Young and middle-aged adults' perceptions of elder abuse
Young and Middle-Aged Adults’ Perceptions of Elder Abuse

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Elder abuse has become a recognized form of intra-familial violence, with the abuse of elderly individuals now recognized as a serious problem that affects individuals, families, and communities at a rapidly growing rate (see DeCalmer & Glendenning, 1997). Although elder abuse occurs as frequently as other forms of domestic violence, reporting and detection rates of elder abuse are extremely low. For example, Giordano and Giordano (1984), Matlaw and Mayer (1986), and Salend, Rosalie, and Kane (1984) noted a reporting rate of only 1 out of 6 cases.

Several factors may affect the reporting and detection of elder abuse. First, some elderly individuals who have been abused may be reluctant to report abuse, having been dependent on the abuser for their basic survival or having strong bonds of affection toward the abuser (Penhale, 1993). In addition, some elders may fear being removed from the home or being institutionalized (Cassell, 1989; Hickey & Douglass, 1981; Penhale, 1983), whereas others fear abandonment (Hooymans, 1982; Steinmetz, 1978). Inadequate data may account for the difficulty in the detection of elder abuse by professionals. A lack of knowledge (Penhale, 1993; Rosenblatt, Cho, & Durance, 1996) as well as differing criteria for reporting (Tatara, 1993) may also contribute to the problem (Blakely, Dolon, & May, 1993). In this light, a lack of consensus about elder abuse among medical and psychiatric professionals, legislators, researchers, and legal experts may stem from the pursuit of different social aims by each group (Valentine & Cash, 1986). For example, the legal community may emphasize criteria that justify legal intervention, whereas clinicians may emphasize factors that relate to eligibility criteria for services. Moreover, public and professional perceptions of elder abuse differ (Gebotys, O’Connor, & Mair, 1992).

Most definitions of elder mistreatment involve physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional abuse (Douglass, 1983; Lau & Kosberg, 1979; Saveman, Norberg, & Hallberg, 1992), whereas components such as financial and material abuse have been added more recently. Johnson (1995) suggested that psychological abuse may be especially difficult to define because it lacks concrete behavioral criteria. Elder abuse has also been defined in terms of neglect (Anderson, 1981; Johnson, 1979), with the distinction between passive and active neglect being ambiguous given that the component of intent must be clear in defining active, but not passive, neglect (Douglas, 1983; Goldstein, 1995; Johnson, 1995). An additional barrier to detection may be professional or societal attitudes toward older persons (Penhale, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1993).
et al., 1996), wherein ageism may hamper the recognition of elder abuse as a serious problem (Matlaw & Mayer, 1986).

Generally speaking, individuals' perceptions of abuse may also impact their judgments regarding abusive behavior. Howe, Herzeberger, and Tennen (1988) found that a history of abuse affects individuals' perceptions of abuse. Zaidi, Knutson, and Mehm (1989) noted that individuals from abusive backgrounds were more likely to endorse potentially injurious disciplinary responses as such than those from less abusive backgrounds. Arias and Johnson (1989) found that persons with a history of experienced family violence viewed marital aggression less negatively than those with no such history. Variations in the meaning of abuse were noted by Phillips and Rempusheski (1986) and by O'Toole and Webster (1988) regarding the role identities of the victim and the perpetrator. Such variations are likely to affect not only perceptions of abuse but also perceptions of its severity and the willingness to report family violence and abusive behaviors (Kean & Dukes, 1991; Koski & Mangold, 1988; O'Toole & Webster, 1998; Snyder & Newberger, 1986). Hudson (1994) found level of education to influence perceptions of elder abuse among middle-aged and older adults.

To date, most research investigating perceptions of family violence is rooted in the child abuse literature (Johnson, 1995). In this light, several factors have been identified as influencing perceptions and reporting of child abuse: (a) socioeconomic status and race of the abusive parent (Hampton & Newberger, 1985; Nalepka, O'Toole, & Turbett, 1981), (b) age of the victim (Finkelhor, 1984; Groenewald & Giovannoni, 1982), (c) gender of the victim (Korbin, 1981), (d) social attractiveness of the parents (Osborne, Hinz, Rappaport, Williams, & Tuma, 1988), (e) occupation of the parents (Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979), (f) gender of the witness (Dukes & Kean, 1989; Skifferenton, Bell, Olasov, Calhoun, & Ladd, 1983), and (g) age of the witness (Dukes & Kean, 1989; Kean & Dukes, 1991).

In contrast, little research has examined the factors influencing perceptions of and attitudes toward elder abuse. Given that middle-aged individuals (adult children) are the typical abusers (Chen, Bell, Dolinsky, Doyle, & Dunn, 1981; Giordano & Giordano, 1984; Hooyman, 1982; Pierce & Trotta, 1986; Powell & Berg, 1987; Sengstock & Barrett, 1986), it is therefore possible that such persons do not view elder abuse as seriously as would younger-aged individuals, who are less likely to be caring for an elderly parent or grandparent. In this light, Johnson (1995) found that although most elderly persons and caregivers each defined elder abuse in terms of neglect, elderly persons were more likely to endorse the passage of laws prohibiting elder abuse and were more likely to perceive the family as being most neglectful. In contrast, caregivers viewed legal agencies as most likely to be neglectful.

