
Pilot Study of the Differences Among the Puerto Rican Aged by Gender in Opinion, Attitude and Exposure to Abuse, Mistreatment and Neglect

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Objectives. Contribute to the knowledge base of the risk factor literature by gender for abuse, mistreatment and neglect of the Puerto Rican aged.

Background. A review of the literature in Puerto Rico and the United States related to gender impacting upon elder abuse, mistreatment and neglect report conflicting findings.

Methods. A 107 item questionnaire was developed. The definitions of abuse, mistreatment and neglect were based on those set out by the National Center on Elder Abuse in the United States (1998). The questionnaire has been preliminarily validated by Cronbach's Alpha .879. The sample of respondents was based upon availability. This method was selected in the face of practical considerations in spite of criticism to the external validity that this type of sample represents. Structured face to face interviews were carried out from August to December 2004 with 430 aged residing in community. Data were entered into the SPSS program

whereby cross tabulations were carried out for gender.

Results. Elderly Puerto Ricans regardless of gender are knowledgeable concerning what constitutes attributes of abuse, mistreatment and neglect. Females were found to report a high percentage of yes responses than males to opinion statements related to situations of abuse, mistreatment and neglect. Males reported a higher percentage of yes responses to situations of exposure to abuse and neglect than females.

Conclusions. Findings here are similar to some reported in the United States but are dissimilar to those reported in Puerto Rico. Further research must be carried out to pinpoint the living arrangements situations placing the aged in greatest risk for abuse and neglect. Such findings have implications for social policy, prevention and intervention strategies.

Key Words. Gerontology, Aged, Abuse, Mistreatment, Neglect, Gender, Puerto Ricans, Hispanics

Many studies have documented the existence and nature of elder abuse and neglect, but only a few have collected data on the prevalence (number of occurrences in a lifetime) and the incidence (number of new occurrences within a specific time) of the problem among the non-institutionalized elderly. Accurate data have been difficult to obtain, not only because defining abuse and neglect vary, but also because methodologies used to deal with the highly sensitive topic differ and the samples studied do not fully or accurately represent older people (1-2). A definitional disarray exists due to the fact that they have been developed from different perspectives: the caregiver, the health professional, the policy-maker, the social worker, the police and to a lesser

extent the abused older person (3,4). Studies have shown that elders' definitions of abuse do not correspond to professionals' definitions, which may confound findings (5, 6). Researchers recommend including seniors and caregivers in the definitional process (4, 7-11).

According to the National Center on Elderly Abuse 10.5 per cent of the cases reported in the United States involve Hispanics and experts believe that this is only the tip of the iceberg as to the real magnitude (12). In Puerto Rico for the month of March of the year 2003 there were 2,265 senior citizens removed from the custody of their children and residing in substitute homes. For that same time period there were 3,949 seniors receiving protection due to mistreatment under the law of economic mistreatment or failure to provide an aged relative with the necessary economic resources to meet their financial needs (13). In Puerto Rico the social epidemiology of mistreatment of the aged has not been clearly delineated due to the lack of studies about magnitude and resources to develop a base. The aged as a group have not been the focus of legislative attention in terms of recognizing, defining, intervening and penalizing mistreatment (11).

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Most studies identifying abuse in later life report more than one type being involved (14-17). Psychological abuse was the most prevalent type of abuse according to several researchers (18-23). Other studies found neglect to be the most common type of abuse (5, 10, 24-29). Whereas physical mistreatment was reported as being the most frequent by others (15,30-33). Another study (34) examining physical abuse, neglect, financial abuse, and denial of shelter, found that "denial of shelter" was the most common type. Whereas others (14, 35) found financial abuse as being the most prevalent type of abuse.

