NATIVE ELDER MISTREATMENT

Lori L. Jervis, Ph.D.
Department of Anthropology and Center for Applied Research, University of Oklahoma
Has never been a prevalence study in the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) population

Complicating prevalence studies: Great diversity among Native populations

566 federally recognized American Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2012)

More than 64 state-recognized tribes, 14 tribes with active petitions with the BIA, and a huge number of unrecognized tribes
Other North American Indigenous Groups

- Canada: 633 First Nations, Inuit, Métis and northern communities (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013)

- Mexico: Indigenous population 12.7 million people, speak 62 languages (UNHCR, 2008)

- Almost no literature on elder abuse in these populations
- Presentation focuses primarily on US
- Impossible to make generalizations across so many cultural groups/nations
Studies that May Hint at Prevalence

- Medical record review study of physical abuse in urban primary care clinic (Buchwald et al., 2000)

- 550 AI/AN patients 50 years of age and older over a one year period

- 10% were definitely or probably physically abused
  - Significantly more likely to be female, younger, depressed, dependent on others for food
Shielding American Indian Elders (SAIE) Project

- Employed collaborative approach to explore cultural understandings and develop a culturally informed assessment of elder mistreatment (NIA 5 R21 AG030686-02, Jervis, PI)

- 100 American Indians age 60 and older

- Northern Plains reservation and a Southcentral metropolitan area
- Investigated the performance characteristics of 2 measures:
  - Hwalek-Sengstock Elder Abuse Screening Test (HS-EAST)
  - New measure collaboratively developed with community experts to capture culturally salient aspects of mistreatment in American Indian contexts – The Native Elder Life Scale (NELS)
Cultural Conceptions of Abuse

- Cultural relativity of mistreatment

- What appears to be abusive to the majority population may not be interpreted as such by ethnic minority elders themselves (Rittman et al., 1999)

- What appears to be abusive to Native elders may not be seen as such by general population
  - Spiritual abuse
    - Denied Ceremonies, traditional healing [http://www.nieji.org/](http://www.nieji.org/)
Must understand what local community sees as mistreatment

Comparison of perceptions of elder abuse among 944 American Indians, European Americans, and African Americans using case vignettes found similar notions of abuse across groups (Hudson & Carlson, 1999)

- American Indians classified the greatest number of vignettes as abusive and severe
Project’s qualitative component examined participants’ ideas about what it meant to be treated well and poorly by family.

Participants were also asked about whether they knew of situations where elders were treated badly by family or whether they themselves had been treated badly.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overview of Participants' Personal Risk for Mistreatment and Awareness of Poor Treatment of Other Elders *</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Endorsed items that may indicate participant has experienced serious abuse (e.g., physical abuse, forced to do things that hurt them, child hurt to get elder to do something, etc.)</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stated that they had been treated badly by family members in recent years in qualitative interview</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determined to be at risk for abuse based on either HS-EAST or NEL (financial exploitation/neglect) measures (Jervis et al., 2013)</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed cases where other elders were treated badly by family members in qualitative interview</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* From both quantitative and qualitative data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Good treatment = Complex mixture of being taken care of, having one’s needs met, and being respected

- Poor treatment = Financial exploitation, neglect, and lack of respect; physical abuse described far less frequently

- Respect was a crucial component of what it meant to be treated well, while disrespect was largely equated with abuse
While not unique to Native communities, discourse and concern about financial exploitation in AI/AN communities is nearly ubiquitous.

SAIE: Financial exploitation highly salient issue in elders’ discourse about mistreatment.

Theft predominated, followed by housing misuse and exploitative childcare demands—both of young children and inappropriate demands made by adult children.
- Exploitative childcare demands often difficult for elders to differentiate from culturally normative and esteemed childcare
  - Very close grandparent-grandchild relationships that include childcare very common across Native groups

- Cultural values that emphasize familial (and financial) interdependence (Red Horse, 1983)

- Exacerbating factors: In rural and reservation settings, overcrowded housing, typified by multigenerational residence
How does financial exploitation relate to pervasive poverty and dislocation?

Elder abuse is frequently part of a larger system of familial dysfunction/violence (child abuse/neglect, domestic violence)
- Substance abuse may play role

Community may overlook exploitative childcare.
- Elder taking care of grandchild to any extent better than alternative (e.g., foster care)
Many tribes do not have laws focused on elder abuse

Some in process of develop tribal codes

Fewer than 50 tribes to date have tribal codes listed on the National Indigenous Elder Justice Initiative website [http://www.nieji.org/](http://www.nieji.org/) (although work in progress)
Many tribes have no APS at all. Those that do are often run by volunteers.

Example: In Oklahoma, of 39 federally recognized tribes, only a few have APS.
Victims of violence may feel the police or judicial system can’t help them.

Often too few tribal police to cover large distances in rural areas or deal effectively with crime.

In smaller communities it is often a reality that the elder will come into contact with perpetrator/family of perpetrator even if abuse is reported.
Native Elders’ Reluctance to Seek Help

- **Stigma**: Don’t want the whole community in their business

- **Don’t want to break up family**
  - Fear will lose grandchildren
  - Fear will lose caregiver and end up in nursing home
  - Elder may be caregiver for abuser
Future Directions

- Conceptualization studies to better understand elder and community perceptions
  - Where is the breaking point for tolerating mistreatment?
  - What if elder doesn’t think he/she is being mistreated?

- Perceived severity--Interventions?
  - Seems most clear cut in cases of sexual abuse or physical abuse, but resources often not be there…
  - Most challenging in cases of financial exploitation (e.g., exploitative childcare, housing misuse…).
    - Is it even perceived as abuse? Considered worthy of intervention?
Acknowledgments

- Shielding American Indian Elders Project Team
- National Institute of Aging (1 R21 AG030686-01, Jervis PI)