



National Institute of Justice

Elder Mistreatment: Using Theory in Research— Meeting Summary

June 2, 2014

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Opinions or conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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Meeting Summary

Monday, June 2, 2014

**National Institute of Justice
Patrick Henry Building, Washington, DC**



NIJ

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Overview

Researchers in the field of elder mistreatment met in June 2014 to discuss elder abuse theory. In general, elder abuse research tends to be light on or devoid of theory. The meeting had several goals:

- Underscore why it is important to conduct research that is guided by theory;
- Gain insight into barriers to the use of theory in elder abuse research;
- Discuss how to better integrate theory into research designs and proposals; and
- Explore mechanisms to encourage investigators to use theory when developing research proposals and designs.

Dr. Carrie Mulford of NIJ stated that, by the close of the meeting, they hoped to have concrete ways to encourage the use of elder abuse theories in proposals.

Welcome and Introductions

Dr. Mulford welcomed the group, who introduced themselves and described their areas of expertise (see Attachment A, Participant List).

Why Theory is Important in Research

Dr. Mulford introduced Dr. Sherry Hamby and Dr. Anne DePrince. They presented information on the importance of theory in research, with an emphasis on the uses of theory and the theories used to explain violence.

The Benefits of Theory in Violence Research: The Web of Violence

Sherry Hamby

**Research Professor, Psychology Department
University of the South**

Dr. Hamby noted that she and Dr. John Grych recently published the book *The Web of Violence: Exploring Connections among Different Forms of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse*. She said they are dedicated to building bridges across disciplines (i.e., “silo-busting”).

Dr. Hamby said historical ways of talking about violence don’t map to experience in the real world. She noted that elder abuse doesn’t exist in isolation; the web of violence is interconnected. There is an increasing appreciation of the interconnections of all forms of violence. These interconnections have critical implications for research. The data on co-occurrence also provides strong evidence that prevention and intervention efforts should be organized around the full context of individual experiences, not narrowly defined subtypes of violence.

Exhibit 1 illustrates Hamby and Grych’s “Web of Violence” (2013), which indicates strong interconnections among elder abuse and child physical abuse, intimate partner violence (IPV), child neglect, and child sexual abuse. Although weaker, there are also connections among elder abuse and exposure to community violence, robbery, and community physical assault. Additional but more distant connections are found with sexual assault and rape, dating violence, gang violence, and bullying. All these forms of violence are interrelated (i.e., form a web).

One highly studied area is exposure to IPV and child physical abuse. In such cases, children are five times more likely to perpetrate violence. However, this connection isn’t the closest link. It is higher

with custodial interference (e.g., hiding the child from the other parent, violating custody agreements). Family dysfunction causes many kinds of violence and abuse. This can be seen in revictimization. There is also a high correlation with physical assault. Dr. Hamby said past models have been too “matchy-matchy” (i.e., predicting that victims will later perpetrate the same type of violence they were subjected to). However, some things that don’t seem related to each other actually are. For example, domestic violence is associated with increased violence in school. In these situations, the parents are not available and the children become vulnerable in multiple settings. They may commit property crimes. These pervasive vulnerabilities subject people to many types of harm.

Exhibit 1. The Web of Violence: Interconnections in Representative Community Samples (Hamby and Grych 2013)

Interconnection	Strength of Association (OR)
<i>Well-known, well-established connections</i>	
Exposure to IPV & child physical abuse	5.0 (NatSCEV; Hamby et al. 2010)
Exposure to IPV & teen dating victimization	3.8 (NatSCEV; Hamby et al. 2010)
Physical IPV & Stalking by intimate partner	7.0 (CDC, Krebs et al. 2011)
Physical IPV & sexual violence by intimate partner	2.4 (CDC, Krebs et al. 2011)
<i>Strong but underrecognized connections</i>	
Exposure to IPV & neglect	6.2 (NatSCEV; Hamby et al. 2010)
Exposure to IPV and sexual abuse by known adult	5.2 (NatSCEV; Hamby et al. 2010)
Any physical assault & any sexual victimization	6.2 (NatSCEV, Finkelhor et al. 2009)
Any witnessed violence and any sexual victimization	4.5 (NatSCEV, Finkelhor et al. 2009)
Teen dating victimization and peer sexual harassment	5.3 (NatSCEV; Hamby et al. 2012)
<i>Weaker but still positive connections</i>	
Exposure to IPV and peer relational aggression	1.7 (NatSCEV; Hamby et al. 2010)
Any property crime and any sexual victimization	3.2 (NatSCEV, Finkelhor et al. 2009)

Understanding Mechanisms of Violence and Victimization

People tend to start from scratch when they begin to study a new type of violence, but this isn’t necessary. They can look at other types of violence and review the work on existing theories, such as parental attachment. John Bowlby made significant contributions in this area.

Dr. Hamby said that sometimes causes are direct. “Direct” usually means occurring at or near the same time (proximal) and creating a change that increases one’s risk of violence as either a victim or perpetrator. Direct causes are often situational or environmental, such as heat, crowding, or substance use/abuse; they can also be actual violence. Unfortunately, “direct” is used in two ways: as a theoretical concept and to describe a statistical relationship. Most mechanisms studied in psychology are indirect.

The related terminology is confused in the literature. A bivariate relationship doesn’t really mean there is a direct relationship. Dr. Hamby gave the example of two people having an argument. One woman hits the other in the head, and the victim lies on the ground unconscious. Someone then comes along and steals her bracelet. That’s a direct effect. Usually, the woman would be able to fend off the theft. She experienced a temporary risk or vulnerability. However, most mechanisms studied in psychology are indirect. When we say a mediator wasn’t significant, we often say the link between

the cognitive state and risk for vulnerability is direct, but it's more likely that we haven't identified the indirect mechanism.

