying environmental living conditions, and sometimes difficult relations among tribes.³⁰ Yet there is also the importance of many general cultural similarities: spirituality, religious foundations that emphasize the connection of people to the earth, and valuing cooperation of the group and harmony among the tribe.³¹ Many negative forces work against the idealized tribal support system, including poverty, drugs and alcohol abuse, mental and physical illness, and insufficient services to address these significant problems. While "mutual sharing" is a traditional value, it appears that the dependence of multiple family members upon the pension or Social Security benefit of the elder leads to financial abuse or exploitation as it does in other multi-generational households. Consequently, neglect of the elder, whether because of insufficient financial resources, or simply because of the burden upon caretakers (typically a widowed or single-mother

daughter), was perceived to be more of a problem than overt physical abuse. In "Dilemmas Surrounding Elder Abuse and Neglect in Native American Communities," specific recommendations for addressing these problems focus on changes to the health and human services systems of the reservations, including increased federal funding, as well as greater leadership within the tribes themselves to increase accountability and coordination of community services.³²

Sexual preference and gender identity are also parameters for defining a group for purposes of understanding elder abuse. "Lesbian, Gay Male, Bisexual and Transgendered Elders: Elder Abuse and Neglect Issues" by Loree Cook-Daniels, MS is among the very limited explorations of this topic.³³ Cook-Daniels sought to examine how an "elder's need for, and willingness to accept assistance from, adult protective services" would be affected by such elder's identification.³⁴ As she notes, first it is important to understand that sexual orientation and gender identity are "wholly separate characteristics, like age and race" so that it is possible for an elder to face prejudice because of one or both of these.³⁵

Cook-Daniels posits that abuse of lesbian and gay elders arises because of homophobia, and this condition may be manifested in numerous ways. It might be neglectful care by a personal care worker, domestic violence within a couple and the victim's tolerance of it because of low self-esteem, a reluctance to seek outside help, a fear of authorities, or the barriers to leaving a long term relationship with the same rights that are available to legally married couples. Today's lesbian and gay elders include those who may have endured even more significant family and public condemnation of their personal choices than later generations. "Transgendered" elders, whom Cook-Daniels defines to include transsexuals (born one sex but living, post-operative or otherwise, as the opposite), transvestites (cross-dressers), and intersexuals (hermaphrodites), typically face even greater societal prejudice.³⁶

Lesbian, gay, and transgender elders may be more vulnerable because of self-protective efforts to keep their lifestyle private—adaptations that may prevent them from seeking help—or may have their discomfort used against them by manipulative abusers. These elders are thus also more vulnerable to self neglect; they also become isolated socially because of the death of trusted friends or the necessity of becoming institutionalized with others very unlike themselves.³⁷ Even if they seek help, these elders may face misapprehensions that interfere with receiving the services they need.

Cook-Daniels makes a number of suggestions for adult protective services providers, which are applicable to anyone interacting with an elder. These include, among others: do not focus on the gay/lesbian/transgender status (a private matter), but on the person and issues; do not assume the other member of the household is in an intimate relationship with the elder, but determine if they may be a caretaker or concerned partner; remain aware of the lack of legal rights between partners; try to find appropriate services but avoid isolating the elder from his or her community simply because it seems uncomfortable to the observer; and recognize that as in any heterosexual relationship, the bonds and dependencies may lead to the appearance of exploitation, but also may be acceptable to the elder, provided neglect of that elder's needs is not a result.³⁸

Conclusion

The great diversity of elders, and the significant increases in the population of minority elders in particular, means that understanding and addressing elder abuse must take this diversity into account. The effect of assimilation, the changes in society's tolerance for diversity, and numerous other factors, will continue to challenge our ability to understand and address elder abuse. The research conducted over the last several decades reveals that the differences among these groups does not necessarily require changes in the applicable laws, but rather in the public and private services available to educate and assist elders, their caretakers, and the health and social institutions upon which they will increasingly rely.

Endnotes

1. For an extensive bibliography of articles on elder abuse and diversity, see the Clearinghouse on Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly (CANE) <http://db.rdms.udel.edu:8080/CANE>, and the National Center on Elder Abuse at <http://elderabusecenter.org>.
2. For an overview of 12 studies from 1989 to 2000 by widely cited researchers, see Bonnie Brandl, M.S.W., and Loree Cook-Daniels, "Domestic Abuse in Later Life: Cultural Considerations," available at <http://www.elderabusecenter.org/pdf/research/culture.pdf> (herein "Domestic Abuse in Later Life").
3. Jordan I. Kosberg, Ph.D., et al., "Study of Elder Abuse Within Diverse Cultures," *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 15(3/4), 2003, pp. 71-89.
4. See, for example, Charles P. Mouton, M.D., M.S., et al., "Multiethnic Perspectives on Elder Mistreatment," *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 17(2), 2005, pp. 21-44 (herein "Multiethnic Perspectives"), and *Attitudes Toward Elder Mistreatment and Reporting: A Multicultural Study*, February 1998, by Ailee Moon, Ph.D., et al., submitted to the National Center on Elder Abuse, available through the Clearinghouse on Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly (<http://db.rdms.udel.edu:8080/CANE>).

