

Chapter 2

Definitions and Theoretical Models for Understanding Ageism and Abuse in the Workplace

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Introduction

- Sally, age 60, is told by her manager that her division is being reorganized and her job is being eliminated. When Sally asks if she can apply for a new job in the reorganized division, she is told the agency is looking for a Millennium type of worker. After leaving her job, Sally seeks treatment for depression and anxiety.
- Alex, age 67, is assigned to a project team with younger team members. The project requires expert computer skills. Alex asks permission to attend a computer training course, but his request is denied. The younger team members complain about Alex, who is called into his supervisor's office and given a warning that his skills are not keeping pace with the requirements of the job, that he is not getting along with his work colleagues, and that he may be terminated. Alex's job provides health benefits for his disabled wife.
- Wanda, age 73, overhears workers she supervises making fun of her appearance and the way she dresses, referring to her as an old bag and a fossil. She complains to her manager about their behavior, and is told that she is too sensitive, but that if she does not feel comfortable in the company she should think about taking a retirement package and leaving. Wanda lives alone and her job provides meaning in her life and needed financial support.

Gerontologists, policy makers, administrators, practitioners and researchers need to understand ageism, elder abuse and discrimination in the workplace. These features of the working lives of older adults, those 60 years of age and older, co-occur and

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interact to create challenges for those adults who choose to remain in the workforce late in life. An understanding of how these phenomena interact in the workplace is important in order to develop and implement effective policies, programs and organizational change that address these issues simultaneously.

There is currently a movement underway to recognize social problems as human rights issues. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, has become the guiding document for examination of the issue of ageism and abuse in the workplace (Wronka 2007). Article 23 of the Declaration states, “Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment” (United Nations 2007, p. 8). Ageist practices and abuse in the workplace, also cited in Article 23, violate the notion of just and favorable conditions of work.

Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002

In April 2002, delegates of more than 160 governments, intergovernmental institutions and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) came together at the United Nations Second World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid, Spain, to revise and update the 1982 Vienna Plan on Ageing. The Assembly’s outcome document, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, commits governments to integrating the rights and needs of older people into national as well as international economic and social development policies (Global Action on Aging 2007; United Nations 2008).

One of the central themes running through the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing or MIPAA (United Nations 2003) is that of “ensuring the full enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights and civil and political rights of persons and the elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against older persons” (p. 12). This is accomplished by promoting a favorable attitude among employers regarding the productive capacity of older workers as being conducive to their continued employment and promoting awareness, including self-awareness, of their worth in the workplace (United Nations 2003).

The MIPAA established an agenda with a two fold purpose: (1) to promote the participation of older people in the economic development of nations and, (2) to ensure that older people share in the benefits of economic development. Priority direction I (Older persons and development) affirmed the United Nations Principles on the Rights of Older Persons, including the right to a life of dignity free of abuse. Priority direction II, Advancing health and wellbeing into old age, while important, is not a primary focus of this chapter. Priority direction III (Ensuring enabling and supportive environments) emphasizes that a positive view of ageing is an integral part of the Madrid International Plan of Action 2002.

In Priority direction III, one issue (Issue 3: neglect, abuse, and violence) focuses on elder mistreatment that can take many forms, including physical, psychological,

emotional, and financial. MIPAA states that the impact of the trauma felt by older people in experiencing one or more of these forms of abuse can lead to shame and fear that may cause reluctance to seek help (UN 2003, p. 43). A second issue (Issue 4) focuses on images of aging. It declares that an important action step in ensuring enabling and supportive environments for older people is to “develop and widely promote a policy framework in which there is an individual and collective responsibility to recognize the past and present contributions of older persons, seeking to counteract preconceived biases and myths and consequently, to treat older persons with respect and gratitude, dignity and sensitivity” (UN 2003, p. 45).