Most mechanisms studied by researchers look at past experiences and how they change the person. The individual often carries these experiences into future relationships. Someone abused by his or her mother can carry the experience around within, and it influences that person. The mother isn't following the person around continuing the abuse. There is an extensive body of literature on this. The criminal justice field does look at the role of situations (e.g., environmental conditions, drugs/alcohol, social integration, rejection or hostility by others, family and community contexts), but most psychology focuses on indirect effects, whether we understand that or not. The etiological processes that affect most forms of violence are not specific to one field. In the elder abuse field, researchers don't need to start from scratch; they can start with the *situational* conditions listed above, as well as the processes that affect the *person* (e.g., cognitive and affective processes, such as beliefs about aggression, schemas, and automatic cognitions; self-regulatory abilities; and personality factors, such as impulsivity or narcissism). Once these processes have been examined, researchers can look at the variables that might be specific to the stage of being elderly.

Potentially Unique Causes of Elder Abuse

The following are sometimes proximal sources of stress or vulnerability and are unlikely to be the sole causes of elder abuse:

- Living with adult child
- Dementia
- Dependency
- Aging-related increases in vulnerability
- Caregiver burden

Some of these characteristics are unique to elder people, and others borrow from general causes. General Strain Theory might provide a good, comprehensive understanding. To advance the field of elder abuse, researchers need to look at some of these things, but many of them are general and are just carried into old age. Others can help the field understand why violence emerges in a particular family.

Targets that Minimize or Prevent the Harm of Abuse

The new model Dr. Hamby is focusing on includes *external resources* (e.g., socioeconomic status; caregivers such as children, partners, or other adults; a safe, stable environment) and *internal assets* (e.g., "who you are": personality, cognitive abilities, and character strengths). It helps to focus on the malleable points for prevention and intervention. Dr. Hamby said not to focus on things that can't be changed, such as gender or race. These aren't targets for intervention or prevention. However, they should not be dismissed altogether. To prevent elder abuse, the link between these resources and assets must be strengthened and the risk of adversity lowered. To address elder abuse that has already occurred, she said to focus on coping responses (e.g., "what you do": appraisal, regulatory behavior, meaning-making behavior). This can lead to mental health, shown in well-being, affect, and symptoms.

It isn't necessary to address the abuse directly; things like mindfulness meditation can improve mental health. Dr. Hamby said, "keep your eye on the prize" to get smarter and better with prevention efforts.

Conclusions

Dr. Hamby said that laying a theoretical groundwork up front can improve results and increase impact.

The field needs a better understanding of the variables that should be the focus of research, prevention, and intervention and should look for opportunities to take advantage of work in other fields. This can lead to better outcomes for older adults.

Theory in Research

Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D.

**Associate Professor, Department of Psychology
University of Denver**

Dr. DePrince asked, “What do we mean by theory?” Broadly defined, a theory is conceptualization of a phenomenon we are interested in. Theories might include all kinds of views about the following:

- Nature of a phenomenon
- Antecedents
- Causes
- Correlates
- Consequences

It might also specify relationships among various constructs.

A theory can be broad (such as a pattern of numerous birds) or narrow (one particular bird). The focus should be on factors that lead to the problem/phenomenon and maintain or change them.

Why do we need theory? Here are some textbook answers:

- Theories bring order and help identify what we need to pay attention to and what we need to communicate to other disciplines. A host of theories are now being collected in elder abuse literature.
- Theories explain change and unite diverse outcomes. We can look at the literature in other fields (such as child abuse) for guidance.
- Theories can inform the research direction, particularly moderators. At any given time, many things could go into a model, but only some can be included (e.g., demographics might not be as useful). We can’t conduct every study, and not all studies can be funded. Theory has to inform what we look at.
- Theories facilitate applying and extending what we learn in real life. NIJ encourages dissemination and translation.

Theories can help us think about defining a phenomenon. We might link together some things that are quite different. At the end of the day, we have a theory we’re focused on and then we identify root causes. We go below the surface, identifying how elder abuse connects with poverty, education, developmental processes, and so forth. Then we can connect with other disciplines, such as education (necessary because many grandparents raise children). Theory helps get us there.

It also helps us reveal our own assumptions. We’re always “in water,” so it’s hard to understand the problem; it’s always there around us. We need to see how our training and experience influences our assumptions. We need to look at the water in which we are working.

Theory provides a check and balance. Everything is related to everything else. Theory provides balance on what to highlight, so we don't trip on all the connecting strings.

Most important, theory helps build interdisciplinary teams, approaches, and dialogues. We can't solve the problem of elder abuse if we are "siloed" in our universities or hospitals. How do we piece together the expertise from different disciplines? We need to talk to sociologists, for example, to understand social organization theory. Theory gives us a language to build interdisciplinary dialogues. We need to bring together the best of these conversations.

We also need to think iteratively, to go back and revise and refine our studies. Theory is a tool to push research forward.

We can ask, When do we have enough theory? For journals, the "theory police" (i.e., editors) often reject articles because they say there isn't enough theory.

Dr. DePrince said to "come to the dark side" and make theory work for us, rather than us working for it. This organizing information will allow us to talk across fields. We don't want it to become a gatekeeper, however. How can we stay intellectually honest?

Theory is important to advance and fine-tune the understanding of phenomenon for impact. It is important to think about research theory and practice. This feeds back and improves upon theory.

Discussion

A participant asked about the difference between a theory, a model, and a framework. Dr. Hamby said those are fuzzy boundaries, especially in violence research. There is no unifying theory, as there is in quantum mechanics. However, almost all things studied in psychology relate to one another. There are hundreds of risk and protective factors, so there are thousands of choices that could be made in choosing the ones to focus on. She suggested calling a model or framework something modest; there is not a lot of practical difference, as long as there is a good rationale for picking the variables. Dr. DePrince said that in psychology, the era of grand theories has shifted and now they talk about strong conceptual models. It's important to make clear the reason for picking certain variables, but the models don't all have to be different theories.

One person said that when she looks at IPV and child abuse, there is typically either a partner or a parental relationship and the setting is usually in a household. Given the greater complexity in terms of settings and possible relationships, how should they begin to look at elder abuse in terms of model building? Dr. DePrince responded by asking, What do we want theory to help us address? What increases mistreatment broadly or a specific form of mistreatment? Referring to the web of violence, she said things get exciting when it's possible to see what the factors leading to elder abuse have in common. For example, dependency could be an issue that maintains abuse. It depends on the question being answered.

