

Theoretical approaches to elder abuse: a systematic review of the empirical evidence

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Abstract

Purpose – *The study of theoretical models explaining elder abuse has been one of the main gaps in the literature of the field. The extent of support of each theory is not clear. This study aims to conduct a systematic review to examine research supporting or opposing six theories of elder abuse: caregiver stress theory, social exchange theory, social learning theory, bidirectional theory, dyadic discord theory and the psychopathology of the caregiver.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This study conducts a systematic review of the literature. Seven databases were searched six times using different keywords about each theory.*

Findings – *This paper finds 26,229 references and then organised and analysed these references using pre-established criteria. In total, 89 papers were selected, which contained 117 results of interest; these papers were summarised and assessed for conceptual, methodological and evidence quality. The results showed evidence in favour of all the explored theories, except for social learning theory, whose results indicate multiple interpretations of the theory. This study finishes this paper by proposing that each of these theories might explain different facets of elder abuse and that more research is necessary to understand how the predictions of these different theories interact.*

Originality/value – *This paper presents an extensive review of the literature on theoretical explanations of elder abuse. The findings can be of value for selecting theories for prevention programmes or providing a summary of the evidence for researchers and practitioners interested in the theoretical explanation of elder abuse.*

Keywords *Elder abuse, Mistreatment, Theory, Neglect, Theoretical approaches, Older adults*

Paper type *Literature review*

Introduction

As the issue of elder abuse first came to the attention of the scientific community in 1975 (Baker, 1975; Burston, 1975), many social and scientific views have been articulated, thus shaping the field as we know it today. The prevalence, risk factors and assessment strategies of elder abuse have been studied across a vast number of countries. Awareness of this problem grew and, fortunately, continued to grow as governmental and non-governmental organisations dedicated themselves to this issue. More importantly, some international organisations have focussed their attention on elder abuse. The World Health Organisation made a valuable contribution with the Declaration of Toronto (WHO, 2002) by defining elder abuse as a single or repeated action (or absence of an appropriate action) that results in harm or distress and occurs in a relationship where there is an expectation of trust. Prevalence studies estimate that 15.7% of older adults have experienced mistreatment (Yon *et al.*, 2017). Elder abuse has serious consequences for older adults' physical and mental health and is responsible for part of the hospitalisation, institutionalisation and mortality rates amongst older adults (Yunus *et al.*, 2019).

The considerable prevalence and its nefarious consequences may be one reason why organisations such as the United Nations included elder abuse in the international political agenda in The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (UN, 2002).

The field of elder abuse has now reached a tipping point. An increasing number of recent suggestions from experts focus on protecting older adults by developing intervention and prevention strategies for elder abuse (Stahl, 2015). However, some of these interventions are somewhat ineffective and sometimes even counterproductive (Daly, 2011). One explanation for this outcome is that interventions have insufficient theoretical foundations or simply lack them altogether (Jackson and Hafemeister, 2016). Theory's role is of major importance in this context because the theory explains the causes and consequences of a phenomenon. In this way, theory influences researchers' choices and contributes to the development of professional practices and policy initiatives (Roberto and Teaster, 2017), therefore giving a fundamental basis for choosing intervention or prevention strategies.

Traditionally, theories used to explain elder abuse have been adapted from other fields such as child abuse or intimate partner violence (Roberto and Teaster, 2017), although some exceptions exist. Some of these theories are controversial, whilst others are understudied. We lack a clear picture of what support each theory gathers. Hence, we conducted this systematic review to systematically analyse research that can empirically support theories of elder abuse, thus providing a synthesis of evidence in favour of or against each theory. Hopefully, this review will summarise the evidence to guide researchers who want to proceed with theory testing and to lay some foundations to guide an informed selection of theoretical frameworks on which to base intervention and prevention strategies.

Many different theories have been used to explain elder abuse. In five different works (Burnight and Mosqueda, 2005; Mathew and Nair, 2017; Momtaz *et al.*, 2013; Pillemer and Wolf, 1986; Wilber and McNeilly, 2001), we counted a total of 13 theories: caregiver stress theory; social learning theory; bidirectional theory; psychopathology of the caregiver; social exchange theory; dyadic discord theory; power and control/feminist approach; ecological model; sociocultural model; political-economic theory; role accumulation theory; stratification theory and symbolic interactionism. This list of theories was the starting point for the current review. Political-economic theory is very rarely cited and can be considered a specific case of social exchange theory. Role accumulation theory and stratification theory are also rarely cited and are both specific cases of caregiver stress theory.

