
Elder Mistreatment in the African American Community

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Introduction

Today most people in America are living longer than at any previous time in our history. Medical technology, more knowledge concerning nutrition and healthy lifestyles contribute to a longer life span. Regrettably, resources such as services geared specifically for the elderly have not increased or are increasing at a slower pace than needed (Griffin & Williams, 1992). Baron and Welty (1996) cite a report presented at the Joint Conference on Law and Aging that states by the beginning of the next century the population of people over 65 years old will increase by 75%. There will be a need for additional formal facilities to accommodate more old people. Increased demands in the informal sector may mean more responsibilities for families who are already overburdened. Adding the care for an elderly person to an already stressed environment may lead to elder abuse (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1989).

Elder abuse by domestic caregivers or by a spouse may include physical abuse, psychological abuse, or financial exploitation (Baron & Welty, 1996). In cases where elder abuse has been substantiated, studies indicate that there is usually evidence of at least two types of abuses occurring concurrently (Godkin, Wolf & Pillemer, 1989). Because of the urgent need to protect mistreated elderly, legislation has often preceded research. Although more attention is given to this area of research than in the past, our knowledge about elder abuse is still limited, especially for ethnic minority groups.

The purpose of this paper is to examine elder abuse in the African American community. Understanding their perceptions of abuse and the kinds of solutions they feel are necessary to treat the abuse is essential for developing effective interventions, services and policies that address this particular community. African Americans are presently the largest minority group of elderly, yet scant accurate information exists concerning abuse among this population (Griffin & Williams, 1992). It is important to study abuse among African American elders because it is very likely that they may have issues that may not be uncovered in studies using predominately white elders or other minority groups (Longress, 1992; Griffin, 1994; Hall, 1987).

This paper will briefly discuss the current state of knowledge about elder abuse in the general population, including definitions, prevalence rates, victim and abuser profiles.

Definitions

The research field of elder abuse is new and researchers, policymakers and practitioners have been unable to agree on a universal definition of elder abuse (Wolf, 1996; Baron & Welty, 1996; Wilson, 1994; Stein, 1991; Johnson, 1991). While there is no consensus on a legal definition, there is some agreement that abuse falls into four major categories-physical, psychological, financial, and neglect. These categories are not uniformly defined or used in the literature, making it difficult to compare results across studies (Tatara, 1989; Boudeau, 1993). Studies yield different findings depending on categories included or excluded from the investigation. Some studies exclude financial abuse and include psychological abuse (e.g., Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988), while others may omit psychological abuse but include financial abuse (e.g., Sengstock, Hwalek & Petrone, 1989). In addition, studies may define each category differently. For example, Johnson (1986) cites various studies that define withholding of care to be either physical abuse, active neglect, or psychological neglect.

Other researchers emphasize that elder abuse needs to be explored in terms of other factors, including intentionality, necessity, and intensity (Johnson, 1986); frequency and duration (Stein, 1991); and consciousness, subconscious or unconscious (Hudson, 1989). All investigators agree that clear indicators of specific behavioral manifestations and observable, measurable outcomes of each category are needed to formulate a standard definition.

One important issue rarely addressed in the literature is what abuse means to different communities of minority elders. The perceptions of one community may not be the same or even similar to another community's perception of abuse (Tomita, 1994; Griffin, 1994; Montoya, 1997). In order for minority elders to be willing to report mistreatment and accept intervention we need to understand how they perceive and define abuse. Anetzberger, Korbin, and Tomita (1996) argue that definitions that exist are developed by either researchers, social service professionals or the criminal justice system. The elderly and their families may not necessarily agree with professionals as to what constitutes elder abuse (Johnson, 1986; Moon & Williams, 1993).