Dr. Hamby said the terminology in elder abuse needs to be expanded. Elder abuse is unique in terms of developmental stage, so it similar to child abuse in that way and also because it is usually a family phenomenon. However, there is no equivalent term in the field of elder abuse for "children's exposure to violence." Elder abuse lacks this broader term. The parallel would be "elder exposure to violence." The elder abuse research has a subtype for nonfamilial caregiver, so one would need to work on the language to signal which domain is being discussed. Nonfamilial caregiver abuse is something unique to the developmental stage of older adulthood. There are some crimes that can only be perpetrated against a child—similar to elder abuse, which is specific to a developmental

stage. A framework is needed to help explain that. The framework for understanding conventional crimes against the elderly will not be that different from that for other aged populations.

In response to a question about different types of elder abuse, Dr. Hamby said different theories are not needed for each type of elder abuse. Researchers need to identify key common vulnerabilities that apply to all forms of abuse. There could be a core set with some offshoots. She said, don't start over and build something new for older adults; as much as possible, build on the existing models that apply. You don't need different variables, but some might pose a higher risk, such as living alone. However, they're not different.

Someone pointed out that, for elderly people, those who are cognitively impaired are getting weaker, while children are getting stronger. Dr. Hamby said she sees these developmental stages as similar, because for both, one looks to systems and caregivers to strengthen coping responses. The most important thing in research is to focus on malleable factors that can be changed; too much of violence research focuses on things that are static.

A participant asked about the word "elder;" what ages does that include? Dr. Hamby said that age is used as a proxy for development, but is not the same thing. There is greater variability at the end of the life span than at the beginning. Two 70-year-olds can be very different. Perhaps, the term "elder" should be operationalized in terms of abilities, not age (e.g., the ability to care for oneself).

Another person had difficulty with the term "abuse," as it is hard to define and a gray area. Dr. Hamby said this is a problem in the field of violence in general and is not unique to elder abuse. She said the difficulty is that we tend to define abuse and violence the way a 3-year-old might define fruit as "apple, orange, banana," which doesn't tell you much. The same is true with violence and abuse; we give a laundry list of bad things, but what connects them to each other? She said we need to step back. She has gone back to older criminology literature from the 1970s. She noted that there are examples of things that look similar to violence, but are not violence, such as a surgeon with a knife, or a linebacker tackling somebody. She said the field needs to get beyond defining violence using terms such as "hit, stab." She suggested thinking about a definition such as "intentionally causes harm in violation of social norms." The lines can also be tough to draw in the area of neglect. A family might not even realize they are neglecting an older relative.

When asked to talk more about the meaning of "intentional," Dr. Hamby said that in the criminal justice system, it's hard to determine intent, but it's important to tease out things that are accidental. One needs to understand the context of the situation.

A participant pointed out that a discussion of abuse leads to the need for measurement. First, did the thing happen? Then, how serious is it on the spectrum? Criminology measures these things. Dr. DePrince said measurement will fall out of the model being used. She said it depends on the question we are trying to answer. This is a matter of operationalizing the theory. For example, how does cognitive decline affect the perception of risk and victimization? The need to ask for help is in a different category than something that can be prosecuted.

The discussion turned to autonomy. At the end of the age spectrum, there is no silver bullet explaining when capacity turns into incapacity (unless there is a court order or other defining event). As cognitive capacity declines, it can become a "horror show." A caretaker's responsibility changes depending on how autonomous the individual is. Someone noted that intervention and prevention strategies will be different if looked at in terms of theory; autonomy might not be a roadblock based on the model.

Dr. DePrince said we have both deductive and inductive methods of looking at the world. We observe patterns in our case loads and then try to move up to a theory that accounts for them. However, each example is idiosyncratic. If people vary, how can a model explain what is happening? There is better research when one is theory driven in the lab.

The discussion was said to be necessary because the field is not seeing much theory. There is more focus on developing interventions, but without building the base that explains why elder abuse is happening. Someone noted that to conduct an intervention, there must be a theoretical rationale.

There are many practices that are widely adopted in descriptive research, and there are many descriptive theories. However, researchers have not explained why they pick certain variables. They pick them for a reason. There are implicit theoretical assumptions about drivers of violence.

One person working in elder abuse heard that they are 20 or 30 years behind other violence research. He asked, "Have you reached the point of having successful prevention programs or interventions in other areas? Have you identified risk factors that we can learn from? What is the most effective way to cultivate theoretical research techniques?" Dr. Hamby said there has been important work done in peer victimization, bullying, and gang violence, but there are no silver bullets. There are some programs that work can be drawn from, as well as some models. She said she talks to child abuse professionals and tries to do silo-busting, but the fields don't talk to each other enough. She emphasized focusing on malleable factors without making the research too centralized on one thing. She said medicine is very far ahead of them in knowledge management. They have too many eggs in the knowledge-generation basket and not enough in knowledge synthesis and dissemination. The questioner asked, whether in domestic violence or child abuse, how did you get to the point where you could identify moderators, or have you? Dr. Hamby said there has been some progress based on meta-reviews. Much of it was an unguided, implicit effort. She noted that the reason everyone talks about emotional regulation is because it keeps rising to the top. Those variables perform beautifully; but for others, the research is in its infancy.

Child abuse was the first type of violence to be widely recognized, then IPV (out of feminist theory), then elder abuse. Someone stated that, rather than develop on our own, we developed from everyone else without a lot of support. Yet our population is quite different. We looked at everybody else instead of our own population.

One person described a case study. They developed an elder abuse support and measurement system. They needed a theory to measure abuse characteristics. They borrowed the idea of "lack of protectors" from perpetrator and victim criminal theory and called it social support. Now they have measures of those things. They want their work to be put into action since they are working in the field. They also measure victim and abuser strengths. They work on victim strengths; that's their working theory, and it is needed for the decision support system.