Researchers have also pointed out as a critical consideration in all areas of research the need to attend to ethnic diversity (4). Significant differences may exist among racial and ethnic group definitions of what behaviors constitute elder abuse (6, 16, 36). One reason may be that cultures have a range of expectations about the responsibility of grown children and elders to provide care, financial assistance, and emotional support to one another (5, 16, 34, 36-39). Differences have been found between ethnic groups in relation to the labeling of conduct as mistreatment or abuse and in involving persons outside of the family circle in such cases (38). Also considerable differences among ethnic groups in perception of abuse have been found (36). Definitions of mistreatment among Japanese Americans have been explored and it has been found that the cultural message was that of protecting the community through not discussing with persons outside of the family situations that could bring dishonor to the family, including abuse (39). European Americans and Puerto Ricans in the United States were found to differ from Japanese Americans and African Americans on whether psychological neglect was worse than psychological abuse. The study also found difference between older and younger members of the same ethnic groups (16). It was found that in general elderly Puerto Ricans in the United States evaluated a situation as abuse without classifying the attributes of the events involved but the conduct of the other ethnic groups was completely opposite (40). In another study aged Puerto Ricans in the United States informed psychological negligence as the worst treatment that could be accorded to the elderly by their relatives whereas the best treatment offered by relatives to their aged family members was emotional support. In this same study younger generations of Puerto Ricans informed psychological abuse as being the worst type of treatment that could be offered to the elderly (16).

Existing research indicates that background and cultural values impact how an older person will define abuse but it is not always clear how cultural values and norms play a role in these differences (41). Older adults who have been victimized often fail to report, because of feelings of shame

and stigma or fear of retaliation, or a fear of being ignored or placed in an institution (42-44). Among Hispanics shame, embarrassment and the value of protecting the family can be important factors to consider in reporting or not reporting mistreatment or abuse (11).

In Puerto Rican society citizens have always shared the idea that older adults merit respect, consideration, security, protection and adequate human services. In contemporary society this form of perceiving the aged has evolved generally due to the accelerated changes undergone by the society in recent years (17). In relation to Hispanics/Latinos it has been pointed out that the attitude of ageism, individualism and cult of youth is beginning to manifest itself (45). Ageism refers to the conglomerate of beliefs, myths, ideas, attitudes and prejudices that prevail and promote practices that limit the full participation of the aged in the large society and limit their continual psychosocial development (46-48).

It has been found that in Puerto Rican society a stereotyped attitude is practiced in relation to the aged and most particularly among youth even in the face of contrary evidence (49). In relation to Hispanic/Latinos in general it has been pointed out that due to the values of cooperation and the family the aged expect to receive emotional assistance from their children and their children are obligated to provide care and respect to their aged parents (50). In another study it has been pointed out that in the Hispanic culture self sufficiency is not expected of the aged (51). But not all families adhere to the traditional cultural values and many have been socialized that individual needs come before family responsibilities (52). A study of aged Puerto Ricans on the island of Puerto Rico examined mistreatment and negligence of the aged by relatives, caregivers, friends and employees of public and private institutions and senior centers. Senior centers were found to have significantly less incidents of mistreatment than the centers for long term care where the aged are less healthy and more dependent. Mistreatment was found to be present in the three types of establishments and over 50% of the aged sampled reported being victims of mistreatment. Passive negligence followed by psychological mistreatment and active negligence were the types of mistreatment reported most. In the public and private long term care facilities a high rate of passive and active negligence was reported. In the three types of centers more than one individual is pointed out as being an abuser and the aged were cautious about providing information that could cause them problems in the future (17). In another study of 96 situations identified for mistreatment classified under the Adult Protective Services Program of the Department of Social Services of Puerto Rico found that negligence was the most common form of mistreatment

(27). A study based upon data provided by all the local government agencies concerned with the aged found 1,451 cases of neglect and 1,059 cases of abuse and or mistreatment. A profile of victims of abuse or mistreatment were the aged 80 years of age and over of both gender groups. With the increase in age neglect increased. Those 80 years of age and over were the most victimized. After the age of 75 years their were more cases of females being abused or mistreated (53). In a study of professionals and other support services employees who provide services to the aged reported that the aged 70 years of age and over as being the most abused and that women were more frequently victims than men. Eighty per cent of the aged identified as victims did not have spouses. The mistreated elderly generally resided in the rural areas of the island of Puerto Rico (10). Sixty six per cent of the abused elderly resided with relatives similar to findings elsewhere (32). A general profile of the abused aged in this study was a widowed female, 75 years of age and over residing in a rural zone with relatives of which one or more are abusers. In spite of residing in a family situation these aged adults tended to have a high rate of social isolation (10). A study among the aged residing in high rise buildings for senior citizens found loneliness to be a problem identified by thirty six per cent of the aged. Only fifty two per cent reported that they were visited by their families (54). In another study domestic violence against women 60 years of age and over was explored (55). Only one study was found in Puerto Rico that explored the dimensions of how the aged perceive and identify a case of mistreatment and if the perceptions are in accord with the classifications made by professionals. This study was based on the findings of women 60 years of age and over in Puerto Rico. In this study aged women rejected all types of abuse. They were in agreement that abuse of the elderly is a serious problem mainly inflicted by family members and should be reported to the pertinent authorities (11).

