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Perspectives on elder abuse in the Netherlands

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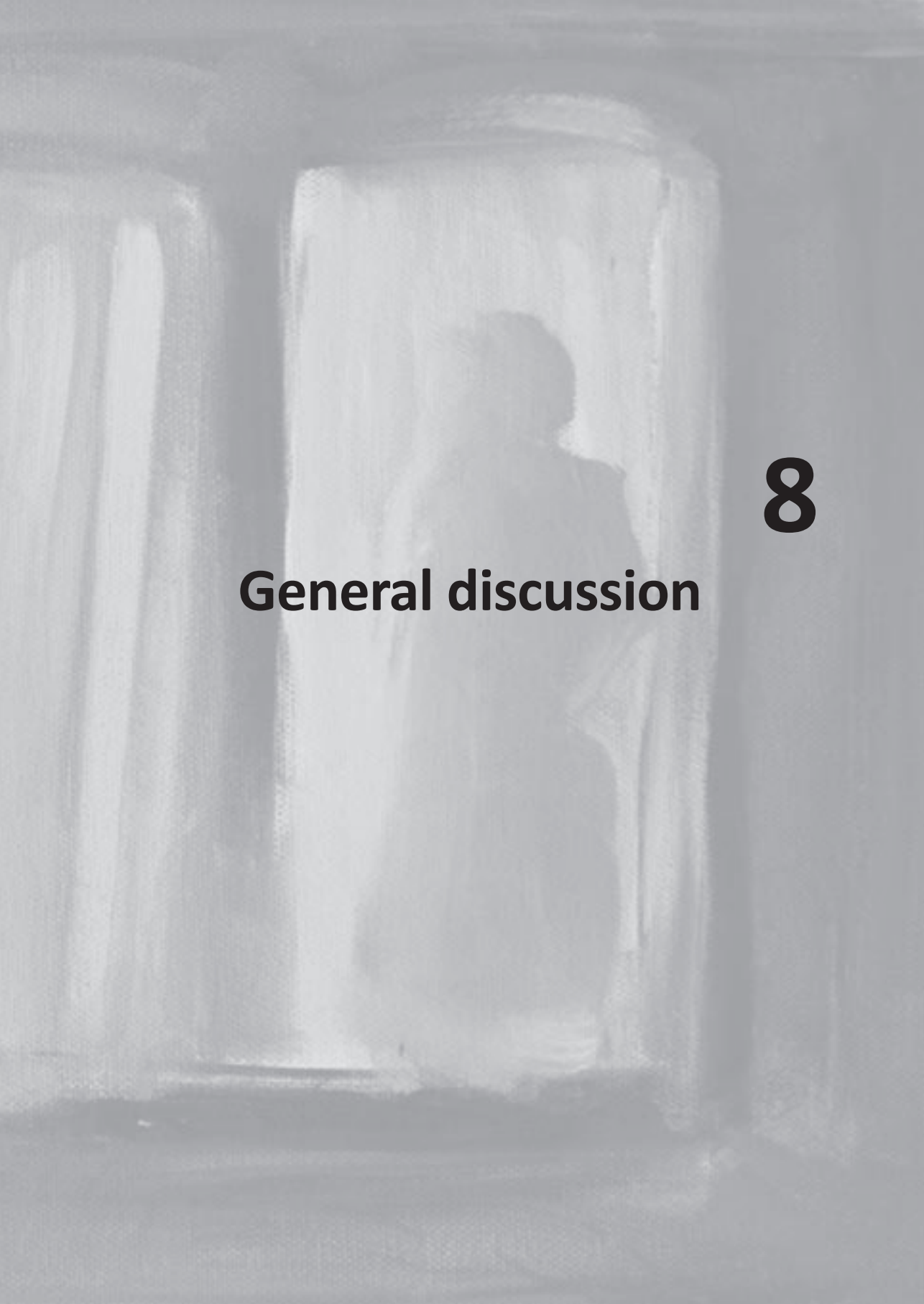

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General discussion

Elder abuse is a field in need of framing and conceptualization. Definitions of elder abuse and explanations for its occurrence are important building blocks that need to be explored in order to conceptualize and understand elder abuse. A variety of definitions of elder abuse that currently exists creates definitional disparity therefore we do not know which definition to adhere to. Perceptions and views of different groups involved in elder abuse, and their possible implications, are not known. In this thesis, we investigated these building blocks by analyzing the existing definitions of elder abuse and discussing diverse perspectives on the etiology of elder abuse of experts and other professional groups, older persons and victims of abuse.

