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The conceptualization of mistreatment by older American Indians

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Abstract

The problem of how to conceptualize elder mistreatment goes back several decades, and is especially important for ethnic minority populations, who may have perspectives that differ from the dominant society. This community-based participatory research study, which examined perceptions of mistreatment by family among 100 urban and rural older American Indians, permits a rare glimpse into how Native elders themselves understand this issue. Here, good treatment was conceptualized in terms of being taken care of, having one's needs met, and being respected. We found relatively high standards for how elders should be treated—such as the belief that an elder's needs should be anticipated and met without the elder needing to ask—in the face of widespread accounts of the mistreatment of elders within the community, largely through various acts of financial exploitation and neglect. Substance abuse and culture loss were blamed for much of the elder mistreatment occurring in contemporary Native communities.

Keywords

Abuse conceptualization; American Indians; community-based participatory research; ethnic minorities; qualitative

Introduction

Culture plays a crucial role in the treatment of elders as well as how their treatment is understood (Anetzberger, Korbin, & Tomita, 1996; Bonnie & Wallace, 2002; Kosberg, Lowenstein, Garcia, & Biggs, 2005; Moon, 2000; Moon & Williams, 1993). Unfortunately, little is known about how contemporary American Indians—particularly Native elders themselves—think about what constitutes proper conduct toward older persons and its violation. To understand how mistreatment is culturally constructed, mistreatment must be placed in the broader perspective of normative and ideal comportment towards elders. This article presents findings from the qualitative component of a collaborative, mixed methods project on Native elder mistreatment in two settings, a rural reservation and a pantribal metropolitan area. Understanding how elders themselves perceive mistreatment is crucial to

developing effective strategies for the detection, intervention, mediation, and prosecution of financial exploitation, neglect, and psychological and physical abuse.

Conceptualization of the treatment of elders

Good treatment

Considerably more is known about how mistreatment is conceptualized than is known about cultural expectations for good treatment of elders. Filial piety in Asian cultures constitutes an exception. Associated with Confucian philosophy, it obligates the child to provide parental care, respect, and postmortem reverence (Barnhart, 1993). The relationship between filial piety and elder abuse has received considerable scholarly attention (Chang & Moon, 1997; Dong, Simon, & Gorbien, 2007; Moon & Williams, 1993; Yan, So-Kum, & Yeung, 2002). The notion that elders deserve respect is considered to be a core value in most Native America communities, although one that is believed by many Native people to be in decline (Jervis & Sconzert-Hall, 2012). Consider Weibel-Orlando's (Weibel-Orlando, 1989) summary of the classic ethnographic profile of the Native elder:

The older Indian became an elder: a person of substance and value, a person with inviolate dignity, a person held in great respect by his or her community members. Councils of elders were the active centers of tribal decision-making. Elders held places of prominence in governmental and political affairs. It was through the elders that the culture of the people was transmitted across generations. In the absence of a written tradition, the entire history, language, arts, and value system of a people were passed on to younger generations by the elderly through their oral tradition. (Weibel-Orlando, 1989, pp. 153–154)

The elder status, which is achieved rather than ascribed (automatically granted), persists in many contemporary Native communities (Weibel-Orlando, 1989), although altered by changes wrought by colonial and post-colonial disruptions (Jervis & AI-SUPERPPF Team, 2009; Weibel-Orlando, 1989). Ascertaining contemporary cultural beliefs about how elders *are supposed* to be treated is important when designing studies or services, for what is mistreatment but a serious violation of a community or society's cultural expectations?