The Risk Factor Literature

The research carried out on the specific factors hypothesized to be associated with elder abuse and neglect continues to be limited to a handful of studies (20, 56). There are many manifestations of abuse and neglect of older adults on many levels. Risk factors may be common to other conditions and they may be dependent on the presence of other factors. As a result, all of the research on risk factors suffers from methodological difficulties and must be interpreted with some care (4). A review of the literature related to social-demographic variables impacting upon elder abuse, mistreatment and neglect report conflicting findings. The literature related to the gender of

the victim reports that equal numbers of men and women were victims (14) whereas others report females as being the major victims (10, 15, 19, 22-27, 32-33, 57-58). Adult protective services reports and other studies of agency samples universally find that the majority of the victims are female (30, 59). It is not clear whether this is due to high risk for victimization or to women's greater numbers in the population of seniors. A research survey suggested that the latter may be the case and in that study it was found that the victimization rate for men was higher than for women (3). They attributed this in part to the fact that elderly women are much more likely to live alone, which reduces their risk and that widowed men tend to remarry. But women tended to sustain more serious abuse and to suffer greater physical and emotional harm from mistreatment. This may in turn explain their greater representation as victims in adult protective services caseload (59).

Methodology

During the months of August to December of the year 2004 face to face interviews were carried out mostly to the aged from the Municipalities of the Region of Arecibo, Puerto Rico. Undergraduate college students were recruited for the interview process. The elderly interviewed were those residing in community. Populations residing in highrise buildings for seniors, nursing homes or attending senior centers were excluded from the study. The sample of respondents was based upon availability. This method was selected in the face of practical considerations in spite of criticism to the external validity that this type of sample represents (60). The aged selected to participate were visited in their homes where the purpose and implications of participation were explained as well as their rights. An informed consent sheet was signed by the participants before the interview process began. The interviewers read all the questions and the responses were noted in individual questionnaires. Later the responses were entered into the SPSS statistical package program excluding information that could identify the respondent. For the purposes of the questionnaire the definitions of abuse, mistreatment and neglect were based on those set out by a government agency in the United States (25). The developed questionnaire was divided into four parts. The first part was a section of general socio-demographic information of eight (8) questions (municipality, zone of residence, sex, age, marital status, years of schooling, previous occupation and living arrangements). The second section of questions sixty eight in total (68) presents a list of statements with the objective of measuring the respondent's opinion (knowledge) as to abuse,

mistreatment and neglect of the aged. The third section of the questionnaire was made up of eight (8) questions to measure the attitudes of the aged towards situations of abuse, mistreatment and neglect. Lastly, the fourth section of twenty three (23) questions was related to exploring the degree of exposure of the aged to situations of abuse, mistreatment and neglect. The scale of responses used in the questionnaire was "yes", "no" and "neutral".

Results

The following descriptive discussion is based upon the number and percentage of responses given by the Puerto Rican elderly residing in community who were surveyed. It is a segment of a principal unpublished study entitled "Development and Validation of a Questionnaire About the Opinion, Attitude and Exposure of Aged Puerto Ricans Towards Abuse, Mistreatment and Neglect". The majority of the participants were from the Municipality of Arecibo (22%) followed by Lares (12%) and Hatillo (10%). The majority sampled were females (60%). Most respondents were from the rural zone (66%) of the island. In terms of age the majority were from the 60-69 years of age cohort group (51%) and of a married (52%) and widowed (33%) status. Most respondents had achieved an elementary school academic level (42%) and had been housewives (41%) followed by blue collar workers. (28%). In terms of living arrangements the majority resided with their spouse (38%) followed by alone (21%) and with children (19%) (Table 1).