Definitions of elder abuse

Debates on the definitions of elder abuse have been ongoing, during and even now as this study is coming to a close. There is no agreement on one, comprehensive and uniform definition of elder abuse (Anetzberger, 2005; Manthorpe, Penhale, Pinkney, Perkins, & Kingston, 2004; Bonnie & Wallace, 2003). The absence of a common definition of abuse, and therewith a variety of definitions of elder abuse for different purposes is often described in the literature as "definitional disparity" (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 1997). This creates difficulties in developing a solid knowledge base in the field of elder abuse. The questions that are often raised in relation to this are: do we need one common definition of elder abuse and what elements should it incorporate? Is there a difference between various definitions of elder abuse?

Different definitions of elder abuse

Some definitions of elder abuse focus on the possible consequences of abuse. At the heart of other definitions are actions and behaviors that help to define the abusive situation. The other definitions, in contrast, focus on risk factors that influence the occurrence of abuse (Erlingsson, 2007) or, rather are used rather in a specific setting or with regard to the specificity of the situation (National Research Council, 2003). All these definitions emphasize the importance of particular elements such as effects of abuse, risk factors or certain behaviors that are considered as abusive, and are quite narrow and subsequently limit the context of abuse and circumstances under which it can occur.

Some studies propose to include in the definition of elder abuse concepts such as intentionality, harm, responsibility, blame, and vulnerability (Erlingsson, 2007; Hudson, 1991; Phillips, 1996). However, this list of the elements of elder abuse is not as exhaustive as other important considerations, for instance, settings in which abuse occurs, relationship with the perpetrator and actions that can be considered as abusive. Other key elements found in several definitions of elder abuse are a trusting relationship, violation and "harmful effects" (Hudson, 1991; Bonnie & Wallace, 2003; Department of Health, 2000; WHO, 2002). All these elements should also be taken into account for these kinds of definitions to be fully inclusive. The list of elements of the definition of elder abuse is non-exhaustive, it

does not give clear answers and raises even more questions like: can abuse only happen in relationships where there is an expectation of trust? Must elder abuse be only intentional action? Do only vulnerable older persons suffer from abuse?

The definition for research

To resolve some of the definitional disparity in the research field of elder abuse that often lead to diverging results and has hampered comparative understanding of the phenomenon), we proposed to adhere to the WHO definition (WHO, 2002) – at least in research and policy-making. This will aid in the development of effective policy, legislation, prevention and intervention strategies. It will also allow comparative studies, for instance of prevalence rates and their underlying factors. The WHO definition is a lexical, broad and comprehensive definition that encompasses different behaviors constituting abuse and the settings in which it occurs. It is well known and widely used and our suggestion is to consistently adhere to this definition. This definition focuses on the interactions and trusting relationship between victim and perpetrator and widens the context of the abusive situation (WHO, 2002). The choice of the WHO definition will not solve all the problems or answer all the questions described above but it is a step forward to defining the phenomenon of elder abuse for research purposes.

The definition for professional practice

However, a definition such as that of the WHO is too broad to be used in a professional practice setting, as it contains too many elements which need further specification to help professionals identify and intervene in situations of abuse. The definition used by professionals should be concrete and allow them to work with and clearly identify elder abuse and set boundaries to the phenomenon. It must guide professionals and help them to understand the characteristics of a particular situation. Therefore, it should also reflect the reality of dealing with abuse and fit with the cultural and social context of the professional practice.

