

## **Methodological Challenges in Elder Mistreatment Research**

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Elder mistreatment (EM) (abuse and neglect) has an estimated prevalence rate of 3.2% in the U.S. With the aging of Baby Boomers, EM is expected to increase. There is scant EM research. EM research with people of color is even rarer. In response to meager EM research, the National Research Council Panel to Review Risk and Prevalence of Elder Abuse and Neglect encouraged research to identify EM determinants, develop/evaluate clinical screening and case identification, and test preventive interventions (Bonnie, 2003). Methodological challenges in EM research include:

Sample heterogeneity Because abuse and neglect frequently co-occur, it may be difficult to recruit participants who have been subjected to a specific type of EM. Victim exposure to abuse and/or neglect varies, resulting in varied “dosage.” Because advancing age increases the risk for EM, victims often have co-morbidities (including dementia and depression) that may prohibit study participation or complicate data analysis.

Identification and recruitment of study participants EM perpetrators are most likely to be family members who live with victims. Perpetrators intentionally isolate the victim, making recruitment of study participants difficult. It is unlikely that victims will volunteer for studies, either because they fear punishment from the perpetrator, they are not well enough to participate, or they do not consider themselves to be “abused” or “neglected.” Denial, embarrassment, and culturally-based standpoints may also inhibit participation. One common point of entry for possible study participants is the emergency department (ED). ED personnel may not talk to eligible persons about a study because of a felt need to protect the victim. Other possible settings for identification of victims include home health and senior housing. When potential participants are identified, recruitment yield is low (10%). Barriers to recruitment in communities of color may include lack of access to the population, reticence to participate, and language barriers.

Legal considerations In most states, nurses are mandatory reporters of suspected abuse, neglect, or exploitation of vulnerable adults. Recruitment of EM victims whose suspected abuse has not been reported to Adult Protective Services (APS) presents a dilemma to the nurse researcher who is legally mandated to report the alleged victim to APS.

Protection of Human Subjects Because of the vulnerability of EM victims, meticulous safeguards must be in place for protection of human subjects. This often necessitates repeated submissions to multiple institutional review boards before approval is obtained.

Safety considerations Whether or not the victim is separated from the perpetrator after a report is made, the perpetrator may continue to be a threat to the elder’s safety. This presents possible safety issues for participant and researcher.

Conclusions Researchers must employ strategies to overcome methodological challenges in EM research, including development of study design to control for confounders; education of intermediaries about protection of human subjects and benefits to study participants; expansion of recruitment intermediaries to nurses in non-ED settings; collaboration with cultural brokers for research with communities of color; adaptation of human subjects protections from domestic violence research; and, use of safety strategies for participant and investigator, such as testing in clinical research centers.

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Bonnie, R.J. (2003). Elder mistreatment: abuse, neglect, and exploitation in an aging America. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.