Anetzberger, Korbin, and Tomita (1996) conducted focus groups of African American, Puerto Rican, European American, and Japanese American elderly and caretakers. Contrary to the abuse literature which suggests that physical abuse is the most harmful, the participants in the study reported psychological abuse such as verbal reprimands and use of profanity, and psychological neglect such as ignoring the elder, which have more lasting negative effects than physical abuse. There were also some differences between groups. Puerto Ricans in this study demonstrated consistently strong family orientations (familism) as found in other literature about Hispanics (e.g., Sanchez-Ayendez, 1988). They believed elders should be held in the highest

regard in all circumstances, lest the behavior be considered abusive. Other groups believed there were times when force may be necessary. Another difference occurred between African Americans and other groups. Whereas other groups believed financial exploitation was a serious offense, African Americans did not focus on it as a form of mistreatment. Since in this study, caregivers and care recipients (two generations) were questioned, African Americans may find sharing of funds expected and beneficial to both parties. This would be consistent with other literature that points to the extended family as a source of support for African American elderly (Taylor, 1985; Taylor & Chatters, 1986; Gibson, 1989).

Prevalence Rates

Various government and academic studies report that there are close to 2 million older adults who suffer from some form of abuse annually (Baron & Welty, 1996). More than half of the victims are abused in domestic settings by adult children or by a spouse (Tatara, 1993; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Baron & Welty, 1996). Pillemer and Finkelhor (1988) found that elderly who are living alone are least likely to be abused. Their study of elderly in the Boston area found that 32 out of 1000 had been abused in their homes by a family member. While these figures of abuse are not as high as other problems facing the elderly such as poverty and illness, they do represent millions of old people who deserve to live in safe environments (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Johnson, 1991).

Most reported rates are believed to be a gross underestimate of the real number of abused elderly (Douglass, 1987). Obtaining precise prevalence rates is difficult because there are problems with accurate reporting, such as defining elder abuse consistently across all studies, various methodological limitations among studies, and locating willing participants for research. Many studies use nonrepresentative samples such as convenience samples drawn from agencies or largely white suburban areas, which omit families who are not receiving services, poor elderly and elders of color (Phillips, 1986; Hudson, 1986).

Accurate prevalence rates for African Americans have not been determined by existing studies. Studies that have included ethnic groups rarely perform analysis examining ethnic differences or have extremely low numbers of minority participants (Anetzberger, Korbin & Tomita, 1996). There have been contrasting results concerning elder mistreatment in the African American community. Studies have either found no differences (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988), that abuse occurs more frequently among whites than nonwhites (Greenberg, McKibben, & Raymond, 1990), or more frequently among minorities than whites (Hall, 1986). Clearly there is a need to better understand the prevalence of elder abuse in the African American community.

Profiles of Victims and Abusers

Pillemer and Finkelhor (1988) found that 52% of victims of elder abuse were male and 48% female, both were mainly abused by a spouse. In contrast, other investigators report the majority of elder abuse victims are females and that adult children are the most frequent abusers (e.g., Baron & Welty, 1996; Tatara, 1993; Kosberg, 1988). A comparison study of abused and nonabused elders by Godkin, Wolf and Pillemer (1989) found that 80% of female victims were primarily abused by caregiving adult children (60%), a spouse (25%), or others (15%).

Although the husbands in the Pillemer and Finkelhor (1988) study were more likely to be abused, abused wives suffered more serious injuries than abused husbands. The authors assert that the higher incidence of male victimization could be attributed to elderly men more likely living with others. In that study, 42% of the women lived alone, while only 17% of the males lived alone. Widowers are more likely to remarry, whereas women are more likely to remain single after being widowed or divorced. Researchers agree that elders who live alone are less likely to be abused than those who live with others (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Baron & Welty, 1996). However, women live longer than men and because there are more older women, there are more older abused women (Kosberg, 1988).

Frail status of the elder is significantly associated with abuse regardless of age or gender and older victims are more vulnerable to abuse (Godkin et al., 1989; Baron & Welty, 1996; Tatara, 1993; Kosberg, 1988). Adult children and formal caregivers are associated with financial abuse, while husbands are more likely to be physically abusive (Wolf, 1996). While the majority of abusers are male, there are no differences in the types of abuse committed between males and females other than spouses who are more abusive (Tatara, 1993; Baron & Welty, 1996).

