



## Review

## Added value of elder abuse definitions: A review

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## ABSTRACT

Elder abuse has devastating consequences for older persons such as a poor quality of life, psychological distress, and loss of property and security. It is also associated with increased mortality and morbidity. Elder abuse is a problem that manifests itself in both rich and poor countries and at all levels of society. It is timely to discuss one of the basic problems that has hampered the study, detection and intervention of elder abuse as the variety of definitions that exist now produce a definitional chaos for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers.

In this article we trace the elements of “how to define elder abuse” and situate them in their socio-historical context. We also analyze the purposes of these different definitions to assess their appropriateness in different settings concerned with elder abuse. Our analysis shows that elder abuse mirrors the societal arrangements which gave rise to them. It also highlights that it is a complex problem that is difficult to define. The central question is whether we need a common definition of elder abuse or different definitions that can be used in different settings. By evidence of our analysis we can see that there is a need for a sufficiently broad and flexible definition in order to cover different behaviors that can constitute abuse and the various settings in which it may occur. On the other hand, the definition needs to be specific and concrete to be useful in professional contexts.

To take a further step forward for both research and practice of elder abuse, we propose to consistently adhere to the WHO definition that leads the enquirer towards a better understanding of the problem and helps to distinguish it from other phenomena; and to a simplified definition for professional practice that sets boundaries to the phenomena and is appropriate for effective prevention and intervention measures.

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## 1. Introduction

Elder abuse remained hidden and taboo until quite recently. After child abuse and domestic violence were discussed publicly in the 1970s, elder abuse emerged as a form of family violence. During the early 1980s more public and professional interest was given to the issue of elder abuse (McCreadie, 1996, 2003; Pritchard, 1995). What exactly constituted elder abuse, however, was at that time less at the center of attention. Despite the fact that the problem of elder abuse has gained more public attention and quite some research was conducted, global statistics are still lacking, in many instances health care professionals still ignore it, and even now not enough action is taken to protect the individuals subjected to abuse. Moreover cases are often not recorded and unreported (Perel-Levin, 2008). Part of this underreporting is due to the complexity of and unequivocality inherent in the phenomenon itself: abuse can take place in a whole range of settings, including

hospitals, nursing homes, residential care homes, day centers and even the person's own home, perhaps the one place where the older person might feel safest (Abbey, 2009; Ansello and O'Neill, 2010; Arai, 2006). Family members, adult children, or spouses are implicated in 90% of the cases of elder abuse. Other abusers include care professionals such as health or social workers, friends, or neighbors. Sometimes the abusers do not recognize what they are doing as a form of abuse; they, and at times their victims, do not know what constitutes abuse and what not, different organizations and professionals still use different terminology, adhere to different definitions and thus perceive abuse differently. This causes significant issues for research as it makes it more difficult to compare the outcomes of various reports as the result of the inconsistencies in the definitions of elder abuse (Pillemer and Wolf, 1986; Pillemer and Prescott, 1989; Newton, 2010).

Lack of agreement about the definition and its parameters has made the assessment of prevalence and incidence problematic from an empirical perspective (Harbison and Morrow, 1998). It makes it especially difficult to determine the extent of the problem of elder abuse. Prevalence rates of elder abuse of between 4 and 6% were found in Canada, Great Britain, Finland and a

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prevalence rate of between one and ten percent was estimated in the USA (Griffin, 1994; Pillemer and Finkelhor, 1988). In the Netherlands one prevalence study on elder abuse showed a 5.6% prevalence rate (Comijs et al., 1998, 2000; Comijs, 1999). Inadequate knowledge and training in how to detect abuse and a lack of staff awareness of what constitutes abuse can lead to underreporting of cases of abuse, underestimation and imprecise prevalence rates (Anetzberger, 2004; Griffin, 1994; Kivela et al., 1992; Ogg and Bennett, 1992; Podnieks, 1992). Some prevalence studies include only one form of elder abuse, such as solely physical abuse and others more than one, for example, physical and psychological abuse. As a result, prevalence rates are inconsistent and incomparable. On top of this, the studies involved provide different interpretations of elder abuse, this makes it confusing to analyze and understand the phenomenon in a comparative way and it also has an impact on further research, and thus for the development of policies, prevention and intervention programmes.