Because little research has examined the factors influencing perceptions of and attitudes toward elder abuse, and given that abusers of elderly persons are typically middle-aged adults, our study explored the extent to which middle-aged adults' perceptions of behaviors that could be considered abusive are unique, relative to those of younger adults, who are less likely to be caring for an older relative and are therefore less likely to have direct knowledge of elder abuse in their lives. Because an individual's perceptions of what constitutes abuse and its severity is also likely to be affected by one's identity (age, gender, and family role), as well as the behavior of the victim and abuser in the abusive situation (see earlier), this study also explored the impact of age, gender, and family status of the perpetrator and victim as well as the impact of history of experienced family violence on respondents' perceptions and definitions of abusive behavior.

If variations in what behaviors constitute elder abuse are identified, such findings might better enable those charged with the development of policy to more carefully define elder abuse from a relativistic rather than an absolute perspective, leading to more accurate estimates of the extent of elder abuse. This may be especially critical to the development of programs of both a preventative and ameliorative nature targeting both perpetrator and victim. A clearer understanding of these variables would assist in the identification and reporting of likely abuse cases.

Methods

Participants

A total of 623 individuals voluntarily participated in this study. Participants consisted of undergraduate college students enrolled in introductory psychology classes at a large southwestern university (n = 422) and a group of community-residing middle-aged adults from the same geographic area (n = 201). To recruit potential young adult and middle-aged volunteers, either announcements about the project were made in undergraduate classes or persons learned about the study through the local newspaper or church bulletins. Given selective volunteering bias inherent in most adult and gerontological research, the samples of young and middle-aged adults in this study may not accurately represent either population. Volunteers may therefore hold different opinions or be more knowledgeable about elder abuse than their non-volunteer counterparts.

The young adult sample included 164 men and 258 women with a mean age of 20.1 years (SD = 3.8, range = 17–30). Most were single and reported both parents to be still living. Most reported having at least one grandparent living and having a close relationship with this grandparent. Contact with older individuals varied, with most participants reporting contact at least several times per year.

Middle-aged participants included 79 men and 122 women with a mean age of 41.7 years (SD = 4.8, range = 38–51). Average level of education was 15.8 years (SD = 2.1). Most were married, and the
majority had at least one parent living and reported a close relationship with either or both parents. Most reported that their parents and grandparents lived in separate households. Average contact with older individuals was at least once a month. Fifty-four of the participants (26.9%) reported providing assistance to an older family member; of these, 22 (40.7%) reported that their older family member suffered from a physical health problem.

Instruments

Elder Abuse Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions Scale—Revised (EAABIS–R).—The EAABIS–R was used to assess elder abuse attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. The EAABIS–R was based on work by Reinberg and Hayslip (1988), wherein an initial form of the measure, the EAABIS, was developed and consisted of four subscales: (a) Attitude—Support, assessing attitudes toward providing helpful behaviors to older people (e.g., attitudes toward helping an older person get dressed); (b) Intentions—Support, assessing intentions of providing helpful behaviors to older people (e.g., intention of helping an older person dress); (c) Attitudes—Abuse, assessing attitudes toward abusive behaviors toward older people (e.g., attitudes toward hitting an older person); and (d) Intentions—Abuse, assessing intentions of abusive behaviors toward older people (e.g., intention of hitting an older person). Pilot study data for the EAABIS indicated that it had adequate reliability and validity to assess attitudes and behavioral intentions of elder abuse in a college population (as = .70-.96). Test–retest reliability coefficients (4-week interval) ranged from .45 to .69, where Intentions—Abuse was the least stable of the four subscales. Correlations between the Attitudes and Intentions subscales suggested convergent validity, wherein relationships were found between Attitudes—Support and Intentions—Support (r = .62) and between Attitudes—Abuse and Intentions—Abuse (r = .48). In contrast, no statistically significant relationship was found between Attitudes—Support and Intentions—Abuse or between Intentions—Support and Intentions—Abuse, indicating discriminative validity for the Support and Abuse scales. The four subscales of the EAABIS were minimally correlated with social desirability (rs = .12-.27; Reinberg & Hayslip, 1988).

For our current study, we wrote additional directions for the EAABIS (see Reinberg & Hayslip, 1991) so that all items were referenced regarding both a general target (older people in general) and a known, specific target (the participant’s parent for middle-aged persons, or the grandparent for young adults). Moreover, the Abuse and Support scales were combined in each case to reduce the effects of fatigue and practice as well as potentially reduce the influence of social desirability on abusive items by embedding them within the context of providing varying types of aid and support to older people.