A woman who started in the field of child advocacy, then worked in IPV, was shocked when she was introduced to elder abuse, because unlike child maltreatment, there was no theory and the work was not data driven. She started to do research and talked to victims across Virginia. She found no theories in the literature. In Rhode Island, the judges were sentencing offenders to batterer intervention programs. She asked, What are we doing? She said in the area of child maltreatment, they've had the freedom to think. She noted that IPV is a much more constricted field and not data driven; rather, it is ideologically driven. Her fear is that that the field of elder abuse will become ideologically driven. People need to develop theory. She does not want people's lives to get worse. She urged the group to figure out the causal factors before thinking about interventions.

She found underlying types in elder abuse in her data and interviews and said it is important to think about types of abuse. Until we can get the understanding that there are types, she said the field can't make progress. She recently wrote a paper on elder abuse in search of its own identity and said we need to see it as distinct in important ways.

The Promise and Peril of Conceptual Frameworks for Elder Abuse

Pamela B. Teaster, Ph.D.

Professor, Department of Health Behavior

Director of Doctoral Studies

University of Kentucky

Co-Director, Ohio Valley Appalachia Region Geriatric Education Center

Director, Kentucky Justice Center for Elders and Vulnerable Adults

Dr. Teaster said that over time, she has gotten a variety of reactions to the idea that promoting theory is important in this field. Some tell her that the field is atheoretical, and others say that it is antediluvian. She asked for a count of those present from various disciplines: psychology, law, sociology, social work, criminal justice, public health, public administration, and medicine. There were representatives from all fields, and she said each would operate from his or her discipline's perspectives. We tend to embrace the heritages of our training. There are now both ontological and epistemological considerations. She said organizing frameworks should define approaches that are both theoretical and applied. She now thinks about ethics and spirituality.

As an early researcher, she thought sex abuse was only about family members, and then found out it happens in facilities as well. She said we move out of a small pond when we think about these issues. This field has now addressed a number of problems and issues. In her city, they used to say elder abuse didn't exist. She asked, Do we intervene, and if so, whose responsibility is it? Will it increase? Is it a problem of economics, interrelationships? Is it increasing? What is it? Where does theory come in?

She quoted Hubert Humphrey's statement, "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."

Demographic Context of Elder Abuse

There is more data on elder abuse compared with guardianship.

Of the 78 million Baby Boomers born from 1946 to 1964, the oldest reached age 65 in May 2011; 50% will live to be at least 81, and 25% will be 89 or older. With 35% of all people over age 71 already having heart attacks or full dementia, the percentage of these health problems will rise to 50% at age 85.

Ecological Model

The ecological model is used by the CDC. It came out of the child development field. It takes us through a variety of levels to think about the issues. It's good because it allows us to see that elder abuse is embedded at different levels of society:

- Family
- Relational
- Community/peers

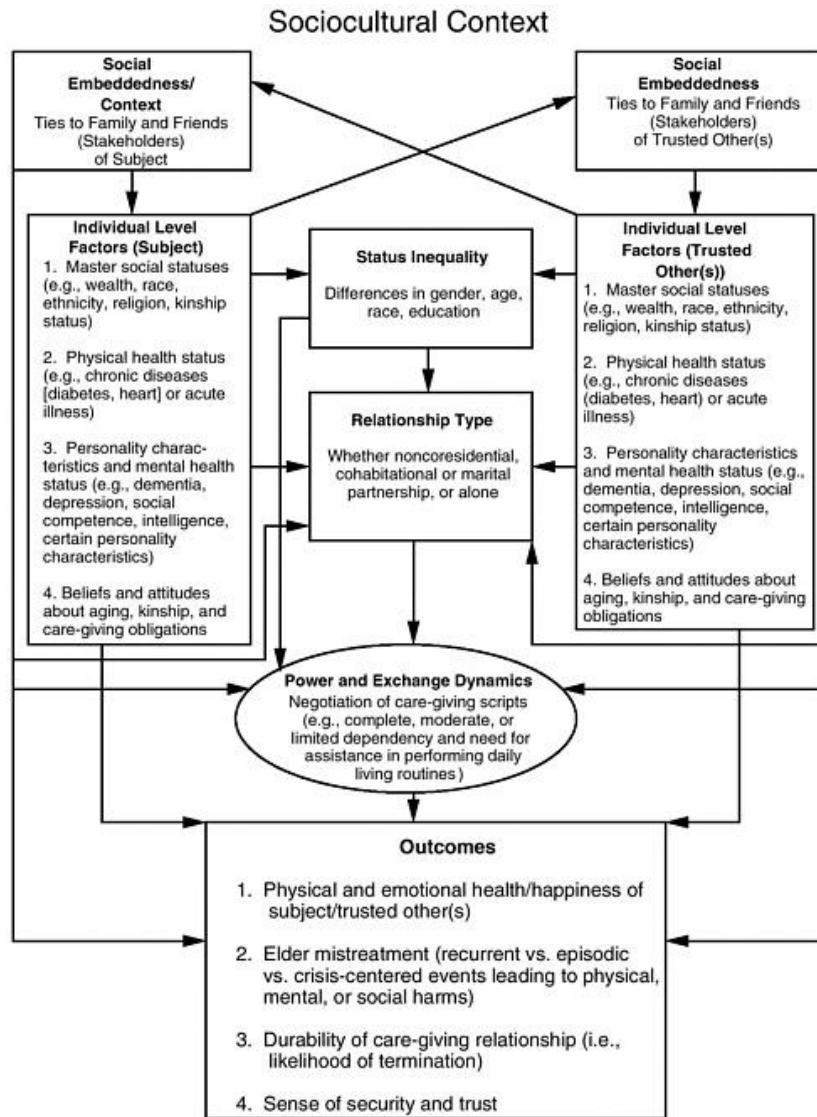
□ Societal/structural

The model was originally conceptualized for children. It provides a multilevel, nested systems approach to considering the problem. It highlights the importance of “levels” or layers of thinking. It attaches responsibility/responsivity to micro- through macro-systems. The systems are not intersecting, but are nested instead. Dr. Teaster noted that it is difficult to measure or consider all of these when conducting research or designing interventions.

