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POLYVICTIMIZATION IN LATER LIFE

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The National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (NCPEA) has been awarded a cooperative agreement with the US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) to conduct a two-year (2013-2015) project regarding polyvictimization in later life. Various elder abuse scholars refer to “multi-faceted abuse,” “multiple victimization,” “hybrid” or “co-occurring forms of elder abuse,” but prior to this NCPEA initiative, the term polyvictimization has not been defined or conceptualized within the elder abuse field. In contrast, it has been explored in the child abuse field and defined by Finkelhor, Turner, Hamby and Ormrod (2011) as a person’s experience of several *varieties of victimizations or exposures to violence, crime, and abuse*. An outcome of this project will be the development of a definition of polyvictimization during later life, as supported by evidence from research and practice, and the academics and practitioners involved in the project. A key goal is to illuminate how a polyvictimization perspective may improve the understanding of and response to older adults experiencing multiple victimizations and resultant trauma. A core team of elder abuse content experts from diverse fields is conducting the project: Trudy Gregorie, Candace Heisler, JD, Kathleen Quinn, Holly Ramsey-Klawnsnik, PhD, Karen A. Roberto, PhD, Daniel Sheridan, PhD, RN, and Pamela Teaster, PhD with oversight provided by NCPEA President Georgia Anetzberger, PhD. Partnering organizations are the International Association of Forensic Nurses, Justice Solutions, the National Adult Protective Services Association, the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a), the National Center on Elder Abuse, the National Family Justice Center Alliance, and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. The project will create training

materials on this topic including a web-based curriculum, a DVD produced by Terra Nova Films, and articles to appear in scholarly journals as well as professional newsletters. Findings will also be presented at selected conferences and delivered through webinars.

Literature and Practice Search

The Core Team conducted a national literature and practice search to compile and analyze elder abuse findings germane to polyvictimization and drafted concept papers to summarize the findings. Substantial evidence was found that cases of elder abuse frequently involve polyvictimization. Furthermore, older adults who experience more than one type of abuse appear to be at higher risk for dire consequences than those who experience a single form of maltreatment. Late life polyvictimization occurs in a variety of ways, may involve one or multiple perpetrators, and is underreported to authorities. All five types of elder abuse (i.e., physical, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse and care provider neglect) can and do co-occur with each other in various combinations, frequently causing victims to suffer in multiple ways. To illustrate, in a poll of APS professionals nationwide, 15% of respondents said that victims of multiple types of abuse comprise over 80% of their caseloads; 75% said that such victims represent over 25% of their cases. (NAPSRC, 2013).

Preliminary research has linked elder physical abuse to psychological abuse, neglect, and financial abuse. Wigglesworth and colleagues (2010) studied 129 persons with dementia and their caregivers and detected elder mistreatment in 47.3% of cases. All care recipients who were physically abused were also psychologically abused, neglected, or both. About one-third (31%) of mistreated elders experienced multiple types of mistreatment. Similarly, both psychological abuse and care provider neglect often co-occur with other harms in abusive relationships. Anetzberger (1998) reviewed 289 cases investigated by APS in Cleveland between 1987 and 1995. When psychological abuse or neglect was present, other forms of abuse were also present in 89.7% of these cases.

It is also not unusual to discover additional forms of abuse co-occurring with sexual assault. Among 429 care facility residents who were reported to state authorities as sexually abused, 193 disclosed to investigators that they had been sexually assaulted. Among the disclosing victims, 13% revealed that their abusers threatened them and 19%

reported that they had been subjected to additional forms of abuse (Ramsey-Klawnsnik, Teaster & Mendiondo, 2008). Another expression of polyvictimization related to sexual and other abuse involves a “cascading” effect when episode(s) of a single form of abuse triggers subsequent other abuses perpetrated by different offenders. For example, a woman who had been sexually assaulted was neglected in her health care facility when the staff “confined (this) victim to her room for days to prevent further sexual assault by another resident” (Ramsey-Klawnsnik and Teaster, 2012, p. 55).

Elder financial exploitation that co-occurs with other abuses has been linked to victims’ health and well-being. Jackson and Hafemeister (2012) compared 38 cases of pure financial exploitation (only form that occurred) with 16 cases of “hybrid” financial exploitation (co-occurred with physical abuse or neglect) substantiated by Virginia APS. They discovered that elders experiencing hybrid financial exploitation were less healthy overall than those experiencing pure financial exploitation. Similarly, health outcomes may be more severe or long lasting for older victims who have experienced multiple forms of intimate partner violence. Baker and colleagues (2009) found that older women who experienced physical and verbal abuse were less optimistic, more depressed and hostile, and showed more negative or ambivalent emotional expressiveness than women who did not experience violence.

The Context of Late Life Polyvictimization

Polyvictimization of older adults occurs within the family (perpetrated by intimate partners as well as other relatives), the community, and care facilities and across diverse victim-perpetrator relationships.