For purposes of inclusion in the tables those questions in which the respondents were almost identical in percentage of response were excluded. Only included for purposes of comparison were those questions that revealed differences of five percent or more among the statement responses between the cohort groups of males and females. Also only the yes response category of the original three part scale (yes, no, neutral) was selected for purposes of analysis of the percentile differences. This determination was taken since only the yes response clearly reveals knowledge by the aged measured by opinion towards situations of abuse, mistreatment and neglect. Also the yes response points out attitude towards the situations studied and exposure to the same.

Table 2 reveals that for seventeen of sixty eight questions of the original questionnaire related to abuse, mistreatment and neglect differences were present by gender. For thirteen of seventeen questions females had a higher percentage of yes response to the opinion statements. Whereas only for four of the statements were male responses higher than those of the aged females. The majority of the aged did not respond with a "yes" to

two questions: "Abuse of the aged is concentrated in the social class of little education and poverty" and "A law exists that makes it obligatory for children to help their parents economically if necessary". The limited yes response to the first question presents the observation by the aged of the social reality of the problem be it theirs or of others observed by them. The response to the second question brings into play the need for more campaigns directed at the elderly informing them of existing legislation in their favor.

The elderly regardless of gender are knowledgeable concerning what constitutes situations of abuse, mistreatment and neglect.

Table 3 presents that only for one question of eight measuring attitude from the original questionnaire was gender difference in yes response present. Whereas both gender groups reject abuse males had a higher percentage of "yes" response to the question than females. .

Table 4 presents that for nine questions of the original twenty three in the questionnaire related to exposure to situations of abuse the aged differed by gender in percentage of yes response to the statements. Males reported a higher percentage of yes response to each of the questions than females. Exposure to situations of abuse fluctuated between twenty eight to seventy male seniors being impacted. For females between twenty eight to eighty three were impacted by situations of abuse. The total impacted by situations fluctuated between fifty seven to one hundred and forty nine seniors or between thirteen to thirty five percent of the aged.

Study findings here in regards to exposure are similar to those of a study carried out in the United States (3) in which the victimization rate for men is higher than for women but are dissimilar to those found for Puerto Rican populations on the island of Puerto Rico (10, 53). A possible explanation for the findings for the Puerto Rico sample can relate to the living arrangements situation among the aged (Table 1). Differences were found to exist by gender whereby a greater number of aged females were found to reside alone followed by with children. But more males were found to reside with a spouse and spouse and children. Also greater numbers of females (41%) were found to be widowed than males (20%) and more males (68%) than females (41%) were found to be married. Both clinical accounts and limited empirical research suggest that a shared living situation is a major risk factor for elder mistreatment with elder persons living alone at lowest risk (3). Others have found living alone to be an important protective factor against mistreatment (24). A study in Puerto Rico with aged Puerto Ricans found that only fifty per cent of the aged resided with their aggressors and the other fifty percent lived elsewhere (10). Studies with Puerto

Table 1. Gender differences in socio-demographic factors related to opinion, attitude and exposure to situations of abuse among aged Puerto Ricans in number and percentage.

