

Title

The Stressed Caregiver Versus the Bad Apple: Classifying Abusers Using APS Data

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Source

DeLiema, M., Yonashiro-Cho, J., Gassoumis, Z. D., Yon, Y., & Conrad, K. J. (2017). Using latent class analysis to identify profiles of elder abuse perpetrators. *The Journals of Gerontology: B*, 73(5), e49-58. [Webinar recording located here.](#)

Summary of Research

Using data from the Older Adult Mistreatment Assessment (OAMA; see Conrad, 2015), the purpose of this study was to identify distinct abuser profiles in cases of elder abuse and neglect investigated by APS in Illinois. The authors hypothesized that abusers can be classified into distinct subtypes that vary according to their traits and behaviors, and that specific abuser profiles are associated with different types of elder mistreatment. All cases in the study sample were substantiated (n=337), which in Illinois means that after investigating the reported allegations, the caseworker determined that there was sufficient reason to believe abuse, neglect, and/or financial exploitation occurred.

As part of the investigation, victims were asked to report on the abuser's negative/harmful behaviors and characteristics (30 items) and positive/helpful behaviors (7 items). If the victim was unwilling or unable to answer these questions, the APS case worker interviewed a third party familiar with the situation or answered the questions based on their observations. Nine of these items were selected to estimate the latent classes (abuser subtypes), where 1=yes/some of the time, and 0=no. The items were: history of trouble with the law, trouble keeping a job, emotionally draining, irresponsible, depends on the victim for money, drinking problem, trouble controlling temper, helps with personal needs and provides emotional support.

A model with four abuser subtypes was the best solution for the data. Subtypes were assigned descriptive labels based on the abusers' characteristics/behaviors. Class 1 was labeled "Caregivers" because abusers in this group have a low probability of exhibiting all negative behaviors and a high probability of providing instrumental help and emotional support to the victim. They comprise 38% of the sample. Class 2—"Temperamental" abusers (28%)—tends to be emotionally draining, has trouble controlling temper, and has a low probability of providing emotional support and personal care. Class 3's "Dependent Caregivers" comprise the smallest group—11% of the sample. They provide moderate levels of support to victims but also have trouble keeping a job, are irresponsible, and depend on the victim for money. "Dangerous" abusers, Class 4, make up 24% of the total sample. They exhibit high negative characteristics/behaviors (e.g., trouble with the law, irresponsible, unable to keep a job) and low positive behaviors.

Substantiated abuse allegations differ significantly between subtypes emotional abuse is highest among Temperamental (65.9%) and Dangerous (73.8%) abusers, whereas only 21.7% of Caregivers have substantiated reports of emotional abuse. Similarly, physical abuse is highest among Temperamental (28.6%) and Dangerous (36.9%) abusers and lowest for Caregivers (7.8%). Caregivers have the highest frequency of neglect (51.9%), and Dependent Caregivers have the highest frequency of financial abuse (74.3%). Dangerous abusers were significantly younger than Caregivers, and so were the victims of Dangers abusers.

This study shows that recording standardized information on abusers during the course of abuse investigations can generate rich information for research and inform more effective abuse intervention strategies. Implementation of abuser- or dyad-centered interventions may improve outcomes by moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach to specifically addressing abuser problem behaviors that contribute to harmful actions, rather than just addressing victims' needs for care and protection.

Practice & Policy Implications

The development of categories of abuser types provides a resource for intake interviews and the abuse investigation. Information initially reported and the in-person assessment can provide insight on key abuser characteristics to assist in the investigation determination as well as the plan of protection. Abuse reporters can alert APS to potential dangers to the victim as well to staff. The abuser categories developed through this data analysis are not a diagnostic tool, but rather a guide to seek key information to assess the risk to the victim as well as the meaning of the relationship between the victim and the abuser. A key principle for APS investigations is freedom over safety when the victim is informed of and comprehends the current risk of harm. This principle is central when assessing the victim's needs and goals in relation to the meaning of the abuser in the victim's life. Options for increased safety can be rejected by the victim when the plan does not recognize this relationship. Protective plans then become short-term and not sustained. It is also critical to assess the relationship to the opportunist and/or newfound friend, who may be operating in the criminal context of a sweetheart scam and using the manipulations of undue influence. These may be "Temperamental" abusers with erratic and threatening behavior. Domestic violence allegations with "Dangerous" abusers require vigilant safety planning and address the power and control context and high risk to the victim. Given that neglect is a common allegation in many APS cases, the characteristics of "Caregivers" and "Dependent Caregivers" may be helpful in guiding the investigation to also include the victim's goals in relation to the abuser's problems. The Full Frame Initiative describes case plans that can be sustained when they support safety for the victim without losing valued relationships (see references 4 and 5). Policy implications include individualized goal setting and outcome measures, evaluating the need for smaller caseloads to assess both victim and abuser needs, and developing robust multidisciplinary teams and resources.

Further Reading

- 1) Conrad K. J (2015). Elder abuse computerized decision support system: Final report. National Institute of Justice Project Number: 2011-IJ-CX-0014. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249185.pdf>
- 2) Jackson S. L. (2014). All elder abuse perpetrators are not alike: The heterogeneity of elder abuse perpetrators and implications for intervention. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 60, 265 -285.
- 3) Ramsey-Klawnsnik, H (2000). Elder abuse perpetrators: A typology. *Generations*, 24, 7 -22.
- 4) Smyth, K., Goodman, L., Glenn, C. (2006). The Full-Frame Approach: A Response to Marginalized Women Left Behind by Specialized Services, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76, 4, 389-502.
- 5) New York Times, January 15 and 24, 2019. Articles by David Bornstein, When Social Services Undermine Well-being (1/15) and The Art of Humanizing Social Services (1/24).

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