A total of six subscales thus comprised the EAABIS–R: General Target Elder Abuse Attitudes, General Target Elder Abuse Intentions, Specific Target Elder Abuse Behaviors, Specific Target Elder Abuse Attitudes, Specific Target Elder Abuse Intentions, and Specific Target Elder Abuse Behaviors. Each subscale consisted of the same 50 items; different instructions preceded each set of items. Respondents rated each identical set of behaviors in the EAABIS–R in terms of both tolerance for potential abusive behaviors (attitudes) and the potential appropriateness of such behaviors (intentions) directed at older persons in general and at a parent or grandparent. In addition, respondents indicated whether or not they had ever responded to an older person or a parent or a grandparent in a way described by the behaviors on the EAABIS–R, which also provided an alternative measure of history of violence by focusing on the respondent’s history of participatory violence in contrast to the measure of a history of experienced violence (see later).

Scale anchors for the EAABIS–R (rated on a 1–5 scale) were: never, hardly ever, sometimes, quite often, and all of the time, respectively. Responses were coded so that higher scores indicated more positive attitudes, more positive intentions toward older persons, and more positive behaviors (less participatory violence) directed at older persons. Alpha reliabilities of each of the subscales in the present study were as follows: .91 for General Target Elder Abuse Attitudes, .92 for General Target Elder Abuse Intentions, .93 for Specific Target Elder Abuse Behaviors, .93 for Specific Target Elder Abuse Intentions, and .91 for Specific Target Elder Abuse Behaviors.

Adaptation of the Severity of Violence Against Women Scale (SVWS).—We used an adaptation of the SVWS (Marshall, 1992) in this study to measure experienced violence. This SVWS is a self-report instrument designed to measure violence against women and provides a more sensitive measure of family violence than the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979) in that it includes an increased number of items about symbolic and physical aggression. Factor analysis of SVWS (Marshall, 1992) showed the behaviors to represent threats of mild, moderate, and serious violence. Alpha coefficient reliabilities for the nine factors accounting for 81% of the variance in severity ratings in a sample of 706 college-age women all exceeded .92. Correlations between scores within dimensions representing levels of severity averaged .80. We found similarly high alphas and within-dimensions correlations in a separate sample of 238 community-residing women. Severity ratings were also consistently higher among community-residing women, who were older (M age = 40.8) than were those in the college-age sample (M age = 20.3). The average correlation between physical and emotional severity ratings was .39 across samples, suggesting that they assessed different aspects of violence against women (see Marshall, 1992). No further validity data for the SVWS were reported.

For our study, we adapted the original scale to assess the extent of current or past abusive behav-
iors toward the respondents by the respondents’ parents, stepparents, or legal guardians. Six items involving sexual aggression were removed, given that these factors involved in sexual abuse may be different from those involved in physical abuse. In addition, as elder abuse may involve behaviors that are not found in other forms of family violence, 22 additional potentially abusive behaviors specific to care-taking situations replaced these sexual abuse items. Respondents rated each of the resulting 62 behaviors on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 4 (never, once, twice to several times, and more often). Responses were totaled, with those above the median classified as reflecting high experienced family violence, and those below the median as low experienced family violence. This was done for the SVWS and the EAABIS–R as appropriate (see later).

In addition, we created alternate forms of the adapted SVWS to contextualize behaviors committed by either a middle-aged or older male or female abuser toward either an older male or female victim. For our study, middle-age was operationally defined as ages 35 to 50, whereas older adult was defined as 60 and above. Again, 22 items about care-taking situations replaced the sexual abuse items to maintain continuity within the study.

We assigned participants randomly to the following 10 conditions, which covered a wide range of family abuse–victim pairings:

1. Middle-aged male child abuser and older female parent victim,
2. Middle-aged female child abuser and older female parent victim,
3. Middle-aged male child abuser and older male parent victim,
4. Middle-aged child abuser and older male parent victim,
5. Older female spouse abuser and older male spouse victim,
6. Older male spouse abuser and older female spouse victim,
7. Older male relative abuser and older male relative victim,
8. Older female relative abuser and older male relative victim,
9. Older female relative abuser and older female relative victim,
10. Older male relative abuser and older female relative victim.

In each condition, respondents rated each of the 62 behaviors in terms of severity of consequences, degree of abusiveness, and willingness to report. Behaviors were rated using 4-point Likert scales in each case: Regarding perception of severity, ratings were very severe consequences, moderately severe, mildly severe, and no severe consequences; for the willingness to report, potential ratings included definitely would report, probably would report, probably would not report, and definitely would not report; for abuse, the continuum was definitely abuse, probably abuse, probably not abuse, and definitely not abuse. In each case, low scores represented more severity, greater likelihood of reportability, and greater abusiveness.