When addressing theoretical approaches, it is fundamental to differentiate between theories and models. A theory shapes empirical fact with logic and reasoning into an explanatory framework, allowing predictions based on the formulation of a hypothesis for testing. A model, however, is a representation of a phenomenon (often distorted) to enhance conceptual understanding (Burnight and Mosqueda, 2005). The main difference between model and theory is that theories focus on establishing causal prediction, whilst models focus on framing descriptions of phenomena. Models are helpful in case analysis but have low power in establishing predictions or hypothesis development. The ecological model is a good example; it is a powerful tool to categorise risk factors and organise cases (check Schiamberg *et al.*, 2011 for an application of the ecological model). However, it has limitations in providing a processual explanation for how abuse happens. For these reasons, models will not be included in this review, excluding the ecological model, sociocultural model and symbolic interactionism theory. The power and control/feminist approach will also not be included in this review. A meta-analysis by Yon *et al.* (2017) showed no gender differences in overall elder abuse, indicating that the mechanics behind elder abuse might be more complicated than just gender roles and expectations, which supports previous findings in the field of intimate partner violence (Archer, 2000). Additionally, dyadic discord theory emerged as a response to these perspectives, offering an expanded explanation of violence, accounting for these data. In summary, we focus on

theories that propose a causal mechanism for the prediction of elder abuse and, in this sense, have important repercussions for practical purposes such as risk assessment and prevention.

We will focus on six theories in this systematic review: caregiver stress theory, social exchange theory, social learning theory, bidirectional theory, dyadic discord theory and the psychopathology of the caregiver. These theories have been pointed out as the best bets to explain elder abuse theoretically (Burnight and Mosqueda, 2005; Mathew and Nair, 2017; Momtaz *et al.*, 2013; Wilber and McNeilly, 2001), but they are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes, their predictions are entangled, proving it difficult to support only one theory. We will briefly describe each one and their main predictions.

Caregiver stress theory

Caregiver stress theory, sometimes addressed as situational stress theory, posits that elder abuse occurs when a stressed/overburdened caregiver unleashes his/her frustrations on the care recipient (Pillemer and Wolf, 1986; Bergeron, 2001). The central premise of this theory is that caregiving is a stressful situation. Sometimes it can be. Stress emerges either from personal factors – such as inadequate coping skills, multiple roles in the family, health problems, lack of caregiving skills; care-recipient factors – such as high levels of dependency, poor health, decreased mental capabilities; or environmental factors – economic difficulties, lack of support from society-level agencies and social isolation. These factors combined can make the caregiver feel overburdened and frustrated, unleashing it on the care recipient (Mathew and Nair, 2017). This theory has been controversial for several reasons, but mainly because it can be used as a strategy to blame the victim for the abuse, thus reducing the perpetrator's accountability (Brandl and Raymond, 2012, for a detailed discussion). However, this theory provides a clear hypothesis. Caregiver stress theory predicts that a stressful or burdened caregiver is at greater risk of committing abuse than a caregiver with less burden. Therefore, good evidence for this theory would be a straightforward relationship between stress and abuse, or, on a more experimental note, the disappearance of abuse after diminishing the caregiver's stress on previously abusive relationships.

Social exchange theory

Social exchange theory was developed by very different study areas (sociology, psychology and economics) and is usually analysed superficially. According to this theory, every social interaction is an exchange of material or nonmaterial resources between two partners, where all involved partners will try to maximise profits and reduce costs. When all involved parties perceive a balance between profit and costs, there is a mutually satisfying balanced exchange (Blau, 1964). Elder abuse is not expected in balanced relationships but in unbalanced relationships. If one of the exchange partners has limited resources to trade and has increased needs, he/she will become “dependent” on his/her partner. In turn, this partner will gain more “power” over the relationship and manipulate the exchanges to maximise profit and cut losses. The manipulation of exchanges can take many forms: deny necessary exchanges (neglect); take monetary compensation by force (financial exploitation) or even inflict pain or distress (physical and emotional abuse) as a mechanism to vent emotions, to increase the power gap or to create a “balance” where both traders lose. Someone who lacks resources (material or nonmaterial) and has few exchange partners (no social support system to trade with) might become dependent on this “powerful” partner, perpetuating unfair trades (Fundinho and Ferreira-Alves, 2019). However, the term “resources” is too vague (Blau, 1964, lists some resources such as social acceptance or prestige) and it is easier to look for variables that increase the needs and make it more challenging to produce resources. Therefore, evidence for this theory might include a relationship between abuse and physical or cognitive impairments (that increase

needs). Additionally, this theory relies on the availability of trade partners; therefore, variables such as network size or loneliness are also of interest.

