

Emotional Dependency: a Risk Factor for Elder Abuse

Literature Review

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In Australia, the problem of elderly abuse first received attention from policy makers during the 1980's. Two strains of thought existed among researchers, with one group viewing it as related to domestic violence, and the other describing it as more complex, unrelated to domestic violence but distinctly associated with increasing dependency in old age (Gordon & Brill, 2001:184). By the 1990's consensus was reached amongst policy makers that elderly abuse could be defined as neglect and financial, physical, emotional and sexual abuse of elderly people within the family, community and institutions. However, the underlying causes of elderly abuse are still being debated and remain unresolved today (Gordon & Brill, 2001:184).

Different theoretical perspectives have been developed in order to understand and respond to elderly abuse. From a feminist perspective, elderly abuse is seen as an *extension of the power and control dynamics* characterised within domestic violence. Furthermore, where adult children of the elderly are the source of abuse, the *learned violence hypothesis* is used to explain the intergenerational transmission of violence within families (Gordon & Brill, 2001:186). In contrast, the alternative perspective is that elderly abuse occurs as a result of *caregiver stress* whereby the effects of caring for a dependent person cause significant stress for the carer which leads to abuse. Therefore, dependency in old age may be regarded as a precursor to elderly abuse (Gordon & Brill, 2001:186-187).

Ockelford et al. (2003: 1455) conducted a study and randomly selected nearly 200 women over the age of 60 (149 were Irish, 50 Italian and 49 were British). These women were interviewed and asked about their living arrangements and whether they were currently subject to any abusive behaviours. In the study 23% reported experiencing some form of maltreatment. It was also noted that the proportion of women reporting abuse rose from 18% among those aged 60 to 69 to 34% among those aged 70 to 79 (Ockelford, 2003:1456). Furthermore, the researchers found that none of the women in the Irish or Italian samples indicated that they had been abused before the age of 60 and only 10% of the British women had been a victim of abuse before the age of 60 (Ockelford, 2003:1456). These studies therefore indicated that elderly abuse is age specific and that increasing dependency is a precursor for maltreatment.

However, abuse only occurs in a small number of families where there is a dependent elderly person, therefore, dependency alone cannot adequately account for all cases of elderly abuse (Pillemer,

1985:147). Wolf et al. (as cited by Pillemer, 1985:147) surveyed the records of reports of abuse of three agencies over a 6 month period and concluded there is a 'web of mutual dependency' between abused and abuser. Philips (1983, as cited by Pillemer, 1985:147) also found that elderly people subject to abuse were no more dependent physically or mentally compared with a sample of elderly people not experiencing abuse. Hwalek et al (1985, as cited by Pillemer, 1985:147) found that the financial dependency of the caretaker was a significant factor in elderly abuse. It is therefore recognised that dependency alone is not the only risk factor for elderly abuse and consequently there has been a movement among researchers towards an 'integrated' theory which draws on both feminist and dependency perspectives.

Limitations

There is no current research on emotional dependency in old age and previous studies on this issue have only been undertaken within the context of domestic violence. Domestic violence literature is predominantly from a feminist perspective and predominantly examines the emotional dependency aspects of relationships together with reasons why women stay in unhealthy relationships. Domestic violence literature therefore pays little attention to dependency or stress from the care giver's perspective.

Furthermore, both men and women are subject to elderly abuse. For example, research by Barnett et al (1997, as cited by Penhale, 2003:168) suggests that 68% of victims of elderly abuse are women and 32% are men. Notwithstanding this, studies have shown that the experiences of elderly abuse differ between men and women with *women more likely to experience violence* and men more likely to *experience psychological or passively neglectful behaviours* (which may not result in any treatment for the male victim) (Penhale, 2003:168).

One proven risk factor for elderly abuse is living with someone for a long period of time and as such it has been found that abuse occurs more frequently in the home than in institutions and that close family members are usually the perpetrators of the abuse (Penhale, 2003:169). That said, there is no literature available on emotional dependency between adult children and the elderly and this paper will focus on the primary relationships only.

Emotional Dependency

According to Hoogstad (2008:134), individuals who have a strong sense of 'self' are emotionally independent and place healthy boundaries between themselves and other people. In contrast, individuals who are emotionally dependent do not have a strong sense of self and are therefore over-reliant on others as their source of identity and as such go to extraordinary lengths to preserve and maintain those relationships (Rathus & O'Leary, 1997:159). As a result, numerous studies have shown that emotionally dependent men may engage in controlling and restrictive behaviours which limit their partner's autonomy (Rathus & O'Leary, 1997:159). Furthermore, emotional dependency is increasingly being recognised by researchers as being a primary precursor to violence within relationships (Kane et al., 2000:18).

For example, Murphy et al. (1994:729) interviewed 24 men seeking help treatment programme for physical abuse against their partners, 24 men who were in happy relationships and 24 men in unhappy relationships to assess their levels of emotional dependency on their partners. The authors of the study found that physically violent men scored extremely high levels of emotional dependency compared with happy and unhappy people in relationships and therefore concluded that emotionally dependent individuals were more likely to resort to violence than individuals who were in unhappy relationships (Murphy et al., 1994:729). The researchers also measured levels of fears of abandonment and self-esteem and found that physically violent men had lower self-esteem and higher abandonment fears, even when compared to those in unhappy relationships (Murphy et al., 1994:729). They also found that the men who used violence against their partners usually focused on the relationship with their partners to the exclusion of many other social contacts (Murphy et al., 1994:733).