Disadvantages of having two definitions

We cannot ignore the fact that having two definitions of elder abuse can have disadvantages. For instance, it can create a bigger gap between research and practice, as they will originate from different definitions. It may make it difficult to use the findings, implications and recommendations from research in professional practice since they will be based on a different definitional framework than the one used by practitioners. Instead of bringing better understanding and clarity this can even complicate the dialogue between research and practice. Can this discrepancy be resolved by adhering to one definition of elder abuse that will be common for both research and practice? Taking into account the fact that elder abuse is a complex phenomenon that is usually defined differently depending on the setting, it is complicated and unrealistic to have one definition of elder abuse that can be

used simultaneously for different settings such as research or policy making, and professional practice. Thus it makes more sense to separate these settings and try to adhere to two definitions of abuse discussed above, albeit consistently.

Views of our participants

Through further exploring the views of our participants, experts, professional groups, older persons and older victims of abuse, different elements of the definitions of elder abuse identified in the literature were established as also relevant to them. However, distinctive elements in the definitions of older persons have a strong focus on physical violence and intentionality, both of which are not prominent in current definitions of abuse. This shows that non-abused older persons understand abuse differently than it is described and defined in existing literature and we also found this in our research among experts and professionals in the field. This emphasis on physical violence and the centrality of intentionality hints that older persons wait for evidence of abuse that is palpable and provable. This seems to be important for older persons to ensure reports of elder abuse will not be doubted or ignored. The strong emphasis on visible evidence of abuse that prevailed in the definitions of non-abused older individuals can be explained by how they described and experienced their marginalized position in society. To be taken seriously, taking into account that they feel somewhat sidelined, they feel the need for clear and visible proof of abuse to be heard, believed and noticed.

Types of abuse are often in the focus of elder abuse definitions described in the literature and distinguished by our analysis of the definitions discussed above. Our elder participants, both non-abused older persons and older victims of abuse, also distinguished different types of abuse. However, for older individuals with no prior experiences of abuse, other types of abuse than physical abuse were mentioned less often. This is in contrast to professionals, experts and also of older victims, who defined a variety of types of abuse, such as psychological abuse, financial abuse and neglect as well as a combination of different types of abuse.

Thus to answer the questions raised in the beginning we can conclude that the complexity and diversity of elder abuse does not make it possible to have one definition of elder abuse that can be used in all settings. Therefore, we advise to adhere to two definitions of abuse mentioned above. Moreover, we need to incorporate the perceptions, views and definitions of various groups involved in elder abuse: professionals, researchers, policy makers, older persons and victims to be able to obtain an understanding of elder abuse that will enable the development of an elder abuse definition.

Explanations of elder abuse

Until recently, in elder abuse studies the main focus was on the intra-individual factors that played a role in the occurrence of abuse, together with the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. It is only recently that more substantial attention has been paid to sociocultural factors (Anetzberger, 2004; Biggs et al., 1995; Burnight &

Mosqueda, 2011; Phillips, 1986; Pillemer, 1986). Our participants also discussed interpersonal factors in the occurrence of abuse, but according to them the role of societal factors was even more significant.

Interpersonal factors in the occurrence of abuse

Both victims of abuse and non-abused older persons discussed interpersonal factors that can play a role in abusive situations. These included dependency of older persons on the perpetrator and vice versa and power and control imbalances. The notion of reversed and mutual dependency was prominent in different perceptions of elder abuse by professional groups, experts and older persons. This notion implies that not only can older victims be dependent on their abusers, but perpetrators can also be dependent on their victims. This important finding gives an additional meaning to the concept of dependency than usually described in the literature on elder abuse and family violence at large as mutual dependency. This shows that in the process of the occurrence of abuse it is necessary to analyze and recognize not only factors that are related to the victim, but also to the perpetrator as they can play a crucial role in abuse.