In this chapter, the authors use a human rights framework to discuss ageism and abuse in the workplace. They review the current state of the literature on ageism and elder abuse, and apply this knowledge to manifestations of ageism and abuse in the workplace. Finally, they propose an expanded conceptual framework to include mistreatment and bullying of older workers, identify additional risk factors that can create vulnerability for older adult workers, and suggest directions for future research.

Socio-Demographic Trends in the United States

To understand the current magnitude of ageism and elder abuse in the workplace, it is first important to understand current and projected demographics. As scholars, professionals, advocates, and policymakers are well aware, by the year 2030 adults aged 65 and older will represent 19.3% or one-fifth of the population, a significant increase from the 12.6% of the population this age group represented in 2007 (Administration on Aging 2008).

Similar increases are also occurring in the workplace. The labor force participation of men aged 65 years and older increased from 17.9% in 2002, to 20.5%, in 2007, and 21.9% in 2009. The labor force participation of older women increased from 9.4% in 2000, to 12.6% in 2007, and 13.6% in 2009 (Administration on Aging 2010; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008a). Together, older men and women accounted for 4.2% of the 2009 workforce and by 2016 this number is projected to increase to 6.1% of the total workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008b). The increase in labor force participation of individuals 65 and older can be attributed to changes in economic conditions and retirement policies.

At the same time, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 6.9% decrease in the number of individuals aged 16–24 entering, or on the verge of entering, the workforce from 2006 to 2016 (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008b). Therefore, employers will need to retain older workers. These trends set the stage for intergenerational conflict and discrimination against older workers who, by choice or economic need, remain in the workforce past the age of 60. Intergenerational tensions may lead to age-based biases resulting in harassment, bullying, and demeaning of older workers.

Ageism

Ageism is a term coined by Dr. Robert Butler in 1968 to describe the “systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against older people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplished this with skin color and gender” (Butler 1989, p. 139). Gerontologists have divided ageism into four types. According to the International Longevity Center (2006),

Personal ageism is defined as ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and practices on the part of individuals that are biased against persons or groups based on their older age. Examples include exclusion or ignoring older persons based on stereotypic assumptions, and stereotypes about older persons and old age. *Institutional ageism* is defined as missions, rules and practices that discriminate against individuals and/or groups because of their older age. Examples include mandatory retirement, and devaluing of older persons in cost-benefit analysis. *Intentional ageism* is defined as ideas, attitudes, rules, or practices that are carried out with the knowledge that they are biased against persons or groups based on their older age. Intentional ageism includes carrying out practices that take advantage of the vulnerabilities of older persons. Examples include marketing and media that use stereotypes of older workers; targeting older workers in financial scams; and denial of job training based on age. *Unintentional ageism* is defined as ideas, attitudes, rules, or practices that are carried out without the perpetrator’s awareness that they are biased against persons or groups based on their older age. This type of ageism is also known as *inadvertent ageism*. Examples include absence of procedures to assist old and vulnerable persons, lack of built-environment considerations (ramps, elevators, handrails), and language used in the media (p. 21).

Other definitions of ageism include *positive ageism*. For example, Palmore (1990) defined ageism as “any prejudice or discrimination against or in favor of an age group” (p. 4). As examples of positive ageism, older persons might be seen as wiser, more capable of grasping the big picture as opposed to details of a specific problem or situation, and happier than younger persons. Assumptions based on positive or negative ageism may lead to responses that are biased (Palmore 1990).

Ageism and Elder Abuse

Ageism has not often been discussed as an underlying cause of elder abuse. However, personal and institutional ageism has been associated with elder abuse (International Longevity Center 2006). According to the late Robert Butler, ageism – also identified as age discrimination and age prejudice – is manifested in the home, institutions and the workplace, and is both a civil and human rights issue (International Longevity Center 2006). The Ontario Human Rights Commission noted that abuse of older adults occurs in large part due to negative attitudes towards older people (Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse 2011).