Characteristics	Gender		Total	Characteristics	Gender		Total
	Male	Female			Male	Female	
Population	173/40.2	257/59.8	430/100%	Population			
Municipality				Marital Status			
Arecibo	38/22.0	58/22.6	96/22.3	married	118/68.2	106/41.2	224/52.1
Barceloneta	5/2.9	10/3.9	15/3.5	single	3/1.7	6/2.3	9/2.1
Camuy	8/4.6	22/8.6	30/7.0	separated	5/2.9	8/3.1	13/3.0
Ciales	5/2.9	4/1.6	9/2.1	divorced	10/5.8	28/10.9	38/8.9
Florida	6/3.5	5/1.9	11/2.6	widowed	34/19.7	106/41.2	140/32.6
Hatillo	21/12.1	23/8.9	44/10.2	common law	3/1.7	3/1.2	6/1.4
Isabela	11/6.4	11/4.3	22/5.1	Occupation			
Lares	17/9.8	35/13.6	52/12.1	homemaker	7/4.0	171/66.1	177/41.2
Manati	8/4.6	11/4.3	19/4.4	white collar	28/16.2	29/11.3	57/13.3
Morovis	6/3.5	7/2.7	13/3.0	blue collar	74/42.8	49/18.7	122/28.4
Quebradillas	4/2.3	1/4.3	5/3.5	agriculture	61/35.3	7/2.7	68/15.8
Utua	10/5.8	14/5.4	24/5.6	other-military			
Vega Alta	7/4.0	12/4.7	19/4.4	service etc.	3/1.8	1/4	4/1.0
Vega Baja	11/6.4	19/7.4	30/7.0	Years of schooling			
Adjuntas	0/0	1/4	1/2	none	12/6.9	35/13.6	47/10.9
Dorado	2/1.2	1/4	3/7	elementary	66/36.3	115/44.7	181/42.0
Carolina	2/1.2	0/0	2/5	intermediate	31/18.0	45/17.5	76/17.7
Corozal	1/6	2/8	3/7	high school	49/28.3	43/16.8	92/21.4
Aguadilla	4/2.3	0/0	4/9	some university			
San Juan	0/0	2/8	2/5	or more	15/8.7	19/7.5	34/7.9
Humacao	1/6	0/0	1/2	Living arrangements			
San Sebastián	4/2.3	5/1.9	9/2.1	alone	27/15.6	64/24.9	91/21.2
San Lorenzo	0/0	1/4	1/2	with spouse	85/49.1	77/30.0	162/37.7
Toa Alta	2/1.2	1/4	3/7	with children	14/8.1	67/26.1	81/18.9
Jayuya	0/0	2/8	2/5	with relatives	5/2.9	8/3.1	13/3.0
Residence zone				with spouse and children	30/17.3	28/10.9	58/13.5
urban	59/34.1	86/33.5	145/33.7	with spouse, children & relatives	6/3.5	3/1.2	9/2.1
rural	114/65.9	171/66.5	285/66.3	with friends	6/3.5	10/3.9	15/3.7
Age cohort							
60-69	93/53.8	126/49.0	219/50.9				
70-79	58/33.5	96/37.4	154/35.8				
80+	22/12.7	35/13.6	57/13.3				

Rican samples on the island of Puerto Rico have found that the abusers were children (10,27). Irizarry (2005) in a unpublished manuscript "Pilot Study of Aged Puerto Ricans Exposure to Abuse and Neglect By Living Arrangements" found that the aged residing with relatives (not spouse or children) and friends had a lower percentage of yes response to the exposure to abuse statements. But those reporting (in order) residing with a spouse, alone; with children and spouse and children had higher percentages of yes responses to exposure to situations of abuse and neglect. The findings that situations of exposure are generally those of abuse is similar to those

reported elsewhere (10) but dissimilar to others on the island (17, 27).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study presents limitations in terms of the sampling method utilized as well as the reduced sample population (n=430) which therefore limits the capacity to generalize the findings. It is recommended that the study be repeated using the Likert scale for purposes of comparison with the results found here. Since the validity of the questionnaire has been preliminarily demonstrated and is

Table 2. Gender differences in yes response to opinion about abuse, mistreatment and neglect among aged Puerto Ricans in number and percentage.