The elder abuse literature is replete with evidence concerning the frequency with which kin victimize older adults. A national APS study (Teaster, Otto, Dugar, Mendiondo, Abner & Cecil, 2006) found that one-third of all substantiated perpetrators were adult children who abused parents aged 60 and over. In fact, the most common perpetrator was adult offspring. In many instances, offspring perpetration involves polyvictimization, as illustrated by “A Mother Never Gives Up Hope” (Terra Nova Films, 2009) in which four older mothers describe long-term, multi-faceted abuse by their

adult sons. Other family members, including grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and siblings also have been substantiated as perpetrators of polyvictimization.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE: “Miss Mary” (US DOJ, 2008) faced ongoing demands and financial exploitation by her grandson and his wife that culminated one night in a five-hour sexual and physical attack by the grandson in which Mary was seriously injured and threatened with death. She was dragged across broken glass and gravel; her nose was twisted leaving her face black and blue. The attack ended when the grandson passed out and Mary was able to call 911. The abusive tactics did not end with the arrest. The wife cashed out Mary’s insurance policy without telling Ms. Mary. The family shunned Mary and supported the grandson at trial.

Abuse and crime reports reveal that non-family members perpetrate multi-faceted victimization of older adults within the community. Potential community abusers can be anyone who has developed a trusted relationship with the older victim—friends, acquaintances, a caregiver, attorneys, trustees, conservators, accountants, or other service providers.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE: The elderly man was “brutalized by a burly male home health aide employed by the victim’s wife” (Gross, 2006). The brutalized man, as he lay on a gurney in an emergency room, repeatedly told the same story of the home health aide’s beatings and neglect, while the aide and the victim’s wife insisted that the elderly man had fallen. Ultimately, the bruises on the man’s chest were determined to be the result of repeated beatings.

Elder abuse within care facilities can involve polyvictimization. The specific abusive act(s) (whether perpetrated by a facility employee, resident, or visitor) may occur in the context of neglect by the facility in failing to prevent that mistreatment. The contract between resident and facility involves the resident’s obligation to pay for care and the facility’s obligation to provide a safe environment. By creating an environment in which resident abuse has occurred, the facility has neglected that resident’s need for safety and failed to fulfill the financial contract with the person entrusted to its care. Furthermore, cascading neglect and abuse perpetrated by facility staff and management can occur following the assault of a resident if disclosures are not believed and needed intervention is not provided.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE:

...two teenage girls... were charged with physical, sexual and emotional abuse of seven Alzheimer’s patients over four months at the Good Samaritan Society nursing home in Albert Lea, Minn., where they worked... The girls allegedly

poked residents' breasts, hit their genitalia, stuck gloved fingers in their noses and mouths until they screamed, spit into their mouths, rubbed men until they became erect and laughed about their exploits later at school or driving around town. (Connolly, 2009).

Polyvictimization in Later Life National Forum

To involve selected, knowledgeable, and influential elder abuse practitioners and researchers in the project, the “Polyvictimization in Later Life National Forum” was held on October 1, 2013 in St. Paul, MN in conjunction with the National Adult Protective Services Annual Conference. Approximately 100 professionals from across the country, representing diverse fields, discussed definitional issues and germane research findings, practice observations, and training needs. In addition to presentations by core team members and large and small group discussions, key elder abuse specialists were interviewed to capture their observations and recommendations. Those interviewed included research, policy, Adult Protective Services, domestic violence, and sexual assault professionals. Terra Nova Films videotaped the forum proceedings and the results will provide foundational material for the training resources under development.

Definition Developed

Based upon project findings to date, the following working definition has been developed: “Polyvictimization in later life occurs when a person aged 60 or older is harmed through multiple co-occurring or sequential types of elder abuse by one or more perpetrators, or when an older adult experiences one type of abuse perpetrated by multiple others with whom the older adult has a personal, professional or care recipient relationship in which there is a societal expectation of trust. Perpetrators of polyvictimization in later life include individuals with special access to older adults such as: intimate partners; other family members; fiduciaries; paid or unpaid care or service providers, resident(s) or service recipients in care settings.”

Implications and Next Steps

Project findings to date reveal that polyvictimization in later life is a common, complex, multidimensional problem that must be addressed comprehensively. Responses and interventions must be victim-centered and trauma-informed. “Trauma-informed services are those in which service delivery is influenced by an understanding of the

impact of interpersonal violence and victimization on an individual's life and development" (Elliott et al., p. 462). Implementation of victim-centered and trauma informed responses and interventions can moderate the effects of poly abuse on victims. Therefore, a trauma-informed framework will be integrated into the training materials to be developed.

Key questions being addressed as the project enters its second year include the following:

- (1) How can a theoretical framework be advanced or adapted to explain polyvictimization in later life? The Socio-Ecological Model holds promise as a framework and will be explored and evaluated.
- (2) Are risk factors for polyvictimization different from those for elder abuse in general?
- (3) How are victim variables (e.g., age, health and socio-economic status, for example) and perpetrator variables (e.g., motives, personality, behaviors) related to polyvictimization?
- (4) What forms of elder abuse most commonly co-occur? What accounts for this phenomenon?
- (5) What are the professional implications for preventing, identifying, and best responding to late life polyvictimization?

Conclusion

NCPEA is grateful to OVC for the opportunity to undertake this groundbreaking exploration of polyvictimization within elder abuse and creation of resources to equip professionals to respond effectively. NCPEA also expresses gratitude to our partner organizations and to the many professionals who have participated in the project by contributing literature or practice resources or by attending the forum. The training materials under development will be available free-of-charge.

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This and all materials produced as part of this project do not constitute legal advice, clinical guidance or professional recommendations regarding how any specific allegation or case of elder abuse should be handled. The content is not intended to guide or recommend responses to individual matters which must be addressed in accordance with local laws, jurisdictional procedures, standards of practice, and sound professional judgment along with careful consideration of the facts of the specific case or problem. If there are concerns about specific cases or matters, consultation with legal, clinical, and/or other experts may be needed.

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