NAS Sociocultural Framework

The National Academies (NAS, 2003) defined a focus on relationships and gave it context. It was specifically designed to explain elder mistreatment (Exhibit 2). Like the Ecological Model, it considers a variety of contributors to mistreatment. It builds on elders in relationship with others and takes into consideration the dynamics of power, exchange, and inequality. The framework includes outcomes and addresses the issue of the “trusted other.”

Exhibit 2. NAS Sociocultural Framework



Cycle of Violence Theory

The Cycle of Violence Theory has been seen as the patriarchal behavior of men. It states that there is a build-up of tension, followed by an explosion of violent behavior, remorse, and then an attempt to win back the victim with gifts or apologies. It was derived from the domestic violence literature. It is controversial, because not all situations fit the model. Not everyone who commits elder abuse was reared in a home in which violence took place. It is easily comprehensible to laypeople, but could excuse the perpetrator from culpability. There is inconsistent support for this theory.

Life Course Perspective

The Life Course Perspective explains why we act the way we do based on how we move through history and experience things (e.g., child, young adult, older adult, old age). According to this perspective, for example, younger people would not tolerate the abuse that some older people accept. We have different conceptions of violence over time. The perspective provides a context for action and intervention, and there are multiple ways to apply it. However, it brings along a “not-a-theory” conundrum. There are also confounding social change and social forces, it neglects inter-cohort variability, and it confuses time with change.

Other Constructs

Other constructs include the following:

- The Power and Control construct explains the use of coercion and threats; intimidation; emotional abuse; isolation; minimizing, denying, and blaming; using the children; using male privilege; and economic abuse.
- Cumulative Inequality Theory looks at the inequality/equality of health factors and other factors related to people’s lives.
- The Social Exchange Theory is a cost-benefit analysis; the perpetrator may not feel adequately compensated for his or her caretaking.
- The Caregiver Stress/Family Stress Theory is not valid, in the opinion of Dr. Teaster.
- Therapeutic jurisprudence is a relatively new, multidisciplinary field. It examines how the law and those that enact it may be helpful or harmful to people’s well-being and looks at alternatives, including special courts for particular problems.
- Neutralization or Drift Theory came from the juvenile delinquency approach.
- The Public Health Model includes primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention.
- The Restorative Justice Model has to do with negotiation and mediation over issues of elder abuse, including Native American communities.
- The Adult Protective Services (APS) Model is unique. It includes support for autonomy and self-determination.
- Ethics of Care moves into the ethical framework. It addresses how to balance principles about treating individuals, such as when to intervene or how to prevent elderly mistreatment.

Dr. Teaster noted that when authors use these constructs in their articles, they usually fail to mention them by name.

The Nexus of the Theories and the Future

A number of theories could be used in the future. For example, the Medical Model comes from an evidence base and should be considered. A form of the Ecological Model includes considerations from micro- through macro-systems; many researchers don't use one framework in a single study. A transdisciplinarity approach is critical, as is the verbiage used (e.g., victim/perpetrator designations). Words matter. What we call things has a great deal to do with the intervention applied. We could use a combination of theories versus a "grand theory." A grand theory would be a long time coming. Dr. Teaster said we will have to think about the variables we'll use in these theoretical constructs. Different fields will have to come together in new ways. Will we go down the path of one approach or use a combination? Will we think broadly and creatively?

Elder Abuse and Criminological Theory

Brian Payne, Ph.D.

Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Studies, Old Dominion University

Dr. Payne said ideas from criminology can inform elder abuse. Until recently, criminologists ignored elder abuse. He wrote a chapter on the issue 15 years ago, and when he submitted it, one of the reviewers said it shouldn't be published because elder abuse was not a big problem in society. It was later published by someone else. In criminology, there are still those who don't see it as an important issue. Criminological theories have been applied most often to juvenile delinquency. They also can be used to help understand elder abuse. However, the theories should be integrated with traditional explanations about elder abuse.

Some reasons criminologists have ignored elder abuse include conceptual ambiguity, political issues (lack of funding), methodological issues (it is not easy to study) and magnitude issues (data suggest that we're less likely to be victimized as we grow older, but these data are not accurate).

What are the perceived causes of elder abuse? One early study about elder abuse revealed several explanations and perceptions. This was a survey of 203 ombudsmen in 26 states. The highest-rated case was stress (41.4%), followed by victim vulnerability (37.4%), greed (29.1%), lack of morals (23.6%), and lack of training (20.2%). They did not mention dependency explanations, conflict theory, gender-based theory, or psychological explanations.

An overview of elder abuse theories used in criminology includes the following:

- Culture
- Deterrence Theory
- Routine Activities Theory
- Strain: classical, institutional, and general
- Learning Theory
- Neutralization Theory
- Control Theory
- Self-control (general theory of crime)
- Social Disorganization Theory
- Conflict Theory

Industrial capitalism promotes a "culture of competition" and offers different opportunities for crime.

Cultural factors in elder abuse include greed, ego-seeking, and fear of poverty. We also have a culture of violence. However, the culture does not actually cause elder abuse; otherwise, more people would offend.

Deterrence Theory and Rational Choice Theory

Deterrence Theory and Rational Choice Theory state that punishment can stop individuals from offending if punishment is swift, certain or guaranteed, or if it outweighs the positive benefits of the crime committed. The underlying assumption of deterrence is that the offender is rational (i.e., “white-collar criminals are more deterrable than common criminals because their crimes are more rational and calculating”). However, deterrence strategies are not enough to prevent elder abuse. Rational Choice Theory states that offenders will weigh the positive benefits and negative consequences before committing elder abuse. It focuses on what the negative consequences are for offenders. Therefore we must ask, Is physical abuse always rational? Is neglect always rational? Is theft rational?

Routine Activities Theory (1979)

Routine Activities Theory is a structural theory that explains how changes in society influence crime rates. It suggests that crime occurs when certain elements merge in time and space, including the presence of motivated offenders, an absence of capable guardians, and the availability of suitable targets. It is helpful in analyzing specific occupational situations to determine the likelihood of workplace crime, such as in nursing homes.