Societal factors of abuse

The participants in this study paid more attention to societal factors than other factors. This included the disadvantaged position of older persons in society resulting in disrespect toward older persons and their devaluation. These ideas were extensively discussed by victims and non-abused older individuals. The individuals most crucially involved in elder abuse, older persons themselves, therewith imply that society is explicitly or implicitly responsible for the occurrence of abuse. This finding coincides with the findings of a Spanish study of Garcia (2003) that suggest that elder abuse is tolerated by society and remains invisible. Other studies have stressed that the organization of institutions, and also the socio-political system underlying it, could be responsible for or, indeed permitting abuse (Biggs & Haapala, 2013; Göergen, 2002; WHO, 2002). This important finding shows the need for more thorough and systematic consideration of the role of society in the occurrence of elder abuse.

This finding is further evidenced by issues such as changes in society and dependency and vulnerability of older persons that were identified in the perspectives on elder abuse of all the different groups involved in this study. Indeed, our participants considered current societal changes, especially in regard to the position of older persons, decreases in social control and emphasis on individual responsibility as principles that led to and – speculatively – increased the occurrence of abuse. Thus, in the exploration and discussion of perspectives of various groups involved in elder abuse, the societal explanation that was given to abuse played an essential role.

This interpretation of abuse as a societal phenomenon was also replicated in the explanations of experts and other professionals involved in the field of elder

abuse who frame and explain abuse as a societal problem bringing forward principles of individualism, independence and responsibility prevalent in current society. Vulnerable older persons cannot be of great value or importance in such a neoliberal society. This shows that society itself somehow puts older vulnerable persons in a dependent position which may allow abuse to occur. These perspectives in some way resemble the ones of non-abused older individuals who emphasized the important role of ill-attainable norms around productivity, individualism, personal responsibility, efficiency in current society and therewith a devaluation to unnecessary older persons. Older persons see abuse as something prevalent in society, as something that is allowed or permitted by society and that can also be justified by such a society. Even though experts and other professionals also focus on societal factors of abuse, such as social control and responsibility, and current societal changes, they rarely mentioned a disadvantaged position of older persons in society. These older persons' explanations of abuse represent their experiences that are obviously different from the ones of the experts and professionals. It also implies that although in the past years research has focused on personal and interpersonal dynamics, and have therewith constructed elder abuse foremost as an individual and inter-individual problem, we should consider reframing elder abuse as a societal problem, thereby also shifting the focus of research and practice. And it shows that we must not disregard societal factors in the understanding of abuse and accept abuse as a social issue and take into account the role of society, its norms, values, prevailing principles and images and position of older persons in such society.

System abuse

In the different chapters of this thesis, it becomes evident that the participants of our study including experts, professionals and, in particular, older persons, alluded to occurrences of abuse that we could not categorize among the commonly distinguished types of abuse. Our participants believed that the system itself permits abuse by creating the conditions in which abuse can occur. We proposed a new type of abuse that we call system abuse (chapter 7). This abuse results from the organization and practices in institutions of our society, and expresses itself in broader societal abuse. Neoliberal principles prevailing in current society are also part of today's healthcare system which focuses on independence, personal autonomy and responsibility. An integration of these principles in the health care and social welfare system brings forward earlier discussed issues of vulnerability of older persons, their powerlessness against these systems and disadvantaged position of older person in current systems and society. It seems inevitable to put system abuse at the same level as other types of elder abuse to allow an awareness of the abuse felt by older individuals.

Contribution of current study

The current study contributed to the conceptualization of elder abuse by exploring, comparing and linking together definitions and explanations of abuse of various groups involved in elder abuse. This illustrated that these groups have notable

differences as well as similarities in their perceptions of abuse and this affects upon what they define as abuse, what they consider appropriate action for abuse and on how they view the context of elder abuse. By including persons who are directly involved in elder abuse as well as potential witnesses and reporters as research participants, this study enabled the understanding and framing of elder abuse from various unique perspectives. It created a bridge between definitions in the literature and real life perceptions that showed what really matters to the people involved in elder abuse.

We also reviewed the variety of existing definitions of elder abuse that have been proposed over the years and the included elements, and boiled these down to two definitions. In this way, this study hopes to contribute to more uniformity and comparability in the field of elder abuse that may strengthen the impact of research and practice across contexts.