In Australia, more recent studies have been undertaken which seek to compare levels of aggression and emotional security to assess whether emotional dependence presents a greater risk than aggression in domestic violence incidents.(Kane et al., 2000:16). The researchers selected three groups of men; men who were undertaking counselling for domestic violence, men who they perceived as having high levels of natural aggression (players in AFL football teams), and men who were working in the community sectors (Kane et al., 2000:17). The study found that the AFL players and violent men had higher levels of aggression compared with the men working in the community sector, but that violent men had higher levels of emotional insecurity compared with both groups. Therefore, high levels of emotional

dependency rather than high levels of aggression is viewed as a significant precursor for physical violence (Kane et al., 2000:16).

The link between a weak sense of self and an over-reliance on others to meet basic emotional needs has been found in numerous studies in the context of domestic violence. Several studies report that emotionally dependent people are more likely to experience jealousy and have high fears of abandonment and rejection (Rathus & O'Leary, 1997:18). Furthermore, researchers have found that emotionally dependent persons report low levels of self esteem and some idealise others and minimise their own strengths and abilities (Overholser, 1997:289). Also, emotionally dependent people often view their partner as the 'sole source of love, support, intimacy and problem solving' and have few other social contacts (Murphy et al., 1994:733).

According to psychologist Bornstein (1992, as cited by Overholser, 1997:289), such traits are caused by a person having negative reflections of the self. Therefore, where violence and controlling behaviours are resulting in abuse in relationships, many researchers have shown that the underlying cause of such behaviours are not solely based on levels of aggression but act as a means of maintaining their own sense of self worth, identity and general functioning (Rathus & O'Leary, 1997:166).

All of the studies which have been referred to however contain some bias as they focus on men's emotional dependency, use participants whom are already identified as being abusive and rely solely on self reporting, which therefore limits the evidence that violent men are more likely than those in the general population to display emotional insecurity. Henderson et al. (2005:233) have addressed this limitation by studying both men and women and in particular by conducting a large study (128 participants, 68 women and 60 men, average age 37.4 years) across the general population. Further, the researchers controlled for bias in the participants' responses by arranging their questioning so that there would be no association between domestic violence and emotional dependency (Henderson et al, 2005:226). The finding of the research however was consistent with previous studies which show that there is a positive correlation between domestic violence and emotional dependency, and this study found that it occurs for both men and women and is bi-directional, i.e. both men and women's emotional dependency in the relationship contribute to the abuse (Henderson et al., 2005:225). The researchers noted however that while it was a risk factor for both sexes, emotionally dependent women were more likely to resort to hostility and withdrawal of emotional support and men more likely

to experience jealousy and controlling behaviours (Henderson et al., 2005:219). Therefore, as the research was conducted randomly across the population, their findings showed that emotional dependency presented a markedly increased risk of domestic violence (Henderson et al., 2005:219). Notwithstanding same, it is acknowledged that no single risk factor is responsible for every incident of abuse and in fact one study has shown that 23% of men committing domestic violence self-reported no negative view of self-esteem or insecurity (Babcock et al., 2000:402).

Furthermore, there is contradictory information regarding the relative strength of the risk factor that emotional dependency represents. For example, studies by Bornstein (2006:599) indicated that emotional dependency shows a strong, positive correlation for men to display abusive behaviours although for women it only plays a moderate role to the reasons why women stay in abusive relationships and that economic dependency presents a more significant risk factor (Bornstein, 2006:604). In contrast, Griffing et al. (2002) have indicated that emotional dependency is a greater risk factor than economic dependency. For example, Griffing et al. (2002:308) interviewed 90 women (average age 26.7 years) whom had left a physically violent relationship and who were residing in a refuge. They found that 66.7% had in the past returned to their partners after taking refuge in a shelter and that 73.3% indicated that their emotional attachment played a significant role in their decision to return to the relationship (Griffing et al., 2002:313). Further, the authors noted that previous research which concluded that economic risk factors outweigh emotional attachments were taken from a relatively small sample and given the results of their research conclude they are therefore controversial.

As stated previously the research which has been conducted is related to domestic violence and the focus has been on the younger population. Currently there are no specific studies which examine the role of emotional dependency solely in the context of elderly abuse. However, Zink et al. (2003:1431) have attempted to redress the lack of attention to elderly abuse and have undertaken a qualitative study of 36 women aged over 55, examining their reasons for remaining in abusive relationships which, while not specifically in the context of emotional dependency, highlights some of the issues older women face when experiencing abuse. For example, the authors of the study found that older women had more to lose by terminating a relationship as they have invested more years in their families and have less opportunity for education or acquiring job skills (Zink et al 2003:1434). Furthermore, they found that women in this age group reported strong feelings of commitment and responsibility for their

partners, “I can’t let him go to the dogs” (Zink et al., 2003:1437). Loneliness was an important factor with many women who raised concerns that due to their age they would be unable to find another relationship and would rather be abused than risk being alone; “I guess my fear of being alone is so strong that it’s... I’m willing to tolerate anything (abuse) to avoid it” (Zink et al., 2003:1438). Therefore, the emotional attachment may be stronger for elderly women and highlights why the concept of emotional dependency within the context of elderly abuse is an important one.

This literature review established that elder abuse has similarities to domestic violence although elder abuse has its own distinct dimensions. Further, there is no single risk factor which can explain all occurrences of abuse or people’s reasons to stay in such relationships. That said this review has highlighted that emotional dependency is a great risk factor for domestic violence and that elderly women may experience an increased risk of attachment due to the time invested in the primary relationship and the realities of loneliness in old age. However, there is no current research specifically in this area. Further, men are also subject to elderly abuse and in many cases of abuse the perpetrators have been family members (including adult children), however no research has been undertaken considering these factors and emotional dependency. This literature review has highlighted the lack of research, and the next step is to conduct primary research.

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