

Original Article

The Importance of Investigating Abuser Characteristics in Elder Emotional/Psychological Abuse: Results from Adult Protective Services Data

Pi-Ju Liu,¹ Kendon J. Conrad,² Scott R. Beach,³ Madelyn Iris,⁴ and Lawrence B. Schiamberg⁵

¹Institute for Health and Aging, University of California, San Francisco. ²School of Public Health, University of Illinois at Chicago. ³University Center for Social and Urban Research, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. ⁴Department of Medicine, Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University, St. Chicago, Illinois. ⁵Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Social Science, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

Correspondence should be addressed to: Pi-Ju Liu, PhD, Institute for Health and Aging, University of California, San Francisco, CA 94118-0646. E-mail: pi-ju.liu@ucsf.edu.

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Abstract

Objectives: Elder emotional/psychological abuse is the infliction of mental anguish on older adults through verbal or non-verbal acts. Using indicators based on existing literature, theoretically important abuser characteristics and victim vulnerabilities were collected using the Elder Abuse Decision Support System (EADSS) to test a theory of emotional/psychological abuse.

Method: Eight-hundred-and-ten alleged emotional/psychological abuse cases were investigated by caseworkers in six Illinois adult protective services (APS) agencies; 466 individuals endorsed at least one item on the Older Adult Psychological Abuse Measure (OAPAM).

Results: Bivariate ordinary linear regression results established that all abuser characteristics were predictive of emotional/psychological abuse scores. In the hierarchical regression model where abuser characteristics were entered after victim vulnerabilities, abuser characteristics predicted emotional/psychological abuse above and beyond victim vulnerabilities ($\Delta R^2 = 0.349$, $p < .001$). Abuser risk and abuser's negative attitudes towards victims remained as significant predictors in the final model. Post hoc analysis identified significant items of abuser risk and negative attitudes, including: an emotionally draining relationship between abuser and victim, abuser's poor temper control, and abuser's angry feelings towards victims.

Discussion: Abuser weaknesses and strengths as highlighted in the theoretical framework should be further investigated for future prevention and intervention in cases of emotional/psychological abuse.

Keywords: Abuser risk/strengths—Negative attitudes—Victim vulnerability—Victim—abuser relationship

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention defined elder emotional/psychological abuse as the infliction of anguish, mental pain, or distress through verbal or non-verbal acts (Hall, Karch, & Crosby, 2016). Verbal mistreatment is widely accepted as a common form of emotional/

psychological abuse (Fulmer, Rodgers, & Pelger, 2014); however, emotional/psychological abuse is not limited to verbal assaults, insults, threats, intimidation, humiliation, or harassment. Insensitivity and disrespect, such as treating older adults like infants, are included as forms of emotional/

psychological abuse. Additionally, isolating older adults from their family, friends, or regular activities, including “the silent treatment”, which might cause harm to or mental health and negative behavioral changes, is another form of emotional/psychological abuse (Conrad, Iris, Ridings, Langley, & Anetzberger, 2010).

Emotional/psychological abuse is harder to identify than other forms of mistreatment, and while the impact can be severe, unless victimized older adults also experience other types of abuse that leave observable evidence, the infliction of emotional/psychological abuse is difficult to prove. Despite this lack of concrete evidence, self-reported lifetime prevalence and substantiated reports of emotional/psychological abuse are high relative to other types of abuse in nationally representative studies (Acierno et al., 2010). Estimated prevalence differs depending on researchers’ definition of emotional/psychological abuse and measures used (Conrad et al., 2010). A systematic review of elder abuse prevalence examined 49 studies and found nearly a quarter of dependent older adults reported emotional/psychological abuse (Cooper, Selwood, & Livingston, 2008).

Although researchers have identified some factors related to emotional/psychological abuse, most of the risk factors in previous research have focused on victim characteristics (Jackson, 2014) or are of poor quality (Johannesen & LoGiudice, 2013). Information about abusers is very difficult to obtain, and we know little about characteristics of abusers that make them more likely to commit emotional/psychological abuse. Therefore, capturing abuser characteristics that contribute to emotional/psychological abuse would help explain its etiology. This study utilized a dataset with information about both alleged abusers (AAs) and alleged victims (AVs) of emotional/psychological abuse collected by adult protective services (APS) caseworkers. In this article, we used these data to test a theory of emotional/psychological abuse derived from previous conceptual models.

Previous Conceptual Models of Elder Emotional/Psychological Abuse

Early theories developed to explain the etiology of elder abuse, especially psychological/emotional abuse, were founded on the construct of caregiver stress. Wolf, Godkin, and Pillemer (1989) developed four conceptual components of abusive relationships, including abuser and victim characteristics, dependency, caregiving stress, and social isolation. Dependency and caregiving stress are seen as feeding off each other, since the need for care increases both an older adult’s dependency on an abuser and an abuser’s stressful caregiving burden. As older adults become more dependent upon their caregivers, they may also develop a greater sense of ambivalence towards them, especially when conflicts arise, potentially leading to abuse (Lowenstein, 2010). Other researchers in the early theorizing stage also focused on caregiver stress (Anetzberger, 1987), describing it as an abuser characteristic.

Nonetheless, not all researchers were satisfied with the proposed theories based on the construct of caregiver stress since many caregivers are stressed, whether they are abusers or not, (Reis & Nahmiash, 1998). The list of possible risk factors for abuse and neglect is long, so stress in itself cannot be deemed as the determining factor. Anetzberger (2000) argued that elder abuse is more complex than caregiver-stress theories allow. She developed the Exploratory Model for Elder Abuse, which examined characteristics of the abuser as the primary consideration, and secondarily, characteristics of the victim and the context in a temporal arrangement.

In addition to the inclusion of the abuser as one of the primary concerns in elder theory development, the National Research Council Panel’s (2003) theoretical model of elder mistreatment brought the importance of microprocess to light, referring to the victim and abuser’s relationship dynamics that change the older adult’s physical, psychological, and social circumstances. To highlight victim and abuser dynamics, Schiamborg and Gans’ (2000) applied Ecological Bi-Focal Intergenerational Model made clear that both the victim and abuser must be the focus of investigation. Applying the Ecological Bi-Focal Intergenerational Model, negative relationships between older adults and their adult children were predictive of elder physical abusers (von Heydrich, Schiamborg, & Chee, 2012). Although the study addressed physical abuse, it highlighted the relationship quality’s impact on potentially all types of elder abuse, which not only further strengthens the argument to focus on the abuser but also considers relationship dynamics between abuser and victim.

The models described above have several commonalities; primary among them is that they recognize the importance of including the abuser and his/her characteristics as well as relationship quality between elder victim and AA in the model. Drawing on this literature, Conrad, Iris, and Liu (2017) proposed a general elder abuse theory weighing in both abuser and victim characteristics. Supplementary Appendix A shows a basic graphic representation of elder abuse causes specific to emotional/psychological abuse, using directional arrows that were tested with cross-sectional data. Causes can be grouped into three categories: abuser characteristics that include both risks and strengths, victim vulnerabilities, and abuser–victim relationship as reflected through caregiver stress, negative attitude towards victim, and isolation. The following section provides a summary of empirical findings from the literature, describing each construct’s correlation with elder abuse, with the focus on emotional/psychological abuse.

Abuser Characteristics

Risk

Although most elder abuse theories acknowledge the need to investigate abusers, little empirical data exist on abuser characteristics, and emotional/psychological abuse. Among