

Rethinking the Dynamics of Abuse against Older Adults: Towards a Relational Lens for Intervention

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Objectives

By the end of my presentation, I hope that you will be able to:

- ◆ Identify at least one way that you are drawing on theory to inform your practice;
- ◆ Understand broadly what a relational lens is and how it shapes what you see and how you respond;
- ◆ Begin to think critically and creatively about your practice in order to consider innovative and new ways of responding

Mary Wilson

◆ See Case Overview

Exercise: Mrs. Wilson

- ◆ How do you understand what is happening here
- ◆ (Quickly) Develop a plan of action

Constructing Elder Abuse

- ◆ Caregiver Stress (Gerontology)
- ◆ Family Violence Perspective (Social Science)
 - ◆ Intergenerational dysfunctional family
 - ◆ Feminist perspective
- ◆ Legal/Criminal (Law)
- ◆ Relational Approaches
 - ◆ Self-in-relations psychological theory
 - ◆ Relational Ethics;
 - ◆ Feminist legal approaches

Caregiver Stress

- ◆ Caregiving is stressful
- ◆ Abuse occurs as a result of caregiver becoming overburdened and striking out at victim
- ◆ Theory accounts for other internal and external factors of the caregiver such as
 - ◆ Personal coping skills,
 - ◆ Degree of choice associated with caregiving role
 - ◆ Strength of social support network (Isolation)
- ◆ Most strongly affiliated with adult children and spouses

Caregiver Stress Perspective Implications

- ◆ Target of intervention is caregiver
- ◆ Goal is to reduce stress
 - ◆ Recognize situational stress
 - ◆ Provide support
- ◆ Decrease isolation
- ◆ Non-confrontational approach which may avoid alienating perpetrator

Mrs. Wilson

◆ Reflections:

1. Did this theory inform your understanding of what the issues were and how you would approach?

Caregiver Stress Perspective: Potential Issues

- 💧 Collusion with Perpetrator
- 💧 Positioning of Victim as problem
 - 💧 Victim blaming
 - 💧 Victim responsibility to change
- 💧 Caregiving, rather than abuse, becomes the focus
 - 💧 Obscures other relationship dynamics

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Domestic Violence: Assumptions

- ◆ Relationship violence does not cease at age 65 nor does it turn into something different
- ◆ Violence is rooted in couple's and family's intergenerational, dysfunctional family patterns
- ◆ Abuse is about power and control
 - ◆ Intimidation
 - ◆ isolation

Domestic Violence Perspective Implications for Practice

- ◆ Importance of history and context
 - ◆ Pattern, not single episode
- ◆ Disrupting cycle of violence
 - ◆ Addressing safety issues
 - ◆ Decreasing isolation
- ◆ Reaffirming (empowering) abused senior
 - ◆ Believing account
 - ◆ Providing options
 - ◆ Respecting choices

Mrs. Wilson

◆ Reflections:

1. How did this theory inform your understanding of what the issues were and how you would approach?

Domestic Violence: Potential Issues

- ◆ Person being abused takes on the status of ‘victim’
 - Can reinforce powerlessness;
- ◆ Requires that “victim” ‘name’ the abuse;
- ◆ Villainizes ‘abuser’ and often focuses on removing him (sic) from relationship;

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Criminal/Justice Issue

- ◆ Assumptions
 - ◆ Abuse is a crime and seniors have a right to be protected
 - ◆ Challenges notions of abuse as a private, family affair
- ◆ Implications for Practice
 - ◆ Deter abuse through legal action
 - ◆ Importance of documenting abuse
 - ◆ Prosecution vs. support as focus
- ◆ Potential Issues
 - ◆ May 'demonize' perpetrator
 - ◆ Potential to infantilize abused senior – capacity is questioned

Mrs. Wilson

◆ Reflections:

1. How did this approach inform your understanding of what the issues were and how you would approach?

Toward a relational lens for understanding and responding:

Why Important

- ◆ Many approaches to understanding and responding to abuse rely upon the notion of a rational, individualistic way of understanding autonomy;
 - ◆ Presume a self-sufficient, independent self
- ◆ Intrinsically linked to the notion of mental capacity
 - ◆ Decision-making is seen as a logical, largely cognitive process;
- ◆ Fail to consider how relationships may influence understanding of an issue
 - ◆ Decontextualized and socio-culturally biased