The exploration of different perspectives on elder abuse enabled understanding abuse in the ways professionals, experts, older persons and victims see and experience it. Salient in the framing of elder abuse by experts and professionals was the focus on environmental factors that they regarded as responsible for the occurrence and continuation of elder abuse. Non-abused older persons understood abuse as foremost physical violence that is performed intentionally. In addition, older victims identify a situation as abusive depending on the expected acceptability of the types of abuse experienced, the expected stigma and the relationship of the perpetrator with the older person. Furthermore, all the participants saw mutual dependency of the perpetrator and the victim as an important factor in the etiology of elder abuse.

This study drew attention to societal factors that were identified by older individuals and older victims as crucial variables in their explanations for the occurrence of abuse. We emphasized the importance and the need for considering these perspectives on elder abuse by proposing system abuse as a separate, and additional, type of abuse. Moreover, through our in-depth exploration of perspectives, we enhanced understanding of the way older persons perceived their position in our society that turned out to be seen as marginalized and disadvantaged.

We believe the current study contributed to the conceptualization of elder abuse by showing, analyzing, and comparing different perspectives on elder abuse and thereby created a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of abuse that enables a closer convergence between the views of those directly involved in elder abuse and those investigating and studying it. This will allow the field to make a step forward theoretically, as it furthers the development and understanding of frameworks that aim to understand the occurrence and continuation of abuse on the basis of perspectives that were previously not taken into account. It also contributes to a practical step forward, as it gives the opportunity to consider and implement these perspectives in practices of prevention and intervention.

The current study helped to situate elder abuse in the wider field of family violence. Delving into diverse perspectives on elder abuse made it evident - and confirmed

previous studies (Anetzberger, 2004; Bennett, Kingston, & Penhale, 1997; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Podnieks, 2008; Wallace & Roberson, 2011; Hyde-Nolan & Juliao, 2012; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2006) - that certain concepts used to explain the etiology of elder abuse are similar to ones in the field of family violence. However, our study made clear that core concepts such as vulnerability and dependence have specific and additional meanings in elder abuse. Indeed, the concepts of dependency and vulnerability are situated in particular in divergent social expectations of maturity and independence and dependence at the same time, mutual dependency, and ambiguity surrounding these concepts show how these concepts have a different meaning in explaining elder abuse in contrast to how they are commonly used in explanations of family violence at other stages of life. This implies that there is a need for a recognition and acknowledgement of elder abuse as a separate form of abuse in the field of family violence. At the same time it proves its' important place in the wider field of family violence by showing how concepts commonly used to explain family violence at other stages of life [such as dependency, vulnerability, social isolation, power and control imbalances, stress, history of violence] show at least some family resemblance to how our participants use these concepts to explain elder abuse.

Limitations of current study

The findings of current study are based on interviews with only some representatives of the older population in the Netherlands (that may be considered a relatively small sample), therefore they may not be generalizable to the whole population of Dutch older residents, all victims of abuse, and to other countries. Further research is needed to establish the relevance of the current study in other contexts.

However, as the study conducted was a qualitative study, generalizability and validity are different for the evaluation of qualitative research. Both are determined not on the basis of their representativeness for the larger population to which the group studied belongs to, as with quantitative research, but rather on the basis or whether the theory developed can be exported beyond the specific context studied. The question then is whether the findings in current study and the explanatory variables provided can be exported to older individuals in similar situations. Given that other scholars have found similar findings in different contexts, as discussed in the discussions of the chapters, we can assume that indeed this is the case.

One of the possible limitations of current study is that we did not fully use the process of triangulation, in particular triangulation of methods and researchers. Triangulation strengthens a study by studying the same phenomenon by different methods (Patton, 2001). Triangulation of data collection and data analysis was used, but not in all aspects of data collection and analysis. As described above, older persons and experts were both interviewed and participated in the focus groups. The professionals were both observed and participated in focus groups. Besides, systematic searches of the literature were used in defining elder abuse (chapter one) and explanatory frameworks (chapter six). During data collection two researchers conducted the focus groups to establish triangulation of observers.