Ageist behavior has been identified as a sub-set of age-differentiated behavior. Of identified types of age-differentiated behaviors, elder abuse is considered the most egregious type of hurtful behavior directed at older adults (Pasupathi and Löckenhoff 2004). Elder abuse, also called maltreatment or mistreatment, has been

defined as harmful behavior directed toward older adults by family members or trusted others such as formal or informal caregivers (McDonald 2008).

Although elder abuse is often associated with care dependency of the victim, this is far from reality. Active aging, a new paradigm of aging for older adults, is emerging in both developed and developing countries across the world, and is now recognized as a normative stage in the aging process (Mellor and Rehr 2005). Most older people live active productive lives well into old age. This new paradigm of aging is sometimes associated with the United States baby boomers cohort, which has been identified as a transformative generation. Better educated than previous generations, in better health, and with a history of social activism and sense of entitlement, it has redefined old age to be a time of continued productivity (Butler 2008). According to the United Nations Human Rights Council (2011), “active and dignified ageing for older people requires reframing society’s concept of ageing to put more focus on the continued participation of older persons in social, economic, cultural and civic life as well as their continuous contributions to society” (p. 1). Unfortunately abuse of older people by family members and trusted others may occur at any stage regardless of their life situation or status.

Types of elder abuse defined in the literature include physical, psychological, emotional, and financial abuse or mistreatment, and intentional and unintentional neglect. These definitions parallel definitions of ageism stated above, including the notion of intentional and unintentional acts; but the definition of neglect implies dependency and need for caregiving (National Research Council 2003). While workforce accommodations for people with disabilities are mandated by law and regulation, care dependency in older adults is associated with domestic settings.

Theoretical Model for Elder Mistreatment

Elder abuse was identified as a social problem of note by researchers, practitioners and policy makers in the 1970s, although considerable controversy remains among researchers of elder abuse and mistreatment about definitions (Pillemer et al. 2011). Physical and emotional or psychological abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation by trusted others are generally recognized as categories of elder abuse. However, self-neglect and crimes including scams perpetrated by strangers targeting older adults because of their perceived vulnerability are not universally accepted as elder abuse.

Currently, an expanded conceptual framework of elder abuse has emerged to bring consensus to this definitional divide among researchers, practitioners and policymakers. This expanded framework includes three dimensions. Elder abuse with stranger crimes against the elderly is one dimension, and self-neglect is a second of three dimensions of the emerging broader definition of elder abuse. The third dimension is identified as elder mistreatment.

The dimension identified as elder mistreatment includes the more traditional understanding of abuse against the elderly as perpetrated by trusted others in the home

and in dependent care institutions like nursing homes (Dr. Georgia Anetzberger, President, November 23, 2011, National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, Personal Communication). This chapter includes mistreatment of older adults in the workplace as a third component of elder mistreatment. It also recognizes the new paradigm of aging as presented in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002.

As noted above, many older people are productive vital members of society, challenging the assumptions underlying much of the elder abuse scholarship and practice to date that old age is synonymous with decline and frailty. However, underlying negative societal and individual assumptions about aging and older people, also referred to as ageism, can result in mistreatment of older adult workers including bullying, harassment and discrimination.

A key element of mistreatment of older adults is that it is perpetrated by trusted others, and this can include workplace colleagues of older workers such as managerial, supervisory and peer staff (Dr. Georgia Anetzberger, November 23, 2011, Personal Communication). The authors of this chapter argue that the dimension of mistreatment of older people in the workplace should be included in a conceptual model of elder abuse in order to better reflect the reality of productive and active aging.

Efforts to develop a comprehensive theory of elder abuse or mistreatment in domestic settings generally posit a transactional model that includes a victim of mistreatment, and a responsible actor or perpetrator, both of whom are the focus of analytic attention (National Research Council 2003). Factors relevant to model-building are: the interactions between the characteristics of the victim and of the abuser; and contextual factors, which include location, social relationship, and the broader socio-cultural context defined by socio-demographic variables such as race, ethnicity, religion, region and economic status.