Foundations of a Relational Lens

- ◆ Feminist writings related to relational autonomy and identity;
- ◆ Positioning theory: How competent a person looks is often, at least in part, determined by how others see and treat him or her;
- ◆ Critical theory: Our subjective experience and ways of making sense of the world and our actions are shaped by broader socio-political context

Relational Lens

- ◆ Introduction of the notion of ‘relational autonomy’
 - ◆ Connection and interdependency as conditions of autonomy
- ◆ Centrality of relationships for constituting and judging self:
 - ◆ One’s sense of self is formed and maintained within the context of relationships
- ◆ Embodied knowing and being
 - ◆ Self-identity and mental capacity are comprised of both objective awareness (the thinking mind) and subjective knowing (the feeling body)

Relevance to Understanding and Responding to Abuse

1. Role of emotion in decision-making
 - ◆ Decisions that demonstrate understanding but seem to 'defy' logic
2. Importance of attending to the preservation of relationship
 - ◆ How is need being defined and what are the implications for 'support'?
3. Inclusion of intimates in the process of decision-making
 - ◆ Who do you involve in the process?
 - ◆ How much is too much influence?
4. Importance of a power analysis to understand positioning of self in broader context (Ageism, Sexism)
 - ◆ How is internalized oppression and messaging impacting actions and decisions?

Mary Brown

- 76 year old very frail, blind woman with deteriorating memory;
- Lives in poverty in a small 1 bedroom basement apt.
 - Provides a home to 53 year old unemployed son who has longstanding mental health issues
- Police called after son had a violent outburst with Mrs. B. that left her with a fractured foot, rib and severe bruising;
- Mrs. B has a history of refusing support and is refusing to press charges against her son

Reconceptualizing “need” and ‘support’

DO: [Attempting to summarize and clarify] So then, what is more important [than getting help for yourself] is...your contact with your son and that you are able to continue in your role of taking care of him?

MB: Absolutely. 100%

DO: So having somebody step in, even if they were to step in and try to protect you, that’s not really what you want?

MB: No. I don’t need that...

DO:.. That’s not the help you want?

MB: NO! [adamant voice] I don’t need that.

DO: So, is it that you want to still to be able to

MB: [Interrupting] to be Victor’s mother! I want to be there for him.

DO: So to be there for him?

MB: Absolutely

DO: [Clarifying an earlier message] Doing things like being able to help him take care of things...you want to be able to help him?

MB: Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely [Forceful tone]

DO: And your contact with him, and having him involved in your life is more important to you than...?

MB: Than Anything.

DO: Than even your own physical safety?

MB: Absolutely

Relational Lens: A different set of questions

- ◆ How is the exercise of autonomy restricted because of the relational context?
- ◆ How is the capacity for autonomous decision-making corroded because of relational context?
 - ◆ Learned helplessness, or internalization of negative self-identity?
- ◆ How can autonomy be enhanced (within this context?)
 - ◆ How can the relationship with the support professionals be used strategically?

Addressing Power Dynamics

- ◆ Recognizing how power dynamics limited ability to express 'choice'
- ◆ Within familial (and community) context
 - ◆ Maintaining 'face' in community
 - ◆ Protecting all members in the family
- ◆ Within assessor/person-being-assessed relationship
 - ◆ Social location power imbalances
 - ◆ Responding to different agendas

Understanding Mrs. Wilson's story through a relational lens

- ◆ Draw on the ideas of a relational lens to help you understand what is happening with Mrs. Wilson?
 - ◆ How does it help?
 - ◆ Where are the questions?

Application to Understanding Mrs. Wilson

◆ See Case Overview

Some Conclusions Relational

- ◆ A relational conception of autonomy calls us to revisit traditional approaches taken to understanding decision-making competence, availability of options, decision to disclose abuse, and what a 'reasonable' response is;
- ◆ Focuses intervention on re-conceptualizing 'need' and 'support' in a way that may be more consistent with the older Adult's way of making sense of her world as a relational being;
- ◆ It suggests the need for intervention to address power dynamics:
 - ◆ Within familial and community context
 - ◆ Within assessor/person-being-assessed relationship