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Epistemological erasure: The subject of abuse in the problematization of ‘elder abuse’



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ABSTRACT

The academic field of literature pertaining to elder abuse emerges largely from gerontology with contributions from a variety of disciplines including geriatric medicine, nursing, public health, law, psychology, sociology and social work. This paper presents a critical review of articles drawn from this literature to identify current directions leading the development of empirical research in this field. The objective measurement of prevalence, the identification and correlation of psycho-social risk factors and practice-based research oriented to intervention and prevention are identified as privileged sites for scientific investigation. These sites are critically analysed in terms of their underpinning rationalities to reveal the operation of a hegemonic post-positivist epistemological framework. This framework enables an expert professional discourse to structure knowledge and the field of inquiry through constructions of the ‘subject of abuse’ as a statistical figure, a factorial subject of risk and universally vulnerable. These modes of representation preclude subjective lived experience and, in doing so, inaugurate an ‘epistemological erasure’ of the embodied subject of abuse. The review attends to the limited body of qualitative research in the field, some of which claims a politicized empiricism of ‘voice’. However, whilst the findings produced by this research suggest theoretically and conceptually fertile lines of inquiry, these have not disrupted or extended the dominant discourses in the field. This paper argues that an epistemological gulf, riven through a politics of evidence, ensures the reproduction of dominant discourses and their attendant limitations in ways that forestall the conceptual and theoretical advancement of the field.

Introduction

An increasing problematization of diverse phenomena socially constructed as ‘elder abuse’ is evident in academic literature, social policy and advocacy arenas offering a highly complex arena for investigation and intervention. The most commonly accepted and reproduced definition of elder abuse across the literature is that offered by the WHO (2002) as ‘a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person’. This definition is generally accompanied by a descriptive typology that delineates abuse in terms of physical, sexual, psychological, financial, neglect and violation of rights. This definition and typology is therefore inclusive of a broad range of behaviours, relationships with perpetrators and forms of harm that are unified on the basis that they affect an older person, typically defined as aged 65 years or more. The degree of variation and conceptual ambiguity about what constitutes ‘elder abuse’ is a key issue giving rise to reoccurring critiques in the literature about limited theoretical and conceptual development in the field (e.g.

Biggs & Haapala, 2010; Harbison, 2000; Norris, Fancy, Power, et al., 2012; Harbison, Coughlan, Beaulieu, et al., 2012; Mysyuk, Westendorp, & Lindenberg, 2013; e.g. Goergen & Beaulieu, 2013; Pillemer, Burnes, Riffin, et al., 2016). To understand the context from which these issues emerge and identify ways in which conceptual and theoretical development may be forestalled or advanced, this paper critically examines the literature on ‘elder abuse’ to identify and problematize privileged and marginalized sites of inquiry in the field.

The academic literature that produces knowledge of elder abuse is the focus of this paper. Whilst this entails a review of the literature, the intention is not to provide a descriptive review or a historical trajectory of the field. Rather, a critical approach guided by Foucault's (1972, 1976, 1980, 1984) work is employed to identify and examine discourses and the discursive formations through which elder abuse is problematized. As Rose (1996: 26) elaborates, problematization refers to ‘practices where conduct has become problematic to others or oneself’ and the attempts to ‘render these problems intelligible and, at the same time, manageable’. Knowledge of ‘elder abuse’ is therefore inextricably interwoven with social structures and social practice in ways that

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produce the ‘problem’ in particular ways and enable particular forms of response. The single quotation marks around ‘elder abuse’ speak to the particular ways in which elder abuse is constituted as an ‘object’ to be known. Rather than focus on describing what is currently known about elder abuse, this paper considers how what is known about elder abuse is connected to an apparatus of knowledge production. Methodologically, this entails viewing the published literature as a ‘surface of emergence’ (Foucault, 1972: 41) that provides access to the systems of thought and rationalities informing academic praxis in this field of knowledge that constitutes ‘elder abuse’. The paper engages with critique of the limitations of this knowledge and suggests potential avenues for interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary engagement that will contribute to advancing the field.

There is a large international literature on the topic of elder abuse (A university library catalogue search for ‘elder abuse’ retrieves 91,235 results). A sample of academic texts was therefore generated using databases in the social sciences including Sage Journals, Scopus, Ebscohost research databases, the university library catalogue and Google scholar. Searches were conducted using the keywords ‘elder abuse’ and ‘abuse and older people’. Relevant articles were selected based on publication date (predominantly within the range 2000–2016 unless a seminal piece published prior to 2000) and applicability to advanced neoliberal socio-political contexts (US, UK, Australia, Canada and Europe). The sample of downloaded articles was saved to an endnote library and comprised approximately 100 articles from a range of books and journals including for instance, *The Gerontologist*, *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, *International Social Work*, *Social Work & Society*, *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, *Social Science and Medicine*, *Journal of Clinical Nursing and Geriatric Nursing*. The final sample of approximately 100 articles was determined by the available time to conduct the literature review and the principle of ‘data saturation’ (Morse, 2000) whereby continued literature searches produced new publications but did not extend the identified themes. The sample of literature was read thoroughly to discover dominant disciplines, topics and themes and initial findings were recorded in a summary document that outlined the ‘state of play’ of knowledge in the field. This process was loosely based on inductive qualitative processes for analysing data by grouping articles according to themes relevant to the focus of the review. The next stage of the review pursued nuances within the themes according to the rationalities that shape empirical inquiry in the field. This stage was co-existent with the writing of this paper, in a mode of inquiry where ‘writing is thinking, writing is analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and tangled *method of discovery*’ (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005: 967 original emphasis retained). At this point it became clear that the dominant disciplines in the field and the key research foci emerging from those disciplines were connected by a unifying epistemological framework. This framework then became the focus of critique in terms of its effect on constituting the ‘subject of abuse’ and the limitations of these constructions for the theoretical and conceptual development of this field of inquiry.