According to the Panel to Review Risk and Prevalence of Elder Abuse and Neglect, a panel of experts on elder abuse convened by the National Research Council and sponsored by the National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, and the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (National Research Council 2003), elder abuse and mistreatment can be understood by means of

..... a model of transactional process unfolding over time as the elder person, his or her trusted other, and other interested parties (stakeholders) {become} concerned with the older person and his or her well-being in the context of changes in the physical, psychological, and social circumstances of the several parties as the result of the elder person's aging process and life course (p. 62).

The panel also suggests that this model is embedded in an environmental socio-cultural context, which provides opportunities to include ageism as a social value attached to the aging process (National Research Council 2003). The socio-cultural context may include the home and family or an institutional setting, the latter implying a high level of care dependency on the part of the older adult victim. In this conceptual framework, which is a risk model, the sociocultural context of the older adult and the potential abuser mediates individual factors of both that interact with status inequality, relationship type, and power and exchange dynamics that can lead to elder mistreatment.

The panel identified individual level factors for both older adult victims and perpetrators: social status (wealth, race/ethnicity, religion and kinship status); physical health status (chronic diseases or acute illness); personality characteristics; mental health (dementia, depression, social competence, intelligence and other personality characteristics); and beliefs and attitudes about aging, kinship and caregiving obligations. Status inequality factors include differences in gender, age, race/ethnicity, and education (National Research Council 2003). Relationship types include non-co-residential, co-residential, marital partnership or other kin. Power and exchange dynamics include negotiation of caregiving scripts and dependency of the victim on the abuser and/or the abuser on the victim. Based on research on care dependency and elder abuse, these dynamics can pertain to both older adult victims and abusers (Pillemer and Suitor 1992).

Early studies on elder abuse found that abusers tended to be financially dependent on the victim (e.g., Wolf et al. 1982). Other studies examined the dependency of victims on abusers and did not find greater dependency on abusers by victims compared with non-victims (Bristowe and Collins 1989; Homer and Gilleard 1990; Phillips 1983; Pillemer 1985; Pillemer and Finkenhor 1989; Pillemer and Suitor 1992; Reis and Nahmiash 1998; Wolf and Pillemer 1989).

In an elaboration of the model for institutional care providers of care dependent elderly, the socio-cultural context can include region of country, and state regulatory and legal environment. Social embeddedness variables can include organizational characteristics, and individual-level factors can include individual characteristics such as age, gender, and race/ethnicity (National Research Council 2003).

According to the panel (National Research Council 2003) and others, existing theoretical models of elder abuse and mistreatment often imply a level of care dependency on the part of older adult victims. However, elder abuse, as an outcome of ageism, can occur regardless of care dependency on the part of older adult victims, and can occur in settings other than homes or institutions as well. Although there is an assumption in much of the professional literature that older adults are out of the workforce, statistics show that a significant proportion of adults 60 years of age and older, remain in the workforce well past 60 years of age (National Association of Social Workers 2008).

A Theoretical Model for Workplace Bullying

A theoretical framework for the study and management of bullying in the workplace was proposed by Einarsen et al. (2003). They noted that gerontologists first became interested in workplace bullying in the 1980s. This came about because of the interest of Swedish family therapist, Heinz Heymann, who transferred an interest in family conflict to conflict in the workplace. Thus, the theoretical models of workplace bullying and elder abuse and mistreatment have many variables in common.

Like the theoretical model proposed by the panel to review risk and prevalence of elder abuse and neglect (National Research Council 2003), the workplace bullying

framework also hypothesizes that the phenomena of interest are embedded in a socio-cultural context. The theoretical model on workplace bullying, however, emphasizes organizational factors over individual factors, and is more of a descriptive than a predictive model. For example, organizational factors inhibiting aggressive behavior interact with individual, social and contextual antecedents of aggressive behavior. Policy enforcement and organizational action – including tolerance and intolerance, social support and retaliation and retribution – are affected by, and in turn, affect the organization and the individual.