As for triangulation of data analysis, focus groups (eight) were transcribed and two researchers, YM and JL, coded the transcripts. The first transcripts with the coding of the interviews with non-abused older persons were cross-checked by two researchers. The rest of the interviews were transcribed and coded by one researcher with recurrent discussions with a second researcher (JL). Thus, during the whole process of transcription and coding another researcher was consulted and gave feedback.

Moreover, to enhance external validity, and adhering to principles of relevance, we intentionally included participants from different settings: individuals living independently, in residential care facilities and in nursing homes. This way we ensured the participation of older individuals from diverse social backgrounds, with different health statuses and in diverse living arrangements. As a result, we were able to capture the diversity of opinions and views of various groups of older persons, even though we may not necessarily have covered all perspectives and perceptions.

A further limitation of current study is that one researcher solely conducted interviews. Multiple researchers could have added alternative perspectives, backgrounds and yield a more complete picture of the phenomenon of elder abuse. On the other hand, having one sole interviewer did ensure that interview-bias – the differential effect each interviewer may have – was reduced given that the same interviewer interviewed all interviewees.

Another limitation that needs to be mentioned is that we did not conduct follow-up interviews with all interviewees. A few follow-up interviews were conducted with non-abused older persons, but the majority of them were not open and ready for another interview and did not want to discuss issues related to elder abuse again. They felt enough had been said, perhaps also because they considered it a taboo subject (see chapter six). With victims of elder abuse the follow-up interviews were not possible to conduct as for them it was extremely difficult to tell their story to the researcher, they were still experiencing the effects of abuse and even those who were successfully coping with abuse and its effects. Older victims did not wish to relive their experiences, and as outlined above a trust relationship was essential. Although the primary responsible researcher YM built up contacts with a small number of older victims after the interview, and talked to them several times, they did not wish to recurrently discuss their experiences with abuse.

Future studies and recommendations

This study developed a basis for future studies on elder abuse. Professionals and policy makers can use the findings of the current study for the development and implementation of a reporting system for elder abuse, prevention and intervention strategies, policy making and program development.

Our findings clearly show that different groups involved in the field of elder abuse perceive elder abuse as a general societal problem. Other studies have also found that various groups perceive elder abuse as a problem stemming from

structural societal factors, in particular issues of disrespect, ageist attitudes or changes in social roles (WHO, 2002; Taylor et al., 2013). They argued that changing social values and attitudes have led to a general lack of respect to older individuals. In addition to what we have found, the study of WHO (2002) found that with the changes in social roles, older persons became care recipients rather than caregivers, and this created situations in which older persons ended up abused or neglected. In a Swedish study by Erlingsson et al. (2005), older persons mentioned societal factors that possibly lead to elder abuse on a family level, including changes in family structures that manifested in increasing amount of divorces, geographic distances between generations and social isolation of older persons, and on a societal level, changes in health care and policies and age discrimination. These findings show that in other countries attention was paid to societal factors of abuse and demonstrates that the Dutch case is not exceptional. They acknowledge the influence societal factors may have on abuse.

It is therefore logical that an intervention directed at preventing elder abuse will have to target general changes in society, both on a macro level in society, on a meso level in how different generations interact and view each other, and on a micro level within families. This will require changes in attitudes and behavior, changes in perceptions on old age and older persons and changes in the position of older persons in our societies. Obviously, this is not an easy task. It requires the acceptance and integration of ageing in society, it requires valuing the strengths of older persons and it requires an honest discussion about the ageing process. Considering this, we propose promoting a positive image of older persons using role models, social media campaigns and increasing involvement of older persons in community life and society. Furthermore providing people with information about ageing will enable a better understanding and acceptance of the ageing process and challenges related to it.