Mistreatment

For several decades scholars have been asking how to best define elder mistreatment (Bonnie & Wallace, 2002; Kosberg et al., 2005; Phillips, 1983; Rabiner, O'Keeffe, & Brown, 2005). Arguably, cultural difference complicates any effort to assert that there is one universal standard for the humane treatment of elders, as it has been demonstrated that different groups conceptualize the proper treatment of older members of their societies in a variety of ways. Ranging from family disharmony in Norway to disrespect in India, to either institutionalizing (in China) to failing to institutionalize an elder seen as needing care (in Sweden), "abuse" is a relative term (Kosberg et al., 2005). Further, the ethnographic record shows that elders experience a continuum of locally normative treatment across the globe—ranging from great esteem and extensive support at one extreme to profound ridicule and even community-supported homicide on the other (Barker, 2009; Glascock, 2009). Mistreatment is not only a culturally relative construct but also a morally relative one in the

sense that cultural groups have their own notions of the “right” and “wrong” treatment of elders. It is crucial to understand how individuals and communities experiencing substandard or abusive treatment view it, since this ultimately affects many aspects of how these behaviors will be responded to and managed.

Notions of severity may also differ among ethnic/cultural groups. In a comparison of perceptions of elder abuse among 944 American Indians, European Americans, and African Americans using case vignettes, similar notions of abuse across groups were found (Hudson & Carlson, 1999a). However, American Indians classified the greatest number of vignettes as abusive and severe. Furthermore, in this same study, which utilized the Elder Abuse Vignette Scale (EAVS) and the Elements of Elder Abuse Scale (EEAS), American Indians more often rated verbal force (e.g., yelling and swearing) as mistreatment compared to the other groups (Hudson & Carlson, 1999a). American Indians were also more likely to view elder abuse as a societal problem rather than an individual problem (Hudson & Carlson, 1999b).

As Hudson and Carlson’s work demonstrates, ideas about “causation” are culturally influenced. In their qualitative study of two plains reservations, Maxwell and Maxwell (1992) identified a number of cases of mistreatment, primarily involving financial exploitation and neglect. Some Native elders believed that mistreatment would cease if the younger generations adhered to more “traditional” cultural norms. The authors’ recommendations, however, focused on the creation of greater economic opportunity for young people (Maxwell & Maxwell, 1992).

As this literature review demonstrates, much of the extant literature on Native elder abuse dates back to the 1990s and earlier. With the exception of an article derived from this study’s quantitative component examining the measurement of elder mistreatment among American Indians (Jervis, Fickenscher, & Beals, 2013), which focuses primarily on psychometrics, there is a dearth of current empirically based research on Native elder mistreatment—especially that focused on how this population understands abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

Setting and method

The Shielding American Indian Elders (SAIE) project examined cultural conceptualizations of the treatment of Native elders using a community-based participatory research approach, which promotes the involvement of communities in all stages of the research process (Jervis et al., 2013; Jones & Wells, 2007; Minkler, Blackwell, Thompson, & Tamir, 2003; Salois, Holkup, Tripp-Reimer, & Weinert, 2006; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006), including problem identification, project design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination. The project team consisted of 18 individuals comprising a range of expertise, including community experts with backgrounds in Native elder advocacy and abuse intervention (largely tribal members), as well as an interdisciplinary group of researchers with expertise in American Indian communities (Jervis & the Shielding American Indian Elders project team, 2009). The project team met regularly and made joint decisions about key aspects of the study.

The project team collectively developed and piloted this mixed methods study on elder physical abuse, psychological abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation. Here we report findings primarily from the qualitative component of the project. Quantitative study findings are reported elsewhere (Jervis et al., 2013). Through a series of deliberative discussions, the project team concluded that it would be important to situate survey findings regarding mistreatment in participants' cultural understandings of how elders should be treated. Moreover, the project team recognized a general lack of scholarly documentation of how Native elders perceived their own treatment by family. These open-ended questions about being treated well and poorly were developed as a result. Interviews, conducted by Native members of the project team, explored participants' ideas about what it meant to be treated well and poorly by family (self-defined, since "family" in Native communities frequently encompasses individuals who are not biological relatives). Participants were asked whether they knew of situations where elders were treated badly by family or whether they themselves had been treated badly (Table 1).

Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, team coded, and entered into the NVivo 9 qualitative software program (Qualitative Solutions & Research, 2010). Since these exploratory questions did not have fixed responses, participants tended to provide a variety of answers to any given question. A coding scheme was developed jointly by the research team, with a premium placed on emic (insider) perspectives and interpretations of phenomenon, in keeping with the ethnographic orientations that grounded the project. To develop the coding scheme, each team member independently reviewed the same randomly selected transcripts for emerging themes. These preliminary codebooks were then collapsed and refined, and then piloted with more randomly selected transcripts, upon which the codebook was further refined until theoretical saturation was achieved and no new codes were identified. Coded data were subjected to thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012). In determining themes, both frequency of occurrence (repetition) and topics that seemed to be particularly meaningful to participants (significance) were taken into account (Luborsky, 1994).

Sample

The project team collectively selected two data collection sites to participate in this study, a Northern Plains reservation and a metropolitan area in the south-central United States. Regional diversity as well as diversity with respect to rurality and reservation/nonreservation status was purposely sought out in order to capture possible differences and similarities in elder treatment across these factors. Approvals to conduct the research were obtained at each respective site through the designated local authority, as well as at the university's Institutional Review Board. On the Northern Plains reservation, a tribal elder center served as the primary base for identifying participants, while in the south-central metropolitan area Protestant Indian churches served this function. These locations were selected intentionally, as they were known sites in which elders tended to congregate within their respective communities. On both the reservation and in the metropolitan area, additional participants were located through snowball sampling, with referrals for new participants obtained from previous participants. Fifteen individuals who were invited to participate declined to do so, for a total N of 100 (50 from each data collection site).

Study participants ranged in age from 60 to 89 with a mean age of 70 (Table 2). Nearly 75% were female and roughly 50% were married/living as married. Participants were a relatively well-educated group, with the majority having educations extending beyond high school. The only statistically significant difference between study sites was current employment status, with considerably more elders employed on the Northern Plains reservation site (40%) than in the south-central metropolitan site (14%). The majority of participants did not receive financial assistance (e.g., TANF, SSI, food stamps, and/or disability). Just over a quarter spoke their tribal language moderately to very well. Participants were a pantribal group, comprising 19 primary tribal affiliations; this was largely due to the tribal diversity of the elders in the metropolitan area.

Findings

Being treated well

In this study, participants tended to conceptualize good treatment in terms of being taken care of, having one's needs met, and being respected. While elders often used the word "respect," the two primary ways in which they believed respect was demonstrated was by providing assistance to the elder and acknowledging the elder's status (Jervis, Sconzert-Hall, & the Shielding American Indian Elders project team, 2010). Participants also stressed the importance of family members spending time with elders and including them in activities. This quote by a 65-year-old Northern Plains male demonstrates how these constructs came together in participants' visions of good treatment of an older person: "My mother was treated real good by her family, all her children, grandchildren. They respected her and did things for her, and they wanted her to be around them all the time.... They respected her because she had stories to tell them and things to share with them." To these family members, the elder was indeed very much "respect-worthy," and spending time with her and "treating her well" was highly desirable. Similarly, a 69-year-old south-central woman stated, "With most of the Indian people that I know, they really listen to the elders in terms of what their knowledge is: 'What should we do now or what song [should we sing]?' 'How should we act?'" This statement points to the high valuation of elders' possession of cultural knowledge, passed on through oral tradition.

Good treatment was most frequently described in terms of "being taken care of," as in the statement provided by this 79-year-old south-central female: "To me, respect means that you show them—you honor them because of their long years, and you just walk in and assume caring for them. Politeness, courtesy." This quote illustrates a central feature of good treatment, that once an individual reaches elder status, his/her needs should be anticipated and met. Importantly, the services rendered should not have to be requested—an elder doesn't have to ask. A 69-year-old south-central woman illustrated this dynamic of the expectation that an elder's needs would be automatically understood and met at a recent community gathering:

When elders are treated well by the community and by their family—I see a lot of that happening.... Like the dinner that we just went to on Tuesday for my cousin, everyone made sure that the elders got their plates and that they did things first, and waited for them and all of that.