Bullying behaviors – as exhibited by the perpetrator and as perceived by the victim – as well as immediate behavioral and emotional reactions, are influenced by individual characteristics of the victim. These include demographic factors and social circumstances, as well as personality and personal history.

The workplace bullying model differs from the elder mistreatment model in several ways. These include: (1) characteristics of the perpetrator(s) are not noted in the workplace bullying model; (2) emphasis is placed primarily on the perception of the victim rather than actual events; and (3) outcomes of the bullying are not individualized, but instead are linked to organizational action. Einarsen et al. (2003) view bullying as related to personal or environmental factors and presence or lack of organizational inhibitors of bullying behavior.

This model of workplace bullying may be strengthened by including the perpetrator's individual characteristics, and the outcome of the interaction among victim, perpetrator, organizational environment and socio-cultural context. The model on elder abuse can be strengthened by broadening the contexts in which abuse can occur (to include workplace settings) and including a stronger assumption that the older person who is victimized is not necessarily dependent on the abuser. The authors advocate a stronger emphasis on the inclusion of socio-cultural values like ageism – which cuts across home, institutional and workplace settings – as well as race/ethnicity and socio-economic status. Inclusion of these variables can guide interventions. It will also lead to more robust models that can be tested to determine what combination of variables best predicts elder abuse and workplace bullying. Armed with this knowledge, policy makers can help society to restore the human rights of older workers, as delineated in the MIPAA (United Nations 2003).

Additional Intervening Variables

Researchers have shown that ageism is “pervasive in media, healthcare, education and advertising” (e.g., Dennis and Thomas 2007), and often co-occurs with sexism (Barnett 2005; Hatch 2005), and technological change (Cutler 2005). As a counterbalance to this, in 1967 the U.S. Congress recognized and addressed ageism in the workplace by enacting the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA). Although the ADEA acknowledged ageism as a social problem that disproportionately affects employees 40 years of age or older, it did not address ageism as a human rights issue. Rather, the ADEA is an employment law that addresses ageism

from an economic standpoint in that back pay and future loss may be awarded. While the ADEA has a provision that notes workplace harassment is illegal and can be pursued under the ADEA, there is precedence in the law for not awarding emotional and compensatory damages resulting from workplace harassment,¹ which is not the case with lawsuits filed under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Dennis and Thomas 2007). Although there has been progress in recognizing that Americans are working beyond the age of 65 (the age limit of 70 for protection under the ADEA was lifted in 1987), there has been little movement to reframe age discrimination from an economic to a human rights issue in North America. (A more in-depth discussion of legal and other legislative protection of older workers is provided in Chap. 9).

Abuse in the Workplace

The impact of workplace abuse, or bullying, is costly to society, organizations and the individual victim. While organizations experience higher turnover, absenteeism, lower performance and productivity, and higher health care costs, people who experience harassment in the workplace often show “cognitive effects such as concentration problems, insecurity and lack of initiative” (Hoel et al. 2003, p. 130). From a societal viewpoint, people experiencing workplace harassment are less likely to stay in the workforce and may use their retirement savings earlier than anticipated, which could lead to an increased need for social welfare programs.

Workplace abuse is defined in various ways by diverse disciplines, including public health, substance abuse, nursing, law, and education (Keashly and Jagatic 2003). In 2007, a nationally representative study conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute defined workplace abuse to include “any or all of the following types of repeated mistreatment: sabotage by others that prevented work from getting done, verbal abuse, threatening conduct, intimidation, [and] humiliation” and found that current workplace abuse for those aged 50–64 was lower than for any other age group (10% vs. 19% for workers aged 18–29). However, 30% of the oldest age group reported a lifetime incidence of bullying [that] was unacceptably higher than any other age group (26% for those aged 30–49; and 19% for those aged 18–29) (Namie 2008).