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5. *The National Elder Abuse Incidence Study, Final Report*, September 1998, by the National Center on Elder Abuse prepared for The Administration for Children and Families and the Administration on Aging in the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services (herein "The Elder Abuse Incidence Study 1998"). See http://.aoa.gov/eldfam/elder_rights/elder_abuse/abuserreport_full.pdf. See also Jeanette M. Daly, RN, Ph.D. and Gerald Jogerst, M.D., "Statute Definitions of Elder Abuse," *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 12(4) 2001, pp. 39-57, reviewing state statutes, the Older Americans Act (2002) and the National Center for Elder Abuse definitions.
6. The Elder Abuse Incidence Study 1998, pp. 3-1 to 3-7.
7. Charles P. Mouton, M.D., M.S., et al., "Multiethnic Perspectives on Elder Mistreatment," *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 17(2), 2005, p. 23 (identifying these five as physical, psychological, sexual, financial/material, and neglect).
8. *Id.*
9. *Id.*, p. 42. The authors conducted focus groups with three ethnically homogenous groups (and moderators) and a group of elder care professionals in San Antonio, Texas.
10. *Id.*, p. 42.
11. See "Domestic Abuse in Later Life" cited in note 2 above for studies.
12. Ailee Moon, "Perceptions of Elder Abuse Among Various Cultural Groups: Similarities and Differences," *Generations*, Summer 2000, Vol. 24 (2) pp. 75-81, 76.
13. Taylor & Francis Group, 1999.
14. Tatara, *Understanding Elder Abuse*, Chapter 1, pp. 2-3 (citing statistics from Day, *Population Projections of the United States by Age, Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin: 1995 to 2050*, 1996).
15. Tatara, *Understanding Elder Abuse*, pp. 2-3.
16. Tatara, *Understanding Elder Abuse*, pp. 5-6. Domestic elder abuse reports between 1986 and 1996 increased by 150.4%, and yet were considered widely underreported. (Referencing 1988 study by K. Pillemer & D. Finkelhor, *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 28, pp. 52-57).
17. *Understanding Elder Abuse*, Chap. 2, pp. 13-25.
18. *Id.*, p. 15.
19. *Id.*, pp. 16-18.
20. *Understanding Elder Abuse*, Chap. 3, pp. 27-48.
21. Yolanda M. Sanchez, "Elder Mistreatment in Mexican American Communities: The Nevada and Michigan Experiences," *Understanding Elder Abuse*, Chap. 5, pp. 67-77. This was a 1996 study of 62 elderly attending various senior centers in these communities, a statistically small group. A more extensive discussion of the characteristics common to the many different cultures that comprise the American "Hispanic" segment—Mexican, Cuban, Central and South American, and Puerto Rican—that both support the family and undermine efforts to identify and combat elder abuse, is also covered by Victor Montoya, M.A., M.S.W., in "Understanding and Combating Elder Abuse in Hispanic Communities," *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 9(2) 1997, 5-17.
22. Bettye M. Mitchell, et al., "Issues in the Provision of Adult-Protective Services to Mexican American Elders in Texas," *Understanding Elder Abuse*, Chap. 6, 79-92.
23. Carmen D. Sanchez, "Elder Abuse in the Puerto Rican Context," *Understanding Elder Abuse*, Chap. 7, pp. 93-105.
24. Ailee Moon, "Elder Abuse and Neglect Among the Korean Elderly in the United States," *Understanding Elder Abuse*, Chap. 8, pp. 109-118.
25. *Id.*
26. See Ailee Moon, Ph.D. and Teresa Evans-Campbell, M.S.W., "Awareness of Formal and Informal Sources of Help for Victims of Elder Abuse Among Korean American and Caucasian Elders in Los Angeles," *Journal of Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 11(3), 1999, pp. 1-23, and Ailee Moon, Ph.D. et al., "Awareness and Utilization of Community Long-Term Care Services by Elderly Korean and Non-Hispanic White Americans," *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 38(3), 309-316, and a response by Pill Jay Cho, Ph.D., "Awareness and Utilization: A Comment," *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 38(3), pp. 317-319.
27. *Understanding Elder Abuse*, Chap 9, pp. 119-139, 122.
28. *Id.*, p. 126.
29. *Id.*, p. 137.
30. *Understanding Elder Abuse*, Chap 10, pp. 143-159.
31. *Id.*, p. 150.
32. David K. Carson and Carol Hand, "Dilemmas Surrounding Elder Abuse and Neglect in Native American Communities," *Understanding Elder Abuse*, Chap. 11, pp. 161-184.
33. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 9(2) 1997, pp. 35-49; also appearing at <http://www.forge-forward.org/handouts/tgelderabuse-neglect.html>, which says this article may still be the only one to address this issue in a professional journal or context.
34. *Id.*, p. 36.
35. *Id.*, p. 37.
36. *Id.*, pp. 41-42.
37. *Id.*, pp. 38-39.
38. *Id.*, pp. 43-45.

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