The servicing and deliberate placement of the elder as “first in line” also serves to dramatize elders’ honored status in the community.

In describing good treatment, participants relied both on descriptions of actual behavior toward elders they knew in their communities as well as on notions of ideal comportment (i.e., as it should be). Descriptions of poor treatment, in contrast, focused primarily on knowledge of the behavior of “real-life” people in their communities.

Being treated poorly

When asked what it meant for an elder to be treated badly, participants frequently provided examples of behavior that could be classified as financial exploitation and neglect. Lack of respect, psychological abuse, and physical abuse were recounted, but considerably less often. Participants were also asked whether they themselves had been treated badly by family in recent years, and if so, what happened. Sixteen percent of participants stated that they had been treated badly. The bulk of this poor treatment fell into the category of household stress or conflict, with theft and exploitative child care constituting the remainder. Only a few participants gave vivid accounts of their own mistreatment. In contrast, the majority (76%) of participants discussed cases where other Native elders were treated badly by family members. The latter scenarios tended to be more detailed. Accordingly, most of the examples of mistreatment provided here are drawn from stories about the mistreatment of other Native elders in participants’ communities. Notably, several types of mistreatment are often present in a single scenario.

Financial exploitation

Being exploited financially—for money, labor, or housing—predominated in elders’ discussions of poor treatment. While actual theft was the focus of much of elders’ discourse, housing misuse, exploitative child care, and inappropriate demands for care made by adult children also emerged as salient concerns. These issues frequently co-occurred, as noted by this 64-year-old Northern Plains woman, who described an elder whose family moved in with her:

Right now she’s so much in debt that she just going around hocking this and that just to pay the lights that [her family] were supposed to pay, and they haven’t paid anything. She’s constantly taking her grandkids with her, and they’re just making her a big nervous wreck. But she figures they’re her grandkids, and she figures that she has to take care of them. And then her granddaughter that she adopted will just let her do it. [The elder] won’t do anything to change her situation.... Totally ruining her house. [The elder] was such an immaculate housekeeper. Now her house, the walls are all marked up, carpet’s all filthy dirty. They just totally take advantage of her, and she just stays in her room ‘til it’s time for her to come out and eat. Then she’ll go cook. She’ll have to cook for everybody. Then she’ll go back in her room and sit there and do her beadwork and stay out of their way.

Here we see a situation where an adult child is believed to be inappropriately exploiting a parent for housing, labor, and child care, all the while draining the elder of her financial

resources and destroying her home. Moreover, the elder is described as anxious and segregated to one room of her *own* home.

Exploitative child care was sometimes linked to neglect of both the elder and to the children in the elder's care, as illustrated by this account given by a 61-year-old south-central female:

A couple was in their seventies, and he had had an amputation of both legs and he was in a wheelchair. And his wife and adult children and adult grandchildren would leave him with their little toddlers and babies and stuff so that they could go to the dances or to the casinos or to different things like that. There would be times that they would leave him, and then he would have fallen out of his chair because he couldn't take care of the kids.

This example conveys the detrimental consequences to the elder (and to the children as well) that followed from leaving young children with a disabled elder who was physically unable to care for them.

Neglect

Neglect typically referred to not providing needed assistance or care to elders. However, other behaviors, such as ignoring or overlooking elders, failing to visit, putting them into nursing homes, or helping only when it was convenient for the relative were also seen as neglectful. This statement by an 89-year-old south-central woman illustrates many of these dimensions:

When they're sick, you don't take them to the hospital... They're neglected. And their daily wants and their daily needs and their personal hygiene, and that they're kind of like a built-in babysitter. I don't think they're asked to go on any kind of—that they're left isolated a lot. When the family is going someplace, that they don't always include the elder because they think he or she might be in the way.

Such a combination of exploitation and neglect is quite common, with the latter manifesting as lack of care and isolation.