Other definitions of workplace abuse include Brodsky’s 1976 (cited in Keashly and Jagatic 2003, p. 33) definition of “repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate or get a reaction from another. It is treatment

¹ (Rivera Rodriguez v. Frito Lay Snacks Caribbean, 265 F.3d 15, 24 (1st Cir. 2001)), the Law Firm Passman & Kaplan, PC Attorneys Washington, District of Columbia noted that “[a]lthough hostile work environment claims are recognized under the ADEA, the court asserted it is well established that compensatory damages for emotional distress and pain and suffering arising from a discriminatorily hostile or abusive environment based on age are not allowed” (No Compensatory Damages Under ADEA, n.d., para. 5).

which persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates or otherwise discomforts another person” (p. 2). From an organizational perspective, Robinson and Bennett in 1995 (cited in Keashly and Jagatic 2003, p. 33) used the definition of “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and, in so doing, threatens the well-being of the organization or its members, or both” (p. 555). Instrumental bullying is used to denote purposive bullying. There is a parallel to this in elder abuse definitions, where psychological abuse may be used as a tactic to obtain money or material goods (Quinn 2000).

Keashly and Jagatic (2003), in their review of recent studies of workplace abuse, noted the broad and overlapping nature of definitions of abuse. Using a broad definition, and relying on insurance records, they studied the incidence of workplace abuse in the U.S. Based on a small sample of 600 full-time workers, they found that the incidence of workplace abuse was 25% (one in four individuals). They also noted a more recent 2000 statewide Michigan study that found 59% of individuals in the workplace reported some form of emotionally abusive behavior. These rates are alarmingly high.

Co-occurrence of Ageism and Abuse: Directions for the Future

What is known about the co-occurrence of ageism *and* abuse in the workplace? To shed light on this issue, in November 2009, Powell conducted a search using Fordham University’s multi-database search option. The search terms “ageism and workplace abuse,” “ageism and abuse,” “ageism and bullying,” “ageism and workplace bullying,” “workplace abuse and older adults,” “bullying and older adults” and “workplace harassment and older adults” were entered. Although many articles addressed the issue of abuse or ageism, few addressed the co-occurrence of workplace ageism and abuse in the United States. The findings suggest there is a gap in the literature that future researchers should address.

Researchers who study the co-occurrence of ageism and abuse in the workplace should strive for a definition of abuse that is clear and concise. In this way, they will help organizations to address the issue and to measure the impact and outcome of policy implementation and change. Such a concise, agreed-upon definition, achieved perhaps through consensus by a panel of experts, would also allow researchers to create a measure to capture the personal and organizational impact of abuse and ageism in the workplace. Most important, a definition of workplace ageism and abuse should draw on workers’ own definitions. This will redress the lack of attention to older workers’ perspectives in the workplace bullying conceptual framework discussed above (Powell 2010). This will also be a step toward ensuring implementation of the international ageing agenda in MIPAA 2002 so that older workers are no longer subjected to a denial of their basic human rights.

Conceptual models of abuse in the workplace (bullying), elder abuse, and domestic violence do exist and have several factors in common: power and control, dependency, and negative outcomes. It is time to revisit these models and to create

a new conceptual model for ageism and abuse in the workplace. This would allow for a more comprehensive framework for investigating ageism and abuse in the workplace. Such a framework should address whether particular organizational structures promote or prevent workplace abuse and ageism.

Discussing the overlap of ageism and abuse will raise awareness and sensitize social workers, human resource administrations, and older workers themselves to the issue of workplace abuse. Through ongoing and open discussion, scholars, professionals, advocates, and students can arrive at a concise and agreed-upon definition for workplace abuse; a conceptual model that integrates ageism and abuse in the workplace; and research that explores the combined impacts of ageism and abuse. These steps will lead to effective workplace policies and practices that promote the human rights of older workers.

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