**Procedure**

In our study, respondents participated in a single session of about 1 hr in length. Participants completed a questionnaire packet containing an informed consent form, a demographic data sheet, the EAABIS–R, and the adapted SVWS particular to one of the 10 abuser–victim conditions. In each case, judgments regarding potentially abusive behaviors were made regarding their severity of consequences, reportability, and abusive quality.

To differentiate physical and psychological abuse on the SVWS, we conducted an interrater reliability procedure in which four PhD-level psychologists rated each of the behaviors on the adapted SVWS as either physical or psychological in nature. Behaviors were determined to be physical or psychological if three of the four individuals agreed on their inclusion in either category (see Table 1). All data were analyzed using these physical and psychological categories.

**Results**

A series of analyses of variance (ANOVA)s was carried out using several independent variables, which in addition to respondent age and gender, were alternatively (a) from the adapted SVWS, the extent of experienced childhood violence; and (b) from the EAABIS–R, the extent of participatory violence toward a general target, or extent of participatory violence toward a specific target. Dependent variables (from the EAABIS–R) included both general and specific-target attitudes, intentions, and behaviors regarding elder abuse. Because exploratory analyses revealed that perceptions of abuse did not vary by family status of either the abuser (child vs spouse vs relative) or the victim (parent or grandparent vs spouse vs relative), we collapsed data across these dimensions before conducting further analyses.

**Experienced Family Violence and Respondent Age**

Results suggested that perceptions of elder abuse varied by whether experienced violence was defined as having been a victim of family abuse or having been a perpetrator of elder abuse. When experienced violence was first defined as having been a victim of past family abuse, the main effect for experienced family violence was not statistically significant. However, a main effect of respondent age was statistically significant for abusive behaviors directed toward older persons in general, \( F(1,411) = 18.35, p < .01 \). In addition, a main effect for respondent age was also significant for abusive behaviors directed toward a specific older person (parent or grandparent), \( F(1,411) = 12.12, p < .01 \). For behaviors directed toward a general older person, the middle-
Table 1. Abusive Behaviors Rated as Physical or Psychological in Nature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Abuse</th>
<th>Psychological Abuse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Throw an object</td>
<td>Hit or kick a wall, door or furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold down, pin in place</td>
<td>Throw, smash or break an object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Push or shove</td>
<td>Drive dangerously with person in the car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shake or roughly handle</td>
<td>Shake a finger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grab suddenly or forcefully</td>
<td>Make threatening gestures or faces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scratch</td>
<td>Act like a bully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull hair</td>
<td>Threaten to destroy something belonging to the person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twist arm</td>
<td>Threaten to harm or damage things cared about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spank</td>
<td>Threaten to destroy property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bite</td>
<td>Threaten someone cared about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slap with palm of hand</td>
<td>Threaten to hurt the person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slap with back of hand</td>
<td>Threaten to kill self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slap around the face and head</td>
<td>Threaten to kill the person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit with an object</td>
<td>Threaten with a weapon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punch</td>
<td>Threaten with a club-like object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kick</td>
<td>Act like want to kill the person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stomp</td>
<td>Threaten with a knife or gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choke</td>
<td>Read personal mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burn with something</td>
<td>Use Social Security checks without the person's knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a club like object on</td>
<td>Call insulting names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beat up</td>
<td>Threaten to lock in room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a knife on</td>
<td>Use savings without permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withhold food</td>
<td>Prevent form receiving visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tie to bed to punish</td>
<td>Lock in room to punish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit with fist</td>
<td>Threaten to tie to the bed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tie to bed to prevent from doing something</td>
<td>Do not bathe or dress when necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withhold medication</td>
<td>Sell personal property without permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enter room without knocking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lock in room to prevent from doing something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Force to wear diapers if incontinent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do not visit when asked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do not call when asked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threaten to hit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Talk about in the person's presence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...and other similar entries...

Aged sample reported being less abusive relative to the younger sample. However, regarding a specific target (parent or grandparent), middle-aged respondents reported having been more abusive than did young respondents (see Table 2).

In addition, there was a two-way interaction between history of experienced family violence and respondent age, $F(1,411) = 5.63, p < .02$, for attitudes toward abuse directed at a specific older person (parent or grandparent). Middle-aged respondents with low experienced violence were more condemning of abuse toward a specific target ($M = 212.32$), whereas middle-aged persons with high experienced violence were less condemning of abuse toward a specific target ($M = 206.57$). In contrast, young adult respondents with high experienced violence were less condemning of abuse toward a specific target ($M = 203.58$), whereas those with low experienced violence were more condemning of abuse toward a specific target ($M = 208.28$).

**Participatory Family Violence and Respondent Age**

When experienced violence was defined as performance of violent behaviors toward older persons generally, there was again a statistically significant main effect of respondent age, $F(1,415) = 21.45, p < .01$, on behaviors directed toward a specific target (parent or grandparent; see Table 2). Middle-aged adults reported behaving in a more abusive fashion toward a specific target.