Putting the elder in a nursing home was construed by some as neglect, as noted by this 61-year-old south-central man:

I was brought up in a family, in a culture, where you paid respect to the elders. And you never got in their way. You never put yourself ahead of them. And it's hard to think in my realm of back a generation ago, maybe two, my mother's generation, they didn't put their people in nursing homes. Took care of 'em. Don't matter what they had, whatever the deal. And my mother's cousin, my aunt, stayed in the same room with my mother's grandpa in his elder age when he was getting senile and everything. And they took care of him until he died. And you don't see that as often now. We're inclined to go ahead and put them in nursing homes now.

For some, this shift to nursing home care signaled a negative culture change, from unquestioned reliance on familial care to the regrettable trend of opting for institutional care (Jervis, 2006).

Lack of respect

Disrespect was another aspect of being treated badly by family. This might take the form of failing to respect the wisdom that the elder had accumulated over the course of a lifetime or acting like one knows more than the elder—both of which signaled that one did not recognize the elder's (higher) status. Disrespect might also manifest as speaking rudely to or in the vicinity of an elder (e.g., swearing) or being inconsiderate. In addition, family members sometimes ignored an elder's advice or "talked back to" an elder. This 68-year-old Northern Plains woman described her idea of poor treatment of an elder:

For [elders] to be treated bad is to not acknowledge who they are as a person—as a mother, as a father, as a parent, grandparent—and to see that they have feelings. To maybe toss 'em to the side and not acknowledge their wisdom. Not to acknowledge what they've gone through to have children. Oh, there's so much that is not recognized. There are so many elders today that do not have the respect that they deserve. They're tossed to the side.

The elder, who historically in most Native cultures would properly be "front and center" in terms of leadership, the passing down of tribal culture and knowledge, and the socialization of the next generation (Anderson, 2001; Eden & Eden, 2010; McNally, 2009; Weibel-Orlando, 1989), is presented here as being relegated to the sidelines—essentially, not in his/her rightful place. To add insult to injury, the elder's hard-won wisdom goes unacknowledged and the elder does not obtain the respect that he/she "deserves" from the family.

Psychological abuse

This category included a variety of behaviors that participants considered emotionally abusive, implicitly threatening, or cruel (e.g., verbally harassing or lying to the elder). Participants also described households that were highly stressful and filled with conflict, noting how difficult such environments were on people as they got older. This 65-year-old Northern Plains woman described a 70-year old grandmother who was living in such a situation:

There must be maybe fourteen people living in the house. She [the grandmother] has a daughter that has cancer, and she was on prescription drugs. And then her daughter—and then the whole family live in the house, so the grandmother has to take care of the whole family. The mom that has cancer—which would be the grandmother's daughter—they all abuse drugs, including the one that has cancer. So everybody is arguing about the drugs, fighting, selling, and then the grandmother has to take care of the whole family—and totally chaotic, totally chaotic. Not enough food sometimes. People coming and going, fighting, arguing, borrowing money. That's what I see as elder abuse.

While the grandmother was not individually targeted for mistreatment, being chronically subjected to a chaotic, substance-abusing environment was construed an act of abuse by this participant.

Physical abuse

Physical abuse basically equated to physical assault in the sense of “being beaten up.” Perpetrators included “family” (in a collective sense), husbands, adult children, and grandchildren.

This 61-year-old Northern Plains woman provided a powerful example of physical abuse and how it existed in a wider context of mistreatment inflicted upon elders:

I’ve seen elders being beat on, physically hit. I’ve seen elders, older people, their money taken away from them, their cigarettes taken away from them, their food taken away from them, their housing used in such a way that they lose their place to live. I’ve seen older people made to get drunk. I’ve seen older people made to use drugs, illegal drugs, all under the threat of being abused or physically abused themselves.

Physical abuse here came in two forms, being hit and being forcibly intoxicated. This woman’s statement demonstrates the interwoven nature of various forms of mistreatment as well as the pernicious role that “threat” itself can play.

