



## Research on mistreatment of older adults in Quebec: summaries of scientific articles



### Critical Concepts in Elder Abuse Research.

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#### REFERENCE

Georgen, T. et Beaulieu, M. (2013). Critical concepts in elder abuse research. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 25(8). 1217-1228.

#### TEXT TYPE

**Format:** Scientific article

**Content:** Critical analysis of literature

#### DISCUSSED THEMES

Age; Definition; Factors of vulnerability; Trust and power imbalance; Types of mistreatment in community-dwelling.

#### GOAL OR RESEARCH QUESTION

This article identifies the main elements of the definition of the mistreatment of older adults, with particular attention to the concepts of age, vulnerability, trust and power imbalance within the construction of the definition.

#### PROBLEM

Despite the fact that the mistreatment of older adults has been globally recognised as a social problem for nearly three decades, there are still conceptual variations of its definition, and this has led to a more complex understanding of it. Thus, a critical discussion of some of its central concepts finds its relevance in this article.

#### METHODOLOGY

A critical review of the literature on the mistreatment of older adults was conducted. The articles were identified from several databases: PubMed, SSCI, PsycINFO and the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) database. Publications between 2003 and 2012 prioritised the analysis of studies and contemporary definitions of mistreatment of older adults that are notable on an international scale.

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## RESULTS

The definitions of mistreatment of older adults discussed in this article share five commonalities: 1) Mistreatment is a socially and individually undesirable phenomenon; (2) it is part of an action or inaction on the part of the perpetrator; 3) it implies the presence of an interaction between an older adult and minimally another perpetrator; (4) it constitutes an offense against the older adult; and (5) the mistreatment is part of different types of actions or inactions involving various consequences for the older adult

In terms of the concepts inherent in these definitions, several questions are raised as to their operationalisation and their impact in scientific research on the subject, including **age**. Are the risks of being involved in a situation of mistreatment becoming higher when the sixtieth or the sixty-fifth birthday is celebrated? Do the dynamics of «conjugal violence» change status for a conjugal relationship «based on mistreatment» when the person reaches the age of sixty? In short, chronological age is one indicator among others to define the concept of mistreatment with its strengths, but also its limits.

The **vulnerability** of the older adult is an additional indicator in constructing analysed definitions of the mistreatment of older adults. Among other things, this concept is translated by the ability of the older adult to protect themselves from the actions or inactions of others that can cause physical or psychological distress. The challenge of this concept is its proper evaluation, on a scientific level, because vulnerability is not in itself a dichotomous concept (present / absent). Rather, it is based on a continuum that varies greatly from one older adult to another and is complexified by all the environmental, personal and social variables that may influence it.

As a concept, **the relationship of trust** also occupies an important place in the definition of mistreatment. According to the analysis of the selected texts, the relationship of trust at the heart of the dynamics of mistreatment also implies some degree of vulnerability of the older adult towards the perpetrator, all the more if the relational dynamics between the two people demonstrates a strong dependence.

The potential risk of mistreatment derived from the relationship of trust which is tainted by dependency introduces the last concept underlying the definition of mistreatment: **the power imbalance** between the older adult and the perpetrator. Particular attention should be drawn to the use of this concept to characterise mistreatment of older adults. Indeed, although

the act or inaction leading to mistreatment which in turn leads to neglect, may be perceived as the imposition of one power over another, for the individual mistreating the older adult, it is not always true that the balance of power between the two individuals is to the disadvantage of the older adult.

## DISCUSSION

By way of an introduction, mistreatments towards older adults can be conceptualised as a subtype of complex and specific victimisation. As a result, it is important to keep in mind the following nuance in order to avoid generalisation: despite the fact that all older adults living with mistreatment position themselves as victims in these situations, not all older adult victims are necessarily experiences forms of mistreatment. Thus, to differentiate this subtype of victimisation (mistreatment) from other types of victimisation (criminal acts), two criteria must be respected: 1) trust characterises the relationship between the mistreated and the perpetrator of the mistreatment and 2) a high level of vulnerability of mistreatment among older adults may be perceived by professionals during an assessment.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion is included with the discussion presented above.

## AVENUES FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

In terms of research, the use of methodological approaches to integrate different perspectives which promote a diversified understanding of this phenomenon is becoming apparent. Indeed, older adults living in these situations of mistreatment still position themselves as the best placed to document this field of research. However, they are not always able to discuss their experiences aloud, especially if they are suffering from cognitive losses, for example. Thus, interviews with police officers, social workers or members of the protective services involved in such situations support the appropriateness of using this new type of methodology in research on the mistreatment of older adults.

## DRAFTING DATE

December 20, 2014