There was also a main effect of participatory violence toward a general target on intentions, $F(1,415) = 25.11, p < .01$: attitudes toward a specific target, $F(1,415) = 26.32, p < .01$, and behaviors directed toward a specific target, $F(1,415) = 236.97, p < .01$. Those respondents with low levels of participatory violence toward older persons generally had more negative intentions toward a general target, more negative attitudes toward a specific target, and were more abusive toward a specific target (see Table 3).

When experienced violence was defined in terms of performance of violent behaviors toward a specific person (parent or grandparent), there was a main effect of respondent age on performance of abusive behaviors toward older persons generally, $F(1,415) = 26.96, p < .01$. In this case, young adults were more likely to tolerate abuse toward older persons in general than were middle-aged adults (see Table 2).
There was also a main effect of performance of violent behaviors directed toward a specific older person on intentions toward a general target, $F(1,415) = 232.51, p < .01$; attitudes toward a specific target, $F(1,415) = 23.26, p < .01$; and on behaviors directed toward a general target, $F(1,415) = 232.51, p < .01$. Those respondents with low participatory violence against a specific older person (parent or grandparent) had more negative behavioral intentions toward a general target, more negative attitudes toward a specific target, and were more abusive toward a general target (see Table 3).

There was also a two-way interaction between respondent age and history of abusive behavior toward a specific target, $F(1,415) = 232.51, p < .01$, for behaviors directed toward a general target. Both middle-aged ($M = 163.75$) and young ($M = 160.92$) adults with low participatory violence toward a specific target were more abusive (where such scores indicated greater abusiveness) toward older persons in general. However, middle-aged adults with high participatory violence toward a specific target were less abusive ($M = 189.12$) toward older persons in general. In contrast, young adults with high participatory violence toward a specific target were, comparatively speaking, more abusive ($M = 177.62$) toward older persons in general.

### Table 2. Perceptions of Elder Abuse by Respondent Agea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Young Adults</th>
<th>Middle-Aged Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse—general target</td>
<td>169.19a</td>
<td>14.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse—specific target</td>
<td>180.52a</td>
<td>17.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse—specific target (parent or grandparent)</td>
<td>180.45b</td>
<td>17.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse—general target</td>
<td>169.27c</td>
<td>14.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Higher scores indicate less abusiveness.

*aCrossed with participatory violence.

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### Table 3. Perceptions of Elder Abuse by Experienced and Participatory Family Violencea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentions—general target</td>
<td>200.78b</td>
<td>19.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes—specific target</td>
<td>201.92a</td>
<td>22.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse—specific target</td>
<td>166.21b</td>
<td>14.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentions—general target</td>
<td>201.55b</td>
<td>19.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes—specific target</td>
<td>202.21b</td>
<td>22.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse—general target</td>
<td>162.26b</td>
<td>14.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Higher scores indicate more positive intentions, more positive attitudes, and less abusiveness.

*aParticipatory violence toward older persons generally.

*bParticipatory violence toward specific older persons (parent or grandparent).

### Table 4. Means for Respondent Age x Respondent Gender x Age of the Abuser Interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Young Men</th>
<th>Young Women</th>
<th>Middle-Aged Men</th>
<th>Middle-Aged Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse</td>
<td>30.12</td>
<td>30.31</td>
<td>28.94</td>
<td>27.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAA</td>
<td>33.53</td>
<td>30.88</td>
<td>30.26</td>
<td>30.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Severity</td>
<td>31.02</td>
<td>32.28</td>
<td>32.59</td>
<td>29.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAA</td>
<td>36.98</td>
<td>34.48</td>
<td>32.64</td>
<td>35.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Report</td>
<td>34.17</td>
<td>35.56</td>
<td>35.31</td>
<td>33.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAA</td>
<td>42.90</td>
<td>37.45</td>
<td>37.62</td>
<td>39.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Abuse</td>
<td>56.17</td>
<td>58.33</td>
<td>51.44</td>
<td>48.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAA</td>
<td>62.31</td>
<td>58.15</td>
<td>51.17</td>
<td>53.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Severity</td>
<td>60.61</td>
<td>64.78</td>
<td>61.75</td>
<td>56.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAA</td>
<td>69.20</td>
<td>67.80</td>
<td>58.45</td>
<td>64.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Report</td>
<td>71.02</td>
<td>73.36</td>
<td>72.78</td>
<td>68.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAA</td>
<td>78.69</td>
<td>74.08</td>
<td>71.81</td>
<td>73.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Physical Abuse = quality of physical behaviors; physical severity = consequence severity of physical behaviors; psychological report = willingness to report psychological behaviors; physical abuse = quality of psychological behaviors; psychological severity = consequence severity of psychological behaviors; psychological report = willingness to report psychological behaviors; MAA = middle-aged abuser; EA = elderly abuser.
ness, \( M = 31.07 \); severity, \( M = 34.88 \); reportability, \( M = 39.18 \); see Table 4).