Dr. Payne conducted a study of Routine Activities Theory that looked at more than 800 cases. He found that half of motivated offenders were serial, 27% were pathological/tormentors, and 25% were stressed. Concerning the vulnerable target variable, he found that older people were at more risk and those who were impaired were more likely to be sexually abused. Concerning capable guardians, he said there are few witnesses. Penalty enhancement states give lighter sentences; mandatory reporting had no influence.

In a survey of 76 nursing home directors conducted to study Routine Activities Theory, Dr. Payne found that prevention efforts were facility based and included education, community outreach, and building security. The directors described a vague response system.

Situational Crime Prevention: Preventing Elder Abuse in Nursing Homes

Harris studied situational crime prevention (i.e., preventing elder abuse in nursing homes). It is important to make targets less accessible, limit the access of visitors and employees, use surveillance systems, develop property identification systems, and conduct background checks. He emphasized the importance of a guardian for reducing opportunities for abuse.

Strain Theory

General Strain Theory proposes that crime is an adaptation to stress and frustration. Strain Theory can be used to bridge the gap between sociology and criminology. Classical Strain Theory says that strains are due to interactions between social and economic structures. It’s a macro-level theory that examines individual behavior and focuses on why poor people commit crimes. The idea of modes of adaptation describes how individuals meet goals using different roles:

- Conformists

- Innovators
- Ritualists
- Retreatists
- Rebels

Institutional Anomie Theory states that American society promotes financial success, but it does not emphasize values that are consistent with a legitimate means of achieving that success. American values that are key to the commission of crimes include achievement, universalism, individualism, and materialism.

Applying General Strain Theory, Agnew (1992) cites three sources of strain in elder abuse (Exhibit 3):

- Failing or expecting to fail at positively valued goals;
- Removal or expected removal of positively valued stimuli; and
- Confronting or expecting to confront negative stimuli.

Exhibit 3. Examples of Strain in Elder Abuse

Strain Source	Example
Failing or expecting to fail at positively valued goals	Caregivers experience external stresses that could cause them to either fail at their goals or believe they will fail at their goals.
Removal or expected removal of positively valued stimuli	Loss of independence could be a source of strain. Caregivers might perceive that they are losing their free time or other positively valued stimuli. These perceptions lead to frustration.
Removal or expected removal of positively valued stimuli	Fear of medical bills, financial costs, confronting death

“Caregiver burden” means the strain or load experienced by a caregiver. It is believed to be a significant cause of elder abuse. Half of caregivers experience a financial burden; two-thirds are in ill health. The explanatory importance is oversimplified.

One study asked if the burden is higher in cases involving victims with Alzheimer’s disease. It analyzed 751 cases. The burden was not higher in those cases. One can’t assume burden based on victim characteristics.

In another study on Strain Theory, the burden seemed to be especially high in situations where caregiving is provided by those not prepared for the caregiving situation; they have not had examples or training to show them how to do caretaking. Daughters were found to be more likely to experience the burden. Results indicated that strain be a better predictor for neglect.

Learning Theory

In Differential Association Theory (Sutherland), people learn to commit crimes from their peers. They learn how and why to commit crimes, as well as why laws against those crimes are inappropriate. The theory is criticized for the lack of explanation revolving around the “first white-collar criminal.” Co-workers of an offender are more likely to offend than friends or family members; they learn reasons to commit elder abuse.

Neutralization Theory

Neutralization Theory argues that individuals are not committed to a criminal lifestyle and must neutralize their conventional beliefs before committing crimes. They know right from wrong. The

neutralization occurs before the act. There is a denial of responsibility, denial of the victim, denial of injury, condemnation of condemners, and an appeal to higher loyalties. The types of denials include the following:

- Denial of crime: they say they did not commit the crime.
- Denial of fact: offenders deny specific aspects of the crime.
- Denial of awareness: offenders indicate they did not understand that their actions were violations of workplace rules.
- Denial of guilt: the offender admits doing something, but denies that his or her actions were criminal (Payne, 2003).
- Denial of law: professionals describe the law as unfair (Coleman, 1994).
- Defense of entitlement: they indicate that they are underpaid, overworked, and entitled to the funds.
- Borrowing: they say that they planned on returning the money (Coleman, 1987).
- Metaphor of the ledger: occasional wrongdoings are “okay” (Minor, 1981).
- Denial of wrongfulness: offenders suggest nothing was wrong with their behavior (Payne, 2003).
- “I was told to do it”: the authority excuse.
- “Everybody is doing it”: the institutional excuse.
- “My actions won’t make a difference”: the minimization excuse.
- “It’s not my problem”: the ostrich excuse (Gibson, 2000).

Control Theory

Control Theory asks why people *don’t* commit crimes. It suggests that bonds to society prevent people from committing crimes and outlines four elements of social bonds: attachment, belief, commitment, and involvement. In nursing homes, those most likely to offend are new employees and those with negative attitudes toward older people.

Self-Control Theory

Self-Control Theory argues that all types of crime stem from a lack of self-control. Those with low self-control are more likely “impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, short-sighted, and non-verbal.” A lack of self-control is seen as learned from “bad parenting.”

Social Disorganization Theory

Social Disorganization Theory says that characteristics of neighborhoods could play a role. Researchers mapped 751 cases reported to APS and mapped Alzheimer’s cases, police report data, support group data, and available services.

In Norfolk, VA, Alzheimer’s cases were studied in disadvantaged areas. Support groups were well distributed, although in Chesapeake, one must drive 5 or more miles in 25% of cases. Adult day care is not well distributed. Those in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to refuse services.

Social “Reality” of Elder Abuse

Counting the number of articles in newspapers allows us to examine how elder abuse is “socially constructed” in the media. The number of elder abuse news articles from 1999 to 2003 was very low

compared with the number of child abuse articles. Child abuse is considered a serious problem, but in the media, elder abuse pales in comparison.

Integrated Explanations

The field should integrate efforts to explain elder abuse in a way that combines multiple perspectives. Elder abuse is not a one-dimensional phenomenon; therefore, no one theory on its own can predict compliance rates. Personality characteristics, social controls, and personal controls also play a role in elder abuse.

