Polyvictimization in Later Life

by Holly Ramsey-Klawinski, Ph.D., and Candace Heisler, J.D.*

The National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (NCPEA) has been awarded a cooperative agreement with the U.S. 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 “multifaceted 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.


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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 developed by the academics and practitioners involved in the project.

A key goal is to illuminate how the polyvictimization perspective may influence the understanding of and response to older adults experiencing multiple victimizations and resultant trauma.

Team and Deliverables

The project is conducted by a core team of elder abuse content experts from diverse fields: Trudy Gregoire; Candace Heisler, J.D.; Kathleen Quinn; Holly Ramsey-Klawinski, Ph.D.; Karren A. Roboto, Ph.D.; Daniel Sheridan, Ph.D., R.N.; and Pamela Teaster, Ph.D.

Oversight is provided by NCPEA President Georgina Aizetberger, Ph.D.

The 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. They 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. (NAPSC QuickPoll (distributed to National APS Lissett); National Adult Protective Services Resource Center (2013).)

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary research has linked elder physical abuse to psychological abuse, neglect, and financial abuse. Wiglesworth and colleagues studied 129 persons with dementia and their caregivers, and detected elder mistreatment in 47.3% of cases. (Aileen Wiglesworth, Laura Mosquera, Ruth Mulnard, Solomon Liao, Lisa Gibbs, and William Fitzgerald, “Screening for Abuse and Neglect of People With Dementia,” J. Am. Geriatric Soc’y 493 (2010); available at http://CenterOnElderAbuse.org/docs/ScreeningAbuseNeglectOfDementia_Wiglesworth2010.pdf.)

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.

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Anetzberger 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. (G. Anetzberger, "Psychological Abuse and Neglect: A Cross-Cultural Concern to Older Americans," in Archstone Foundation, "Understanding and Combating Elder Abuse in Minority Communities" 141 (1998); available at http://www.archstone.org/publications2292/publications_shows.htm?doc_id=67523.)

Sexual Assault and Co-abuse. It is also not unusual to discover additional forms of abuse co-occurring with sexual assault. Among 125 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 and 19% reported that they had been subjected to additional forms of abuse. (Holly Ramsey-Klawsnik, Pamela Teaster, and M. Mendiola, "Researching Clinical Practice: Findings From the Study of Sexual Abuse in Care Facilities," 11(2) VED 17 (Jul./Aug. 2008).)

Another expression of polyvictimization related to sexual and other abuse involves a "cascading" effect when one episode(s) of a single form of abuse triggered(s) 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." (Holly Ramsey-Klawsnik and Pamela Teaster, "Recommendations and Practice Guidelines From a Recent Comprehensive

Study on Sexual Abuse in Institutions," 36(3) Generations 53 (2012).)

Exploitation Effects. Elder financial exploitation that co-occurs with other abuses has been linked to victims' health and well-being. Jackson and Hafemeister compared 38 cases of pure financial exploitation (in which this was the only form of abuse that occurred) with 16 cases of "hybrid" financial exploitation (exploitation co-occurred with physical abuse or neglect) substantiated by Virginia APS. (Shelly L. Jackson and Thomas L. Hafemeister, "Pure Financial Exploitation vs. Hybrid Financial Exploitation Co-occurring With Physical Abuse and/or Neglect of Elderly Persons," 2(3) Psychol. Violence 285 (2012); abstract available at http://PsycNet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy_optionToBuy&eid=2012-0450-004.) 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 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. (M.W. Baker; A.Z. LaCroix, C. Wu, B.B. Cochrane, R. Wallace, and N.F. Woods, "Mortality Risk Associated With Physical and Verbal Abuse in Women Aged 50 to 79," 57(10) J. Am. Geriatrics Soc'y 1799 (2009); abstract available at http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19682130.)

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 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. (Pamela B. Teaster, Joanne Mariatti Otto, T.D. Dugar, M.S. Mendiola, F.I. Abner, and K.A. Cecil, "The 2004 Survey of State Adult Protective Services: Abuse of Adults 60 Years-Of-Age and Older," Report to the National Center on Elder Abuse (Administration on Aging 2006).)

Family Perpetration. 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, multifaceted abuse by their adult sons. Other family members, including grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and siblings, also have been substantiated as perpetrators of polyvictimization.

Abuse of Trust. Abuse and crime reports reveal that non-family members perpetrate multifaceted victimization of older adults within the community. Potential community abusers can be anyone who has developed a trusted

Perpetration by Family

"Miss Mary" 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 Mary. The family shunned Mary and supported the grandson at trial. (U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime and the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, "I'm Having to Suffer for What He Did," In Their Own Words, NCVJ Number 227928 (2008).)

Abuse by Caregiver

The elderly man was "brutalized by a burly male home health aide employed by the victim's wife." The victim, 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. (Jane Gross, "Forensic Skills Seek to Uncover Hidden Patterns of Elder Abuse," NYTimes, Sept. 27, 2006; available at http://www.NYTimes.com/2006/09/27/us/27abuse.html.)
relationship with the older victim—friends, acquaintances, a caregiver, attorneys, trustees, conservators, accountants, or other service providers.

**Facility Abuse.** Elder abuse within care facilities can involve polyvicimization. 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.

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, MN, 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. (Marie-Theresa Connolly, "When the Mind Falters, Is Sex a Choice?," Washington Post, Sept. 20, 2009; available at http://www.WashingtonPost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/18/AR2009091801144.html)

**Polyvicimization in Later Life National Forum**

To involve selected, knowledgeable, and influential elder abuse practitioners observations and recommendations. Those interviewed included research, policy, APS, 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:

Polyvicimization in later life occurs when a person aged 60 or older

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**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.**

and researchers in the project, the "Polyvicimization 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 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 polyvicimization in later life include individuals with special access to older adults

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such as: intimate partners; other family members; fiduciaries; paid or unpaid care or service providers, resident(s), or service recipients in care settings.

Implications, 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. (D.E. Elliott, P. Bjaela-jac, R.D. Fallot, L.S. Markoff, and B.G. Reed, “Trauma-Informed or Trauma-Denied: Principles and Implementation of Trauma-Informed Services for Women,” 33(4) J. Community Psychol. 461 (2005)).

Implementation of victim-centered and trauma-informed responses and interventions can moderate the effects of polyabuse on victims. Therefore, a trauma-informed framework will be integrated into the training materials to be developed.

Agenda for Second Year

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?