“Causation” beliefs

Problematic drinking—Problematic drinking was implicated in much of the mistreatment discussed by participants. A 61-year-old south-central man proclaimed,

I know there is [a link between drinking and mistreatment] because I’ve lived on places upon a reservation where alcohol was a major problem, and when alcohol’s a major problem, somebody gets abused. Everybody—little children, elders—everybody gets abused in some terrible ways.

This statement conveys the widespread, detrimental impact of alcohol in the reservation context, as well as the view that mistreatment in such a setting is not confined to a simple perpetrator-victim dyad or to the targeting of just one age group.

Similarly, a 60-year-old female Northern Plains participant reflected on the intergenerational transmission of both abusive drinking and mistreatment in families affected by alcohol addiction. Referring to her own parents, she stated,

There could be a party going on in their home downstairs and they would have no idea what’s going on.... There’s ten of us—of all of us, there’s two or three alcoholics that carry on. Now it’s going down to their kids, second and third generation from my parents, who are doing the same thing as their parents in that home.... So yes, there’s abuse going on. It would be a tremendous emotional harm to argue with my folks because they will deny it all. “Well, I didn’t hear it” or “I don’t think so.” “I didn’t see it” or “I didn’t hear it.”

The belief that elders refuse to acknowledge or do anything about the mistreatment they were experiencing was not unusual among study participants.

Culture loss—Some participants saw a relationship between a decline in “traditional” values and mistreatment. For instance, a 70-year-old south-central man noted that “these days” people preferred to mind their own business or were afraid to get involved, but

back in my day when somebody mistreated someone, I mean, *everybody* got on ’em. I mean, it wasn’t just regular family, it was friends and everybody else who sat ’em down [and said], “Look, you don’t do that.” So, to me the world jumps you for what you did, not just the family. Today, we don’t interfere in each other’s families.... So I think the pressure on that individual was the world of Indian—the people—not someone who didn’t say nothing about it.

This participant speaks of a time when social regulation by the larger Native community was normative. The inward turn spoken of here signals a breakdown of the traditional, community-oriented social controls that once helped keep family violence in check.

Discussion

In this article we examine how Native elders on a Northern Plains reservation and in a south-central metropolitan area conceptualized the treatment of elders by family members. It is important not to generalize these results too widely. We find relatively high standards for how elders should be treated juxtaposed with widespread accounts of Native elder mistreatment, particularly through acts of financial exploitation and neglect. Substance abuse and culture loss were largely held responsible by participants for the bulk of this mistreatment. With a relatively small purposive sample, it is not clear how these results apply to the 566 federally recognized American Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages and 64 state-recognized tribes (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2013). Further, due to institutional review board requirements, prior to being enrolled in the study, each participant saw a recruitment flyer, was given an informed consent screener, and signed a consent form, each of which stated that serious abuse that they themselves experienced would be reported to elder protective services. The fact that participants were reminded three times that serious abuse would be reported may have encouraged participants to avoid discussing their own mistreatment and/or to confine descriptions of the more horrendous cases of abuse to other people. It may have also discouraged elders with abuse histories from participating in the study.

Participants’ standards for the good treatment of elders might strike some as relatively high, particularly the obligatory servicing of an elder’s needs solely due to his/her higher status, or the idea that it is incumbent upon a family member to anticipate an elder’s needs without being told what these needs are. It is important to recognize that these expectations are rooted in these older participants’ beliefs about how American Indian elders have historically been regarded and treated. In contrast to these high standards, however, participants described numerous elder mistreatment scenarios in their own lives and communities. While typified by financial exploitation and neglect, these forms of mistreatment were interwoven with psychological abuse, physical abuse, and a lack of respect for elders. The latter form of mistreatment, lack of respect, while not considered a standard form of elder abuse by the general U.S. population, was taken quite seriously by these participants. The inclusion of disrespect in participants’ explanatory framework of

mistreatment is but one example of a perspective that is considerably broader than some dominant culture definitions of elder abuse (Bonnie & Wallace, 2002; National Center on Elder Abuse, 2016). Within a Native cultural framework that highly values respect for elders (Jervis & Sconzert-Hall, 2012), disrespect can be read as a violation of culturally prescribed age behavior by younger people that in effect diminishes the elder's culturally recognized personhood.