Discussion

A participant asked how to apply Social Disorganization Theory to communities of elders, such as nursing homes and assisted living facilities. Dr. Payne said that one way is to look at whether a nursing home is in a socially disorganized community, in which case the staff is likely to be from there as well. The problems around the nursing home then come into the nursing home. Things to look at include poverty rates, number of single-parent families, and other community-level measures.

In response to a question, Dr. Payne said he has not documented characteristics of nursing homes. He said some research has shown more abuse in for-profit organizations, due to the “McDonaldization” of care. Researchers could look at neighborhood vs. county-level characteristics and the degree of altruism in a community. Where the nursing homes are located plays a role. One person noted that nursing homes are likely to be in rural settings.

A participant noted that people were talking about mistreatment, but neglect can be extreme. He asked what theoretical perspective works for self-neglect. The response was that it depends on the reasons. Some people neglect their surroundings; there is physical, medical, and financial neglect. Some reasons are global, while other people don’t fit into this approach. There is also Continuity Theory, which says people want to live in their own homes, and they neglect themselves when they are taken out of them. Self-neglect can also be due to executive dysfunction. Dr. Payne said there is sometimes a deterrent or punitive framework that is not helpful.

Someone asked what theory would apply to unlicensed facilities and vulnerable adults. He said HHS wants to do foundational work, but can’t go out and survey. The agency wants to “dig our toes in the water.” Another person said licensing is a huge and amorphous problem. It’s like a game of whack-a-mole; it’s growing by leaps and bounds and will only get worse.

Another participant said this is an atheoretical question; the field needs to find an immediate solution because people are at risk. Dr. Hamby said the field needs to look at why they think the unlicensed homes are bad; in fact, they might not be all bad. Ask: What factors are associated with riskier settings? Routine Activities Theory could be used with motivated offenders (caregivers who are antisocial), vulnerable targets (those with less oversight, no site visits) and those with no capable guardian (minimum standards for care).

Two researchers from the University of Chicago who work on the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP), a nationally representative study of older people, were asked to describe the NSHAP and talk about their interest in elder abuse theory. Study questions were included on elder mistreatment, and some publications came out of it. It confirmed that there is a high prevalence of mistreatment in the physical, verbal, and financial areas. Because of financial constraints, researchers didn’t ask the same questions in the second wave. However, for the third wave, funded by a supplement, they will ask additional questions on mistreatment. The pre-test will be done in the fall of 2015. These individuals were interested in the meeting, because they are trained in theory at the

University of Chicago. They plan to go into more depth with the third-wave follow-up questions. For example, they will ask: Has someone stolen from you, and if so, who is that person? They are trying to test hypotheses about cognitive deficits and mistreatment. The field of elder mistreatment might not be sufficiently data driven, so they want longitudinal data to help build theory.

Analysis of Project Narratives of Elder Abuse Grants from 2005 to 2013: Categorization

Jaspreet Chahal, *NIJ*

An NIJ research assistant analyzed NIJ grants for mentions of theory. During the first read, she categorized each application as either Yes (it explicitly mentioned theory), Implied (it referred to theory, but either did not name a theory specifically or the theory was used in a broader way and not intended to explain elder abuse), or No (no references to theory were made).

There were 25 grant applications funded from 2005 to 2013. Seven clearly mentioned theory or a theoretical model; 16 implied, but did not specify, a particular theory; and 16 did not mention theory. They used other research as a framework for “filling in the gaps.”

Theories Mentioned

- Etiology of Abuse
- Social Exchange Theory
- Social Breakdown/Social Competency Theory
- Financial Exploitation Models
- Desistance of Abuse
- Risk Assessment Models
- Routine Activities Theory
- Victimization Theory
- Sociocultural Models
- Ecological Theory

Conclusions

Ms. Chahal found that there were difficulties relating theory to elder abuse (implied theory vs. named theory). In addition, 27% of grants that were funded specifically included theory; 64% did not include any reference to theory.

Prior research is included as a requirement in all grant-funded projects to indicate the need for proposed research. She asked, Is the theory important? It was noted that this review had no inter-rater reliability.

NIJ Strategies: How to Encourage Investigators to Use Theory in Research

The group weighed in on the importance of theory and methods for encouraging the use of theory. Their comments follow.

- There is a risk in just plugging in a theory. Maybe the researchers should just describe their perspective.

- NIJ recently had a meeting on theory. One of the participants said grant applications should be required to draw the model they plan to use for the program.
- They are interested in things that will generate testable hypotheses; it doesn't have to be a "capital T" theory. Another person didn't like the idea of having a "small t" theory.
- Everyone agreed that it is important to articulate the theoretical thinking. What is it that matters? Sometimes that is not provided in proposals.
- Someone could write a proposal to develop a theory using inductive methods, as there is no theory for elder abuse.
- NIJ specifically asks for theory in their solicitations. As a journal editor, this speaker said that her experience historically was that no paper would be published without theory; it was drilled into her in her field. NIJ has some mechanisms to propel the field forward, such as peer review and who receives funding.
- The perception among criminologists is that having theory (or too much theory) in their applications will decrease their chances of getting funded by NIJ. NIJ staff said theory would not hurt an applicant unless it was perceived that the application didn't have relevance to criminal justice policy or practice.
- Many of the theories discussed in the meeting were classic theories of violence. "Back in the day" there was hope in the field that there would be theories that indicated one cause of violence. Now it is known that there are many causes. More recently, emerging theories include the general aggression model, the social information processing model, social learning, and the I-cubed model.
- Re: Bandura's work, it is the hierarchy is important. A ruler shows a hierarchy of financial exploitation with about 80 items, from a low-level crime up to actions such as taking the title of a house or exerting pressure to sign loans. He disagreed that the theory should be set going in and noted that sometimes basic research is needed to build theory.
- The hope of advancing theory is to change it. Existing theories will eventually evolve. We should be adding to them all the time.
- If it becomes standard that there has to be theory in an application, a great deal of researcher time could be spent (i.e., wasted) by the researcher. For example, concerning bruising in cases with elderly people, what theory could be used? One researcher asked, Is that what you want me to spend my time writing? It's important to find the right balance; we don't want to miss the basic foundational work that needs to be laid. People are suffering and dying.
- The goal is to build forensic evidence and build tools. One man said there are two different issues: What is defined as a bruise? vs. Why do perpetrators bruise elderly people?
- You can develop a framework that will help guide you and improve emergency treatment.
- The introduction to a grant proposal should explain the conceptual framework (i.e., why the applicant wants to look at this issue). How will it advance the state of knowledge? It might be more of an implicit model of what is wrong with emergency services for elders.
- You can't do science without a theory; it's whether or not you have unpacked the theory. But is this just an intellectual exercise that doesn't get you anywhere?
- Should the group define theory? People were using the term in different ways.