As a first step towards further developing the field of elder abuse in a comparative way, this article reviews definitions of elder abuse taking into account different aspects of these definitions and effects they can have on research and professional practice. The purpose of this analysis is to come to an understanding of the development of research and practice in elder abuse. By enabling comparative understanding it hopes to contribute to a comprehensive approach towards elder abuse.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Identification of studies

Studies were identified by searches of 11 databases (PsycINFO, PubMed, EMBASE, Web of Science, CINAHL, Academic Search Premier, ScienceDirect, Wiley, LWW, HighWire, Taylor&Francis/Informa). The search strategy consisted of the AND combination of two concepts: “elder abuse”, “definitions”. For these concepts, all relevant keyword variations were used; not only keyword variations in the controlled vocabularies of the various databases; but the free text word variations of these concepts as well (such as: elder neglect; elder mistreatment; terminology; concepts; ontologies). Searches were restricted to papers published in English. The bibliographies of relevant original and review articles were screened aimed to include all published studies that provide information about the phenomenon of elder abuse; definitions of elder abuse; problems in defining elder abuse; the development of definitions; comparison and analysis of different definitions. The titles and abstracts of all articles identified by the search were screened and potentially relevant articles were retrieved and assessed. Additional relevant articles were identified through Pubmed; Google Scholar and other relevant search engines. Relevant books and chapters of the books were also included to the review.

### 2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The studies which provided information about the phenomenon of elder abuse, definitions of elder abuse, problems in defining elder abuse, the development of definitions, comparison and analysis of different definitions or any information were included in the review.

The articles that did not contain necessary and relevant information were excluded from the review.

### 2.3. Results of the search

The PsycINFO yielded 113 hits, the PubMed yielded 77 hits from which 52 were unique (not found in other databases), the MEDLINE

yielded 80 hits (0 unique), the Embase yielded 35 (12 unique), the Web of Science yielded 56 hits (17 unique), the CINAHL yielded 84 hits (36 unique), the Academic Search Premier yielded 42 hits (0 unique), the ScienceDirect yielded 4 hits (1 unique), the Wiley-Blackwell yielded 12 hits (0 unique), the LWW yielded 96 hits (76 unique), the Taylor&Francis yielded 38 hits (19 unique) and the COCHRANE yielded 0 hits.

Screening of titles and abstracts identified potentially relevant papers; then the papers was thoroughly studied and 12 studies which met the inclusion criteria are addressed in this review.

Other relevant studies which were identified from reference lists, authors and additional search engines were also included in the review (see Fig. 1).

Information obtained during the symposium “Elder abuse in context” (Leiden, 2011), interviews, exchanges and meetings with professionals, experts, older people also contributed to this review.

### 2.4. Classification of definitions

To explore definitions of elder abuse, we will first discuss what kinds of definitions are commonly distinguished and which purposes they serve, as a comparative starting point for our analysis of elder abuse definitions. This will be the first starting point for our analytical framework for these definitions.

In a long history of definitions, many strands have become tangled together, so that “definition” has implicitly come to mean many different things to many people, often in ways that are inconsistent (Cregan, 2005). As a first step, Robinson (1950) distinguished two types of definitions: lexical (or also dictionary) and stipulative.

Lexical definitions are used when we need to explain the existing meaning of an old word or term; that is, a word/term that is already in use in the community, but unfamiliar to the person wanting the explanation. Lexical definitions seek to pinpoint what was meant by some word to someone at some point in time (Belnap, 1993).

If one might wish to explain a proposed meaning for a new word, stipulative definitions will be used. The purpose is to specify that a certain term will be used only to mean a certain precise thing within a given context (Belnap, 1993; Ierodiakonou, 1993). This may be a broadening or narrowing of an existing sense of a term; a completely new usage of an existing term; or may involve the creation of a totally new term. It is a specification of how the author intends to use the term in the future within a particular work or context, and binds the author to making good on that intention (Zalta et al., 2009).

However, besides the two types that Robinson (Gulpa, 2008) distinguished, there are also many cases not exhibiting either one of these types, including perhaps most distinctively philosophical definitions; in these cases one wants both to rely on an old, existing meaning and to attach a new, proposed meaning, they try to explain the circumstances of elder abuse without necessarily being a full sum-up of the conditions that make it count as elder abuse. For this purpose a third type of definition, here called explicatory, is used in which analyses or explications expounded.

The three broadly distinguished types of definitions – lexical, stipulative and explicatory – discussed above can be identified in definitions of elder abuse as well. These types will be used as a conceptual framework to analyze elder abuse definitions in this review.

The incongruity between different interpretations and definitions of elder abuse also has their impact on the understanding of the consequences of the phenomenon. To explain the impact of elder abuse, we need to have a clear idea of what that phenomenon entails. Clear definitions serve several important purposes:

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