Native elders, in participants' view, possess valuable knowledge that commands respect and good treatment. High valuation of older persons in Native communities stands in contrast to dominant American cultural narratives that privilege youth and create an "impatience" with traditional, low-tech knowledge. Dynamic obsolescence, a core feature of American culture, is "the drive to make what is useful today unacceptable tomorrow" (Henry, 1965, p. 22). Typically construed in technological terms, the principle gets extended to humans, whose capabilities—and very existence—become obsolete (Henry, 1965). The value system of the dominant U.S. society, with which older American Indians must contend, has no doubt played a role in disrupting traditional Native constructs of elderhood. Thus, traditional ideals of respect come into conflict with contemporary realities where elders find themselves treated with disrespect.

Based on this study, financial exploitation was particularly prominent as a type of mistreatment within communities. Some researchers have noted that Native elders do not see providing for their families as abusive even if it means denying their own needs (Rittman, Kuzmeskus, & Flum, 1999; Schweitzer, 1999b). While there was some support for this view in our project, especially where self-denial equated to providing for grandchildren, this was far from a consensus view. Indeed, behaviors that constituted exploitative child care, housing misuse, and inappropriate care demands by adult children all tapped into otherwise culturally prescribed and valued role expectations for Native elders, thereby decreasing the ability of elders to recognize scenarios that lapsed into mistreatment. These values include very close grandparent–grandchild relationships that encompass child care (and where children may also provide elder care) (Jervis, Boland, & Fickenscher, 2010; Schweitzer, 1999a), cultural values that emphasize familial interdependence (Red Horse, 1983), and notions of reciprocity that stress the financial support of other family members (Schweitzer, 1999b). In situations of pervasive poverty, cultural dislocation, diminished health, substance abuse, and overcrowded tribal housing, traditional values and norms that once served to sustain families (including elders) may be manipulated in order to exploit elders. This might be even more easily accomplished in cases where elders are cognitively impaired. Another possibility is that financial exploitation is easier to bring into open discourse than other more taboo forms of abuse (e.g., physical abuse).

Implications

Our findings strongly suggest that Native elder mistreatment must be situated within the extended family, which has been posited as the heart of American Indian communities (Red Horse, 1983; 1997). Indeed, the cases presented here convey an image of stressed or high-conflict families, frequently including adult children or grandchildren with alcohol or substance abuse issues, that create an ideal set-up for the mistreatment of elders and for child

maltreatment as well. Developing culturally relevant interventions that incorporate elder and community perspectives for the detection, prevention, and mediation of mistreatment is essential, particularly given the severe limitations that often exist in terms of Adult Protection Services, policing, and prosecuting elder abuse in much of Indian Country (Jervis, 2014; Wakeling, Jorgensen, Michaelson, & Begay, 2001).

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Table 1

Treatment of elders interview.

What comes to mind when you hear the word “elder”?

Do you consider yourself to be an elder?

Think of a situation where an elder you know has been treated well by family. Can you tell me a little about what you think it means for an elder to be treated well?

Think of a situation where an elder you know has been treated badly by family. Can you tell me a little about what you think it means for an elder to be treated badly? I am not looking for any names.

In recent years, have you been treated badly by family members?

If yes: What happened?

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Table 2

Demographics.

	Northern Plains (n = 50)	South central (n = 50)	Total 100	p
Female	66%	78%	72%	0.18
70 years (range 60–89)	40%	52%	46%	0.23
Married/living as married	56%	48%	52%	0.42
Post high-school education	62%	64%	63%	0.17
Currently employed	40%	14%	27%	0.003
Receives financial assistance (SSI, etc.)	16%	18%	17%	0.79
Speaks tribal language moderately to very well	29%	32%	26%	0.17

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