Statements	Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
The abused aged suffer from fear.	134/77.5	212/82.5	346/80.5
In physical abuse bones are fractured and death can occur.	134/77.5	212/82.5	346/80.5
Abuse of the aged is concentrated in the social class of little education and poverty.	44/25.4	51/19.8	95/22.1
The mistreated aged feel anger.	137/79.2	184/71.6	321/74.7
The aged remain quiet due to feelings of fear, shame and guilt.	145/83.8	230/89.5	375/87.2
The abused aged remain in their situation because they love their children and relatives.	145/83.8	230/89.5	375/87.2
The number of aged alone or abandoned is alarming.	138/79.8	228/88.7	366/85.1
Many children do not have a sense of commitment with their aged parents.	143/82.7	225/87.5	368/85.6
Alot of indifference by children and relatives exists towards the aged.	119/68.8	196/76.3	315/73.3
A law exists that makes it obligatory for children to help their parents economically if necessary.	75/43.4	97/37.7	172/40.0
Many children leave their parents without a home upon selling their property without their permission.	113/65.3	192/74.7	305/70.9
It is mistreatment not allowing the elderly to use clothes that they like.	108/62.4	179/69.6	287/66.7
Neglect of the aged is not visiting at least one day a week.	143/82.7	227/88.9	370/86.0
Neglect of the aged is not calling by telephone various times per week.	126/72.8	210/81.7	336/78.1
Physical abuse is the presence of ulcers in the buttocks.	123/71.1	199/77.4	322/74.9
Physical abuse is the inadequate organization of the environment surrounding the aged.	141/81.5	226/87.9	367/85.3
Psychological abuse of the aged is treating him/her as a child.	133/76.9	186/72.4	319/74.2

Table 3. Gender differences in yes response to attitude of aged Puerto Ricans towards abuse and neglect in number and percentage.

Statement	Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Children should not threaten the aged.	128/74.0	176/68.5	304/70.7

considered adequate according to the statistics obtained (Cronbach's Alpha .879) the study is considered to be an important contribution to the area of investigation in social gerontology and other related disciplines. It is also believed that it makes a major contribution to an understanding of aged abuse, mistreatment and negligence in Puerto Rico since the elderly themselves define it with their responses. Also it pinpoints differences among the aged by gender and gives us an insight into a possible risk factor for abuse, mistreatment and negligence. Further research must be carried relating gender to other variables such as living arrangement situations possibly placing the aged in greater risk for abuse and neglect.

Such findings have implications for social policy related to housing alternatives for the aged and prevention and intervention strategies that need to be implemented with aged Puerto Ricans, their immediate and extended family and professionals servicing this group.

Resumen

Contribuir a la base de conocimiento sobre los factores de riesgo en la literatura por género de opinión, actitud e exposición de los envejecidos para abuso, maltrato y negligencia.

Se desarrollo un cuestionario de 107 preguntas basado en ejemplos provistos por el Centro Nacional de Abuso de Ancianos de los Estados Unidos (1998). El cuestionario fue validado de forma preliminar (Cronbach's Alpha .879). Entrevistas estructuradas se llevaron acabo entre los meses de agosto a diciembre del 2004 a 430 envejecidos residiendo en comunidad. La muestra se baso en disponibilidad. Se entraron los datos en el programa SPSS y se llevaron a cabo tabulaciones cruzados.

Las hembras tuvieron un por ciento mas alto de respuestas de si que los varones para las aseveraciones

Table 4. Gender differences in yes response to exposure to situations of abuse among aged Puerto Ricans in number and percentage.

Statements	Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Having to wait alone in an unfamiliar medical office.	70/40.5	73/28.4	143/33.3
Being screamed at for not understanding something.	66/38.2	83/32.3	149/34.7
Being prescribed new medications without a complete explanation of the reason or the possible secondary effects.	58/33.5	70/27.2	128/29.8
Being threatened with being sent to a nursing home.	31/17.9	28/10.9	59/13.7
Made to sign a document without knowing the details.	29/16.8	30/11.7	59/13.7
Purchase a service or merchandise by telephone that never arrived.	28/16.2	29/11.3	57/13.3
Suffered material abuse due to fraudulent announcements.	46/26.6	45/17.5	91/21.2
Being overcharged for merchandise in stores.	58/33.5	68/26.5	126/29.3
Personal things are thrown out without permission.	54/31.2	62/24.1	116/27.0

relacionados a opinión sobre situaciones de abuso, maltrato y negligencia. Los varones tuvieron un por ciento mayor de respuestas de sí para situaciones de exposición al abuso y maltrato.

Se necesita llevar a cabo más investigación para averiguar las situaciones de vivienda que ubican a los envejecidos estar en mayor riesgo para abuso y negligencia. Tales hallazgos tienen implicaciones para política social y estrategias de prevención y intervención.

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