



Research on mistreatment of older adults in Quebec:

summaries of scientific articles



Respect for Autonomy: An Ethical Issue in Psychosocial Intervention Among Mistreated Older Adults.

REFERENCE

Giasson, M. & Beaulieu, M. (2004). Respect for Autonomy: An Ethical Issue in Psychosocial Intervention Among Mistreated Older Adults. *Intervention*, 120. 98-109.

TEXT TYPE

Format: Scientific article
Content: Reflection

DISCUSSED THEMES

Extent of the phenomenon, vulnerabilities, intervention, organization of services, ethics, respect for autonomy, beneficence, social representations.

GOAL OR RESEARCH QUESTION

This article aims to put forward issues and ethical dilemmas related to respect for the autonomy of older adults experiencing situations of abuse, and to compare and contrast autonomy to other related values.

PROBLEM

Since the early 1980s, the issue of elder abuse gradually emerges. It is estimated that 4% to 7% of Canadian seniors living in their homes experience a situation of abuse. Psychosocial workers have an important role in screening and intervention, but the complexity of this phenomenon raises many challenges for them, particularly in terms of problem solving and ethical decision making. So far, no study has examined the experience of psychosocial workers in this regard.

METHODOLOGY

This is a fundamental, exploratory and qualitative study which uses a cross-disciplinary approach. It relies on sixteen subjects, who are psychosocial professionals working with abused seniors, recruited by a network-based sampling method. Among the participants, eight come from the Bas-Saint-Laurent region and eight from the Quebec City area, and equal proportions come from the public sector and the community sector. Semi-structured interviews, conducted in a non-directive approach, allowed the participants to express themselves on various topics related to their practice. Subsequent analysis of this data highlighted the social representations of these professionals in situations of elder abuse. In addition, ethical issues related to respect for autonomy of this clientele were put forward in the analysis.

RESULTS

Firstly, the study reveals issues related to screening, including low demand for services by abused seniors and resistance of this clientele. It appears that the vulnerability caused by violence contributes to the decline in psychological autonomy of the victim. In addition, issues related to psychosocial assessment were put forward: determination of the levels of urgency and danger of the situation, as well as of the person's vulnerability, cognitive autonomy and capacity to take charge of her life.

The study also shows that intervention practices adjust themselves to the level of deterioration of the autonomy of the victim, and range from negative autonomy, to soft measures, and finally, to extreme measures. Between the two extremes, there is a quest for balance between the values of respect for autonomy and of beneficence. These values are not in opposition, but are merely present to different degrees, depending on the situation. The decisions of each practitioner will be influenced by his or her intrinsic characteristics. However, respect for the individual is a core value that transcends all others, in the context of the intervention.

DISCUSSION

The discussion is integrated with the Results section above.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, practitioners experience several ethical questions, which bring them to position themselves on a continuum of intervention practices, from negative autonomy, to soft measures, and eventually, to extreme measures, based on their assessment of the situation. There is no answer to the question «How far do we go?», which leaves room for the development of ethical guidelines elaborated on the basis of discussions and dialogues.

AVENUES FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

To reduce the burden on practitioners and their feelings of powerlessness and dissatisfaction, several elements can be addressed: the exercise of balancing different values, ethical reflection, clinical supervision, training, interdisciplinary and partnership approaches, awareness and improvement of human and financial resources. In addition, practice environments would benefit from the development of interventions tools (for example, grids for screening or psychosocial assessment), intervention protocols and checklists to facilitate ethical decision making.

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