The interaction between respondent age, gender of the respondent, and age of the abuser was also statistically significant for all physical abuse measures, \( F(1,383) = 5.78, p < .02 \). Simple effects analyses (\( p < .05 \); see Table 4) indicated that for quality of physical behaviors, middle-aged and young women reported minimal differences in their perceptions of physical behaviors when age of abuser was taken into account. Although middle-aged men reported that age of the abuser did not influence their perceptions of abusiveness, such persons rated behaviors perpetrated by middle-aged and elderly abusers as similar in quality in defining abuse. In contrast, young men were more likely to rate physical behaviors as abusive when the perpetrator was middle-aged compared with being elderly.

Although middle-aged women rated physical behaviors perpetrated by middle-aged abusers as having more harmful results than the same behaviors perpetrated by elderly abusers, young women rated physical behaviors perpetrated by middle-aged and elderly abusers as having similar levels of severity of consequences. Young men rated physical behaviors to be more harmful when perpetrated by a middle-aged abuser, whereas middle-aged men reported that age of the abuser did not influence their perceptions of severity.

Results for willingness to report physical behaviors indicated that middle-aged women were more willing to report such behaviors perpetrated by middle-aged rather than elderly abusers. In contrast, young women did not perceive that age of the abuser influenced their willingness to report physical behaviors. Young men were more willing to report behaviors committed by middle-aged perpetrators than by elderly perpetrators, whereas middle-aged men were equally willing to report middle-aged and elderly perpetrators of physical violence.

Psychological Abuse

For perceptions of psychological abuse, there was a main effect for respondent age, \( F(1,383) = 14.17, p < .01 \). Middle-aged individuals were more likely to label psychological aspects of abuse as such than were young respondents. In addition, middle-aged adults perceived these behaviors to be more harmful to the victim than did young adults. Finally, middle-aged respondents were more willing to report such behaviors when compared with young adults (see Table 4).

Main effects for age of abuser indicated that respondents found psychological behaviors committed by middle-aged abusers as more abusive, more harmful, and more reportable, \( F(1,383) = 5.57, p < .02 \), than behaviors committed by an elderly abuser (see Table 4).

The interaction of respondent age, sex of the respondent, and age of the abuser was also statistically significant for all dimensions of psychological abuse, \( F(1,383) \geq 6.14, p < .01 \). For quality of psychological behaviors (see Table 4), simple effects analyses (\( p < .05 \)) indicated that middle-aged women rated behaviors committed by a middle-aged abuser as more abusive. In contrast, young adult women reported that age of the abuser did not influence their perceptions of psychological abusiveness. Young men rated psychological behaviors inflicted by a middle-aged abuser as more abusive than the same behaviors committed by an elderly abuser. In contrast, middle-aged men reported that age of the perpetrator had little influence on their perceptions of abusiveness.

For severity of psychological behaviors, middle-aged women rated psychological behaviors exhibited by a middle-aged abuser as more harmful to the victim. In contrast, young women rated behaviors committed by middle-aged and elderly abusers as similar in level of severity. Young men rated behaviors committed by middle-aged abusers as having more harmful results when compared with the same behaviors committed by elderly abusers, whereas age of the abuser was not important in middle-aged men's ratings of severity.

For middle-aged women, age of the abuser also influenced their willingness to report psychological behaviors, wherein such women were more willing to report middle-aged abusers than elderly abusers. In contrast, young women indicated that age of the abuser was of little importance in their willingness to report psychological behaviors. Young men were more willing to report behaviors committed by middle-aged abusers compared with those by elderly abusers, whereas for middle-aged men, age of the abuser did not impact willingness to report psychological behaviors.

Comparisons of Physical and Psychological Abuse

Exploratory repeated measures ANOVAs also indicated that regarding the nature of abuse, \( F(1,200) = 924.20, p < .01 \), individuals rated physical behaviors (\( M = 29.41 \)) as more abusive than psychological behaviors (\( M = 51.50 \)). Likewise, regarding the perception of severity, \( F(1,200) = 969.11, p < .01 \), physical behaviors (\( M = 32.80 \)) were viewed as more harmful than were psychological behaviors (\( M = 60.42 \)). Finally, regarding reportability, \( F(1,200) = 1183.14, p < .01 \), persons were more willing to report physical behaviors (\( M = 36.66 \)) compared with psychological behaviors (\( M = 71.48 \); see Table 4).

There was also a main effect for the dimensions of physical abuse (quality vs severity vs reportability), \( F(2,766) = 67.37, p < .01 \), and for the dimensions of psychological abuse (quality vs severity vs reportability), \( F(2,766) = 200.73, p < .01 \) (see Table 4). Respondents were more willing to label physical behaviors as abusive (\( M = 30.34 \)), but were less likely to view the behaviors as having harmful results to the victim (\( M = 33.37 \)) and were even less likely to report these behaviors (\( M = 37.28 \)) to proper authorities. Similarly, with regard to psychological
behaviors, respondents were most likely to perceive such behaviors as abusive \((M = 55.07)\), less likely to view psychological behaviors as having harmful results \((M = 63.22)\), and even less likely to report such behaviors \((M = 73.06)\).