Future studies

The perspectives of perpetrators are not often included in studies of elder abuse. However, as our findings show, the relationship between victim and perpetrator is crucial in situations of abuse. For instance, the involvement of close family members in abuse had an influence on the choice of coping strategy of older persons. If we include research on perceptions and perspectives of perpetrators of elder abuse in future studies we will be better able to understand and explain the interaction between victim and perpetrator, as well as understanding victims' help-seeking behaviors and coping strategies and perpetrators' behavior, motives and reasons.

There are a limited number of studies that focus on potential reporters, in particular older persons, of elder abuse. We know very little about factors that can influence reporting of elder abuse and motives of potential reporters. We have started this debate showing that non-abused older persons perceive abuse differently, and may therefore also detect and report abusive situations only in later, evident stages of abuse. Further increasing the knowledge about whether and

how this reporting behavior is influenced and understanding of these factors will enable a fuller mapping of reporting behavior of potential reporters, as well as their reasoning for reporting particular abusive situations or refraining from doing so.

Moreover, help-seeking and reporting behavior of older victims of abuse is also understudied. We still do not fully understand why older victims refrain from reporting abuse. Although our study gave some indications (in that older victims help-seeking behavior depends on the type of abuse and the relationship with the perpetrator), more in-depth qualitative studies that include the perspective of perpetrators could shed light on this interaction. We do not know much about the possible combinations and relations between various types of abuse experienced, different perpetrators involved, and coping strategies used to deal with these situations. Studies are needed that can explain how one type of abuse, or a particular perpetrator can have an impact on the choice of reporting and coping strategy of older victims.

Societal explanations of the occurrence of abuse by older participants can be a part of a rationale behind their reporting behavior and reasoning. As they see abuse as a social problem and society as responsible for abuse, their perceptions of the abusive situation and reporting of abuse will be affected by norms and values prevailing in society, societal changes and what is considered as acceptable or unacceptable behavior.

Recommendations

The findings of our study show that elder abuse causes a lot of negative feelings and emotions to older victims with which they cope in different ways. Shame plays a prominent role that influences both reporting and coping. Older individuals also suffer from self-blame, even after reporting, and find it difficult to pick up their lives again. Based on these findings, we recommend the initiation and organization of support groups, for example self-help groups for victims of elder abuse that can be coached or led by an experienced professional or peers with similar experiences. These groups can also include face-to-face conversations, empowerment training, and psychological support. Support and help for victims of abuse is also one of the foci of the action plan “The Elderly in Safe Hands” launched by the Dutch government (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports, 2011).

We recommend the involvement and inclusion of older persons in professional practices concerned with elder abuse. This will increase older persons’ participation and vital role in the decision making process surrounding elder abuse, encourage and educate them, and, at the same time may increase their reporting behavior. This could be accomplished by organizing special trainings and workshops on elder abuse for older persons and inviting them to meetings and gatherings related to the topic of elder abuse, including them in teams that deal with cases of abuse, and, initiating community volunteer groups of older persons. For instance, in the Netherlands, Rotterdam introduced a unique approach to elder abuse that involves local multidisciplinary elder abuse teams (WEDO, 2012). Such a team consists of

different specialists and professionals and is now more often used across the country and also commonly used in other countries such as the USA and Canada. It can be useful to include for example a representative of a community volunteer group to this team. This can first be initiated as a pilot and, following success, implemented on a larger basis.

As our study shows older persons' understanding of abuse is crucial for defining a situation as abusive and also impacts reporting of an abusive situation. One of the recommendations arising from this study is to develop educational materials, programs and trainings that includes the views and experiences of non-abused older persons and victims of abuse for professionals who work in the field of elderly care and have direct contacts with older persons.

Elder abuse is framed as a societal phenomenon by our participants. Older victims and especially non-abused older individuals see abuse as a societal issue for which we as a society are all responsible. However this responsibility has not yet been realized and understood by the general public. Thus, we need to update the current norms and values that permit widespread social tolerance of elder abuse to active social responsibility, one that will be visible and hold us all accountable. It is time to take responsibility, start acting and stop ignoring the voices of older persons.

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