- Anyone who has done elder abuse work knows the urgency of the situation, but some standards are needed; theory is not a bad thing. The speaker urged caution; find a middle ground.
- Theory is important for driving things, but descriptive studies are important for building theory. Maybe for the bruising study, the theory should be at the back end. We don't want "siloed" theories that don't add up to a whole; they need to tie into the literature.
- Example from the field of risk assessment: they talk to case workers all the time and use inductive logic. They describe their approach to the case worker. They all come at it from different angles. You need all the pieces.
- NIJ wants potential grantees to articulate where they're coming from; it might not be based on an existing theory.
- People need to create theory. Current theories might not work. Everyone has experience from which they can develop theories. One participant wanted to see new ways of thinking about elderly people.
- We're still in our silos, but elder abuse is an interdisciplinary problem. The speaker thought the important thing is to have guardians who are able to identify problems.
- It might be good to be less grandiose at the moment and take steps toward working collaboratively with other fields. We could push the field along. The problem is too large for one field to tackle. Perhaps no one is ready to create a theory. Focus on combining the disciplines.
- We can state our assumptions, our framework, and explain why we have selected certain variables. We shouldn't be searching for an overarching theory.
- Caregiver stress is a factor for some people and in some situations. Some theorists have thrown it out as a single factor. It is now politically incorrect to raise it (this relates to advocacy and the way caregiver stress was viewed as an excuse for abusers). It has been overused in the literature; it predominated for a while, then it dropped. A 1981 report from Congressional hearings brought it into awareness, but research did not bear it out as a single factor. Rejecting it altogether was a failure of the iterative process; it should not have been totally debunked.
- Social Disorganization Theory was popular years ago, went away, and is now coming back again. Finding out what works is important.
- Theories generate interest and give us something to test.

Suggestions for Moving NIJ Forward

The group was asked to write down several things NIJ should do in the area of theory to move the field forward. The following comments were offered.

- NIJ could provide money for several researchers to spend 6 months trying to develop a theoretical structure and bust silos.
- There is a need for more articles, such as the one by Dr. Shelly Jackson in the NIJ brief, which highlighted the importance of theory.
- There could be an entire journal issue presenting opposing viewpoints on theory (or a supplement).
- There could be a series of articles providing a snapshot of risk factors.

- Applicants should be required to state the framework, model, or theory driving their work. Include in introduction to indicate the motivation for proposed findings. They must also be required to later quantify the degree to which the data supported this framework. Perhaps include in dissemination/policy & practice section indicating how the findings will add to theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. Possible provide examples/ workshop on how to write such proposals. Remove any application lacking this discussion from consideration during preliminary review.
- Fund the testing of a specific existing theory. In discussion of this recommendation, there was some disagreement about whether the theory should be named in the solicitation.
- Request secondary data analyses, if possible. Find something the studies look at in common. This would provide a baseline for what has been done. DOJ is putting together a website on the literature that could serve as a starting point. The National Clearinghouse on Elder Abuse and Neglect also has a catalog of research in the field. However, some expressed a fear that meta-analyses would look at articles that were based on bad data.
- Request that applicants do two things. Step 1: Ask if a theory (any theory) is relevant, and if so, under what circumstances? Step 2: Test it.
- Conduct a multifactorial analysis of risk factors for two or more areas (e.g., physical abuse and financial exploitation).
- Fund a workshop so people could present on different ideas to test theory and get feedback on the data that could be used or would need to be collected.
- Develop standard measures, as NIH has done.
- Scoring criteria could be changed to emphasize theory.
- Issue an NIJ grant that requires an interdisciplinary team (e.g., a researcher-practitioner or researcher-criminology collaboration that addresses both real-world experience and cutting-edge theory). Over time, collaborations could be expanded to include a full spectrum of actors in the field.
- Develop a funding mechanism for the development of “theory”: (a) contracts for papers, (b) contracts for the interpretation of existent theories, (c) contracts/fellowships for meta-analysis of research that uses a “theory” for a specific problem in elder abuse (d) explicit call for meta-analysis of different dimensions of theory: causes of, maintenance of, and intervention for change (e) funding for theory development proposals that are based on data, for example secondary analysis to test theories.
- Enforce comparative research that test one theory against another.
- Fund the testing of the most frequently used/cited/plausible elder abuse theories.
- Give applicants “extra points” for proposals that articulate their use of theory.
- Have a preliminary guidance session for every grant solicitation that discusses the importance of theory/model/framework.
- Develop a logic model that includes theory inputs, resources (including data sources) and expected outputs to guide next stages.
- Calling for proposals that test prevention/intervention theories. Such an exercise could/should be informed by theory that in turn would allow the intervention/measure to be generalizable or debunked. Require applicants to discuss how the data they collect would be generalizable.

- A proposal for theory development that looks at victim characteristics, perpetrator characteristics, existing theory that is applicable and the discipline it comes from each type of elder abuse: physical, financial, and neglect.
- Create and/or disseminate a model of good use of theory.
- Create NIJ standards for use of terminology in elder abuse.
- Fund a workshop helping people with specific datasets/projects and incentivize scholars to publish in more general journals.
- Require applicants to not only explicitly state the framework/model/theory, but require and encourage proposals to discuss how they will evaluate how well the data collected for analyzed support for the perspective they adopted (quantify the fidelity of implementation and evaluation of data quality issues).

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