**Discussion**

This study was designed to examine the impact of age and gender of the respondent, gender and age of the victim or perpetrator, and history of experienced or participatory violence on perceptions of elder abuse. This is based on the assumption that such perceptions are best viewed in the context of the relationship between perceiver characteristics and the nature of both the abuse itself and victim characteristics.

**Respondent Age and Perceptions of Elder Abuse**

These results indicate that respondent age impacts perceptions of elder abuse; that is, middle-aged and young respondents view elder abuse differently. Although this was not true for physical abuse, partly to the fact that physical violence in the family has become well publicized, this was indeed the case for psychological abuse. Middle-aged adults were more likely to label such behaviors as abusive, found psychological behaviors to have more harmful results to the victim, and were more willing to report these behaviors than were young adults.

There are several possible explanations for this finding. First, young adults may perceive elder abuse similarly to child abuse; that is, the child abuse literature suggests that many individuals do not view psychological behaviors as harmful to the victim (Baer & Wathey, 1977; Junewicz, 1983). It is also possible that young adults, who are unaware of the needs of elderly persons, do not understand the impact of psychological behaviors (e.g., talking about the elderly person in his or her presence, or using his or her money without permission). In contrast, middle-aged adults who are older and more likely to be caregivers, and who have more direct experience with and more knowledge about aging, consequently recognize these subtle behaviors as potentially damaging to the victim. Second, it is possible that the middle-aged sample identified to a greater extent with the elderly victim than with the perpetrator; that is, they may have responded to the questions as potential victims rather than as potential perpetrators, or they may have viewed their own parents as possible victims of abuse, thus influencing their perceptions of abuse. Third, it is possible that the educational level and socioeconomic status of the middle-aged sample contributed to their perceptions (see Hudson, 1994). Because the majority of respondents were highly educated, middle-class individuals, they may have been more knowledgeable and therefore more sensitive to subtle forms of abuse. Finally, it is possible that the differences found between the middle-aged and young samples were cohort related rather than age related; for example, the samples may have varied in their perceptions of abuse because of experiences specific to their generations. For example, the middle-aged sample may be more sensitive to the effects of psychological abuse, having grown up in the “consciousness-raising” era of the 1960s or having been sensitized to women’s rights issues.

The data here also suggest that age of the abuser influences perceptions of quality, severity, and reportability of physically and psychologically abusive behaviors directed toward elderly persons. Middle-aged respondents rated abusive behaviors perpetrated by a middle-aged abuser as more abusive, severe, and reportable than the same behaviors perpetrated by an elderly abuser. It is possible that middle-aged perpetrators are viewed as more powerful and having more control than elderly perpetrators, contributing to the perception that middle-aged perpetrators, when compared with elderly perpetrators, are more abusive and harmful to their victims. This, in turn, may enhance the likelihood that individuals will report abusive behaviors. At the same time, these findings suggest that older abusers are perceived as less abusive; this bias ironically may lead to an underreporting of abuse when the perpetrator is elderly.

**The Influence of Respondent Age and Gender, and Abuser Age**

The interaction between respondent age, gender of the respondent, and age of the abuser indicated that middle-aged women judged middle-aged abusers more harshly than did young women. As women live longer and are often primary victims of elder abuse (Cash & Valentine, 1987; Chen et al., 1981; Lau & Kosberg, 1979; Pierce & Trotta, 1986; Powell & Berg, 1987), these women may be aware of their own vulnerability to abuse. As a result, they perhaps identified with the victim rather than the perpetrator of elder abuse. It is also possible that middle-aged women in this sample judged behaviors more harshly because of their sensitivity to spouse abuse, as most of the middle-aged women in the sample were married but most of the young women were single. Because of the increased publicity that marital violence has received over the past decade, marital status may have influenced perceptions of elder abuse in this study.

There was also a difference between middle-aged and young male perceptions of abuse based on the age of the perpetrator, as young men rated both physical and psychological behaviors perpetrated by middle-aged abusers as more abusive, harmful, and reportable than the same behaviors committed by an elderly abuser. Thus, young men may view middle-aged perpetrators (who would be of similar age to their parents) as potentially more dangerous to the victim, whereas middle-aged men may view middle-aged and elderly perpetrators as equally harmful to an elderly victim on the basis of life experience or knowledge of...
aging. It is also possible that young men may have been victims of child abuse perpetrated by a middle-aged parent, contributing to their harsh judgment of middle-aged perpetrators.