Elder spouses who abuse their mates are not necessarily caregivers. For example, in the Pillemer and Finkelhor (1988) study another possible reason offered for the higher report of male abuse is that females are only willing to report more serious maltreatment, particularly if they are used to abuse from their husbands (Harris, 1996). In her study comparing married couples age 60 and over to younger married couples, Harris (1996) found that spouse abuse among the elderly is influenced by the same risk factors as for younger couples. These include substance abuse, emotional problems, and relational conflict. Lack of interest or research focusing on older married couples make it difficult to determine if spousal abuse in older couples is a long standing problem or a recent occurrence due to the difficulties associated with the aging process (Boudeau, 1993).

Caregiving and marriage are not the only types of relationships elder victims may

have with their abusers. Although frail or disabled older adults may be dependent on other family members or friends for instrumental support as well as companionship, there is some indication that some perpetrators are dependent on their victims for economic and housing assistance (Baron & Welty, 1996; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1989; Hudson, 1986). These abusers often have a history of unemployment, substance abuse, or psychiatric diagnosis and are likely to be living in the victim's home (Hwalek, et al., 1996; Hudson, 1986; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988).

Having a clear sense of victim characteristics would be useful for making decisions regarding appropriate intervention techniques. If victims are frail and dependent, services could be offered to the caregiver to help reduce the burden of caring for the elder. However, if the abuser is dependent on the victim for basic needs such as shelter, then methods for ending the abuse may involve different kinds of support such as employment or housing for the abuser.

Because of the scarcity of systematic studies of elder abuse among African Americans, it is difficult to empirically determine the characteristics of victims and abusers. Anetzberger et al. (1996) speculate that in African American communities, since the oldest daughters have the primary and expected responsibility of caring for the elderly, including their aunts and uncles, they are the most likely perpetrators of mistreatment. However, since there are not enough studies to determine definite profiles, these statements remain speculative.

Intervention Issues

Intervening in elder abuse is a difficult task. One of the most widely offered interventions for elder abuse is institutionalizing the elder. This solution is not always helpful to the relationship between victim and abuser (who is usually related to the victim) and is generally rejected by the elderly (Douglas, 1983; Baron & Welty, 1996; Quinn & Tomita, 1997). Practitioners who are uneducated about elder abuse often find their efforts ineffective. For example, Sengstock, Hwalek and Petrone (1990) found that abused victims received the same services available to frail elderly, regardless of whether the victim was frail or not. The authors speculate that these services were more familiar to the practitioner and that training is needed to familiarize workers with abuse of elders. Clients often refuse intervention that they feel is useless or irrelevant to their particular situation (Neale, Hwalek, Goodrich, & Quinn, 1996). It is important that practitioners' efforts are not an intrusion and that the elder's decisions are respected (Moon & Williams, 1993). Unfortunately, practitioners may perceive the elder who refuses one form of treatment as unwilling to accept any treatment. In those cases, other services may not be offered, allowing the abuse to continue.

It is well documented that African American elderly find informal networks such as churches, family and friends more helpful than formal social agencies (William & Becker, 1994; Price, 1991). In fact, African American elderly tend to receive some level of assistance (advice, prayer, help during illness) from pastors and fellow church members (Taylor & Chatters, 1986). However, we must be cautious and not assume that in abuse situations elderly will turn to their traditional support networks for help. Being abused by a spouse or an adult child may be more of an embarrassment than other kinds of problems. Further, they may either fear the abuser or feel ashamed of what being abused by a family member may imply. Elders may feel that others might interpret the abuse as poor parenting skills or failure at child rearing (Griffin et al., 1997; Tomita, 1990). This may cause elders to feel a need to maintain family privacy, particularly from their broader support network. Also, since African Americans are distrustful and suspicious of the criminal justice system and mostly unfamiliar with social agencies (Sellers, Jackson, & Hardison, 1998; Willis, 1994), victimized elderly may find themselves with nowhere to turn.