Reigning rationalities: the disciplinary terrain across which ‘elder abuse’ is problematized

The large and steadily expanding body of literature on elder abuse spans international geographical terrain and disciplinary spaces and produces and delimits a field of academic knowledge. This literature has arisen largely from the interdisciplinary site of gerontology with contributions from geriatric medicine, nursing, health, law, psychology, sociology and social work that form ‘problematizations’ of elder abuse in relation to public and personal health, adult protection, social relations and professional practice. Across these problematizations of elder abuse, three privileged sites for empirical enquiry emerge: prevalence, risk factors, and preventative practice. These three research foci connect through a logical driving narrative about the size of the problem, why it occurs and what can be done to respond and prevent its

occurrence. In concert, the epidemiological focus on prevalence, the psycho-social approach to measurement and correlation of ‘risk factors’ and practice-based research attempts to understand service needs point to a cohesive and dominant epistemological formation in the elder abuse literature. This discursive formation constitutes an *epistēmē*, an apparatus ‘that makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may be characterized as scientific’ (Rabinow, 2003: 53). Functioning within the *epistēmē* are ‘rules of formation’ to which the scientific study of elder abuse is subjected (Foucault, 1972: 38). These rules can be grouped as a ‘post-positivist epistemology’. As Holmes et al. (2006: 183) observe, the post-positivist epistemology of science provides ‘a form of empiricism’ that ‘fetishizes the object at the expense of the subject, for whom this world has a vital significance and meaning in the first place’. The object of ‘elder abuse’ is constituted and fixed through a professional clinical gaze enabled by powerful public health and medical discourses. Foucault argues in *The Birth of the Clinic* that it is precisely the technique of treating the subject as an object that makes clinical experience possible. He writes, ‘one could at last hold a scientifically structured discourse about an individual’ (Foucault, 2003: xv). As Holmes et al. (2006: 183) elaborate, such an epistemology is ‘dangerously reductive insofar as it negates the personal and interpersonal significance and meaning of a world that is first and foremost a *relational world*, and not a fixed set of objects’. Moreover, this danger is not only a threat to the visual field of empirical knowledge but is deeply oppressive for those subjected by it. This paper develops the argument that post-positivism in the problematization of elder abuse enacts an epistemological erasure of the subject that restricts not only theoretical and conceptual development but also practical translation of research in the field.

The ‘will to prevalence’: rendering the invisible political

A dominant theme in the elder abuse literature is the significant import attributed to the production of objective empirical measurements of its prevalence in society. Indeed, population-based prevalence studies have emerged as the ‘gold-standard’ in elder abuse research (Burnes & Pillemer, 2015: 10). This epidemiological approach is evident in national and multi-national focused research that aim to use the rationalities of science including random selection, representativeness and generalization to establish valid and reliable prevalence data (e.g. Burnes, Pillemer, Caccamise, et al., 2015; De Donder, Lang, & Luoma, 2011; Fraga, Lindert, Barros, et al., 2014; Manthorpe, Biggs, McCreadie, et al., 2007; Naughton, Drennan, Lyons, et al., 2012). The significance of this ‘will to knowledge’ (Foucault, 1976) is also established through the academic praxis of citing prevalence figures in the opening paragraphs of journal articles on elder abuse and through the production of review articles focused on prevalence and the scientific means for its production (e.g. Sooryanarayana, Choo, & Hairi, 2013). Establishing the scope of the problem is generally justified in the literature as a vital first step towards increased recognition and awareness of elder abuse which in turn is considered a necessary platform to politicize the issue and galvanize further research and statutory and social policy responses to prevention and intervention (see for example, Naughton et al., 2012: 98).

Depending on the location of the research, the operationalization of elder abuse employed and the sampling framework, international prevalence estimates range from 7.6–11% (Pillemer, Connolly, Breckman, et al., 2015), 0.8–29.3% (De Donder, Lang, et al., 2011; De Donder, Luoma, & Penhale, 2011), 2.6% (National Centre for Social Research, 2007), 13.5–44.6% (Sooryanarayana et al., 2013), 4.6% (Burnes et al., 2015), and 2.2% (Naughton et al., 2012). Despite the weighty importance given to prevalence by the academic community and decades (e.g. McCallum, Graycar, Matiasz, et al., 1990) of empirical prevalence studies across the globe, the variance in these estimates lead Pillemer et al. (2015: 321) to conclude that ‘given the discrepancies among studies, the true prevalence of elder mistreatment cannot be

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