The Promise and Peril of Conceptual Frameworks for Elder Abuse

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“The way we treat our children in the dawn of their lives and the way we treat our elderly in the twilight of their lives is a measure of the quality of a nation.”

Hubert Humphrey
The Demographic Context of Elder Abuse

*As of July 1, 2010
Why Should We Consider Conceptual Frameworks?

• Elder mistreatment has been described as atheoretical.

• No grand theory exists...or does it, or should it?

• Ontological considerations, epistemological considerations

• Organizing frameworks can define approaches both theoretical and applied
The Ecological Model

An Ecological Model

- Family
- Relational
- Community/Peers
- Societal/cultural
Perspectives on the Ecological Model

- Originally conceptualized for children
- Provides a multi-level, nested systems approach to considering the problem
- Highlights the importance of “levels” or layers of thinking
- Attaches responsibility/responsivity to micro through macrosystems
- Systems are not intersecting, but rather nested
- Difficult to measure or consider all of these when conducting research or designing interventions
- Idea of time “Chronosystem” is difficult to apply

Sociocultural Context

Social Embeddedness/Contex:
Ties to Family and Friends (Stakeholders) of Subject

Individual Level Factors (Subject)
1. Master social statuses (e.g., wealth, race, ethnicity, religion, kinship status)
2. Physical health status (e.g., chronic diseases, diabetes, heart, or acute illness)
3. Personality characteristics and mental health status (e.g., dementia, depression, social competence, intelligence, certain personality characteristics)
4. Beliefs and attitudes about aging, kinship, and care-giving obligations

Status Inequality
Differences in gender, age, race, education

Relationship Type
Whether nonresidential, cohabitational or marital partnership, or alone

Power and Exchange Dynamics
Negotiation of care-giving scripts (e.g., complete, moderate, or limited dependency and need for assistance in performing daily living routines)

Outcomes
1. Physical and emotional health/happiness of subject/trusted other(s)
2. Elder mistreatment (recurrent vs. episodic vs. crisis-centered events leading to physical, mental, or social harms)
3. Durability of care-giving relationship (i.e., likelihood of termination)
4. Sense of security and trust

Social Embeddedness:
Ties to Family and Friends (Stakeholders) of Trusted Other(s)

Individual Level Factors (Trusted Other(s))
1. Master social statuses (e.g., wealth, race, ethnicity, religion, kinship status)
2. Physical health status (e.g., chronic diseases, diabetes, heart, or acute illness)
3. Personality characteristics and mental health status (e.g., dementia, depression, social competence, intelligence, certain personality characteristics)
4. Beliefs and attitudes about aging, kinship, and care-giving obligations
Perspectives on the NAS Model

- Specifically designed to explain elder mistreatment
- Like the Ecological Model, considers a variety of contributors to mistreatment
- Builds on elders in relationship with others
- Takes into consideration dynamics of power, exchange, and inequality
- Includes outcomes
- Issue of the “trusted other”
- Does not include self-neglect
- Does not address “time”
- Needs deeper consideration of characteristics of the abuser
Cycle of Violence Theory

Perspectives on the Cycle of Violence Theory

- Derived from the domestic violence literature
- Controversial
- Situational and short-term
- Easily comprehensible to lay persons
- Not everyone who commits elder abuse was reared in a home in which violence took place
- Could excuse the perpetrator from culpability
- Inconsistent support for this theory
Life Course Perspective

Perspectives on the Life Course Perspective

- Provides context for action and intervention
- Multiple ways to apply
- “Not a theory” conundrum
- Misapplication of central tendency
- Confounding social change and social forces
- Neglects intercohort variability
- Confuses time with change
- Making choices becomes a “problem”
Other Constructs

According to one expert, abuse of the elderly is 'alarmingly common'.

COULD THIS HAPPEN TO YOU, YOUR MOTHER, YOUR GRANMOTHER?

Elder Abuse

Sometimes the only things visible are tears...

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day · June 15, 2011

Please Help
Power and Control
Other Selected Constructs, Continued

- Cumulative Inequality Theory
- Social Exchange Theory
- Caregiver Stress/Family Stress Theory
- Neutralization
- Public Health Model
- Restorative Justice Model
- Adult Protective Services Model
- Ethics of Care
- Economic Theories
Questions and Comments

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