Since elderly may be unwilling to seek help, educating the community about elder abuse may be an effective intervention strategy. Posters and fliers placed around the neighborhood similar to posters about other forms of domestic abuse (spousal and child) would serve to make the community aware that there is a problem with elderly being mistreated (Cabness, 1989). Posters that provide information on available services for elderly abuse victims may encourage the elderly to seek help. Conducting workshops, lectures, or speakers at church functions to alert and educate members that elderly may be experiencing some form of mistreatment may serve to spur victims to seek help and support networks to inquire about the possibility of their mistreatment. In fact, one study found that officials in the Black church were willing to have speakers at their regularly scheduled church events to speak about issues involving the elderly (Chadiha et al., 1994). These types of events would help sources of informal help become educated about and made aware of the problem of elder abuse. Pastors in the Black church are in a better position than others to intervene in elder abuse. African American elderly are not likely to resist help or advice from pastors or church groups, whereas with more formal channels (social agencies or law enforcement) and even other informal channels, they may be more reluctant and hesitant to accept assistance.

Griffin et al. (1997) suggest that community education about elder abuse should be provided to informal and formal networks such as neighborhood groups, churches, senior centers, mental health and health care centers. These networks, if properly informed, can be critical in preventing and intervening in elder abuse. Unfortunately in African American neighborhoods, elderly may be more apt to use informal services because of the lack of availability of formal help services. An assessment of community services that can handle elder abuse cases in African American neighbor-

hoods would be a beginning to servicing African American elders who are mistreated.

Conclusion

The field of elder abuse research is just beginning to receive the attention other forms of family abuse has received over the years. While great progress has been made, there are several areas where focus is needed. The first area is defining and conceptualizing “elder abuse.” Since there is a consensus that elder abuse is categorized, the field would benefit from national, standardized indicators for each category of abuse. Investigators and other professionals, including policymakers, need to collaborate efforts to define what constitutes abuse of the elderly. The term elder abuse incorporates a variety of behaviors, attitudes and conditions, making it difficult for investigators to reach a clear consensus about the state of elder abuse around the nation. However, without some definition consistency, attempts to measure, quantify, and intervene in abuse are limited.

Lack of clear definitions affect our knowledge of prevalence rates, the second area of suggestions for research. Nationally representative samples are needed to determine the prevalence rate of elder abuse. This would allow more generalizations about diverse populations. Elder abuse is a sensitive topic and gathering data is challenging. Currently, investigators who research domestic violence neglect to survey the elderly and researchers who investigate issues concerning the elderly omit matters of abuse from their surveys (Quinn & Tomita, 1997). If researchers included the elderly as well as abuse measures in their studies the field of elder abuse would quickly advance. These efforts would not only allow generalizations about elder abuse, but it would also facilitate more sophisticated statistical analysis for testing theories.

Third, better multicausal frameworks for examining the elder abuse process should be designed. No single theory explains the phenomenon, but more theoretical research may depict the diverse ways family relations become violent or in some cases remain violent in old age. There are few empirical investigations that test causality, therefore, we are still uncertain about the process.

Fourth, more qualitative research is needed among African Americans to determine their perceptions, definitions, and attitudes concerning elder abuse. Racial, cultural, and historical influences may affect their ideas about elder abuse. The unique intergenerational living arrangements and low financial status are just a few factors that may contribute to their tolerance levels of abuse and may influence their perception of what is considered abusive behaviors. It is unknown by researchers or practitioners which culturally normative behaviors are considered abusive and which are protective (Quinn & Tomita, 1997). Qualitative investigations would allow us to disentangle these issues.

In addition, assessment tools and indicator measures of abuse need to be able to separate the effects of race and/or minority group membership from the effects of poverty and/or social status. Although researchers may find similar results for members of minority groups and the poor (e.g., poor health, mortality rate), the relationship among variables may differ between race and economic condition (Gibson, 1989).

The above review indicates that in order to obtain accurate rates of abuse in the African American community, consideration needs to be given to issues particular to that community. In addition, since many African American elderly have help networks in place, educating their support system about elder abuse may serve to be an effective method for helping mistreated elderly.

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