Physical Versus Psychological Abuse

In addition, the data suggest that perceptions of physical abuse are different from those of psychological abuse. Respondents rated physical behaviors as significantly more abusive, harmful to the victim, and reportable compared with psychological behaviors, regardless of the gender or age of the victim and perpetrator. This finding is consistent with work on family violence, which suggests that physical abuse is seen as more detrimental to the victim than is psychological abuse (Baer & Wathey, 1977; Junewicz, 1983). Less obvious, but equally serious forms of victimization (e.g., verbal abuse or rejection) often remain undetected and therefore explain a lack of sensitivity to the harmful effects of such psychological abuse. Thus, it may be that physical behaviors were rated as more abusive, harmful to the victim, and reportable because of obvious physical damage to the victim that physical abuse can create. In addition, the lack of clarity about the parameters and consequences of psychological abuse compared with physical abuse may influence individuals’ perceptions (see Johnson, 1995).

Family Violence and Perceptions of Elder Abuse

Finally, our study suggests that history of violence mediates perceptions of elder abuse. Although history of childhood violence did not generally influence perceptions of elder abuse, a history of participatory violence toward elderly persons did so. Respondent age and target specificity, however, appear to mediate this picture. Middle-aged and young individuals who had been victims of abuse did respond differently to a nonspecific older person than to parents and grandparents. In general, middle-aged respondents viewed themselves as less abusive toward a nonspecific older person and more abusive toward a parent. In contrast, young adults viewed themselves as more abusive toward older persons in general and less abusive toward a grandparent.

Experienced Family Violence

When a history of family abuse was taken into account, middle-aged adults with low experienced violence held more critical attitudes about abuse toward a parent, whereas those with high experienced family violence held less critical attitudes regarding such abuse. For young adults, those with low experienced violence held more abusive attitudes toward a grandparent, whereas those with high experienced childhood violence held less abusive attitudes toward a grandparent. It is possible that middle-aged adults may have more realistic perceptions of family interaction based on more contact and history with an elderly parent compared with those involving young adults and their grandparents. In addition, ageism may contribute to the fact that young respondents saw themselves as more abusive toward an older person in general. College students, in particular, have been found to hold more negative stereotypes about aging and the elderly (Doka, 1985–1986; Miko, 1987). Thus, it is possible that the young adults’ negative stereotypes about older people contributed to their viewing older persons as more deserving of abuse.

Participatory Family Violence

When experienced violence was redefined as past performance of abusive behaviors toward an older person in general or toward a parent or grandparent, all persons (irrespective of age) with low levels of participatory violence saw themselves as having more negative intentions, exhibiting more abusive attitudes, and reporting more abusive behaviors toward specific elderly persons. In contrast, those persons with high levels of participatory violence had fewer negative intentions, less abusive attitudes, and reported perpetrating fewer abusive behaviors toward specific elderly persons. These surprising findings might be explained by the fact that respondents were fearful of responding honestly regarding abusing another person, born of a concern about confidentiality or fear of possible prosecution. In addition, some respondents may have been trying to present themselves in a more favorable light by responding in a socially desirable fashion.

Limitations of This Study

Several limitations must be recognized regarding this study. First, the sample, for the most part, consisted of individuals who were middle-class Caucasians between the ages of 18 and 50. Future research should address this shortcomings by including a more diverse group of individuals, such as those varying in race and ethnicity, to enhance the generalizability of these findings. In this light, future research might also explore perceptions of elder abuse among noncollege samples of young adults. Moreover, older adults’ perceptions of elder abuse may vary from those of young and middle-aged persons. Such work may provide further clues about the relationship between age of the abuser and the type of abuse. A second limitation speaks to the suspected response bias observed here in reporting one’s attitudes toward elder abuse or about one’s role as a potential abuser in the past. In this respect, cultural awareness of the pejorative effects of all forms of family violence may have prompted some individuals in this study to respond in a manner consistent with societal norms.

Despite these limitations, these data speak to a perspective on elder abuse that emphasizes its contextual, relativistic nature. Perceptions of elder abuse are essential to gaining an accurate picture of its
occurrence and severity and are critical to the development of interventions that are both timely and effective at targeting both the victim and the abuser. Perceptions are dependent on not only the characteristics of the perceiver but also the nature of both the perpetrator and the victim. Moreover, these data highlight the history of both experienced and participatory family violence as determinants of perceptions of what behaviors constitute abuse, their anticipated consequences to the victim, and the likelihood of their being reported.

Last, these findings highlight individuals’ relative ignorance of psychological abuse in contrast to physical abuse, perhaps in part because of the difficulty in identifying observable consequences to the victim of psychological abuse. Equal sensitivity to the psychological dimensions of elder mistreatment may be especially important, for example, in that it may aid in the early and accurate identification of elderly persons who are self-deprecating as a consequence of the effects of such abuse. Such elder persons may be more prone to depression and self-destructive behavior (see Miller, 1979).

Ultimately, improving knowledge about the contextual aspects of elder abuse can raise the public’s awareness of its many variations, contributing to the early and accurate reporting of its possible occurrence. This can do nothing but enhance the quality of life for those elderly persons who are the victims of such mistreatment.

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