Social learning theory

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1978) has been known by many names: intergenerational transmission of violence, transgenerational theory and the cycle of violence theory. From the literature on child mistreatment, social learning theory proposes that violence is learned through observation and modelled into our behavioural repertoire. Social learning posits that someone who was a victim or was exposed to violence as a child is more likely to learn that violent actions are valid strategies to deal with others, resulting in the use of violence in caregiving relationships, thus continuing the violence cycle (Pillemer and Wolf, 1986). The main prediction from this premise is that abusers are more likely to have experienced abuse in their childhood than non-abusers. However, the definitive evidence would have to come from longitudinal studies, following children who were victims or who witnessed abuse and to see if they become perpetrators when the time comes to assume the role of caregiver to their parents.

Bidirectional theory

Bidirectional violence theory arises from the work of Steinmetz (1988), who first noticed that, in some cases, it is difficult to pinpoint a perpetrator and a victim as when abuse occurs, older adults and caregivers are mutually aggressive to one another. This theory states that people raised in environments where violence is used as an interaction strategy or in situations where a caregiver or care receiver feels highly stressed are prone to violent outbursts, to which they are responded with more violence (Steinmetz, 1988). Therefore, the main predictions are that, at some point, older adults and caregivers were both victims and perpetrators. Therefore, the evidence that might support this theory would be reports of mutual violence between caregivers and care receivers.

Dyadic discord theory

Dyadic discord theory was developed in the intimate partner violence literature. When the incidence of intimate partner violence began to be studied in larger, nationally representative samples across multiple sources (courts, shelters, police reports and hospitals), a new understanding of violence emerged regarding gender, as these large-scale studies indicated that women were as violent as men (Archer, 2000). Dyadic discord builds on this finding and focusses on conflict and discordance in relationships (disregarding the gender variable). According to this theory, conflict and discord emerge in a relationship because of contextual factors (history of family violence) and situational factors (e.g. low satisfaction with the relationship) and this discord might work as the onset for violence (Burnight and Mosqueda, 2005). Dyadic discord and bidirectional theory share a relational focus but differ in the depth of analysis. Whilst bidirectional theory is concerned with mutual aggression between two people, dyadic discord considers the family environment and the elements that precede aggression such as discord and dissatisfaction in a relationship. This theory predicts that highly conflictual relationships are prone to be associated with violence. Favourable evidence for this theory would be, for example, an association between family conflict and elder abuse.

Psychopathology of the caregiver

The psychopathology of the caregiver states that elder abuse emerges because the person assuming the caregiving role is suffering some form of psychopathology that makes him/her unable to provide adequate care or even prone to violence (Fulmer *et al.*, 2004). Substance

abuse and depression are the more common mental health issues linked to abuse (Chen and Dong, 2017) but are not the only mental health problems. This theory's prediction is straightforward – if the caregiver has a mental illness, the odds of committing elder abuse increase. Finding evidence for this theory can be tricky; it is not just a simple case of finding associations between mental illness and elder abuse. It is also necessary that mental illness is present before the caregiving relationship starts; otherwise, the causal link cannot be established. If the onset of the mental illness is after the beginning of the caregiving relationship, the mental illness might be a by-product of the relationship, therefore disproving this theory.

Methodology

Search strategy

We searched databases (Web of Science, Psycinfo, Scopus, Science-Direct (Elsevier), PubMed, Sage and Ageinfo) for research-based articles written in the English language and published in scientific journals from 1975 to October 2018. We used a combination of the following keywords: “elder abuse”, “mistreatment older adults”, “violence older adults” and “older adults abuse neglect”, added to some theory-specific keywords. The theory-specific keywords were as follows: caregiver stress theory – “caregiver stress”, “caregiver burden”, “stress”, “coping”; social exchange theory – “social exchange”, “dependency”, “impairment”, “deficits”, “rewards”; social learning theory – “learning”, “abused children”, “abused spouse”, “intergenerational”; bidirectional theory – “caregiver”, “mutual violence”, “violent care receiver”; dyadic discord theory – “relational conflict”, “relational satisfaction”, “disagreement”; psychopathology of the caregiver – “caregiver mental health”, “caregiver psychopathology”.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

From applying this search strategy, six massive databases of references, one for each theory, were gathered and managed using Mendeley, a reference manager software. Papers were excluded from these databases by analysing the titles and abstracts and applying the following criteria: not about elder abuse; not presenting empirical data (the reference list of literature reviews was combed for references that respected the previous criteria and were added to the database). Both quantitative and qualitative studies were accepted. Next, two researchers of elder abuse, experts on the theoretical explanations of abuse, analysed the databases and proceeded to a full-text appreciation to apply the last criteria: the paper includes a result that might provide evidence in favour or against the theory. In qualitative studies, results of interest would be themes that describe affirmatively or contradict the hypothesis of each theory, as can be seen later. Disagreements were resolved by the two researchers reaching a consensus. The number of articles resulting from each step can be found in [Table 1](#).

Table 1 Number of citations retained during paper selection process

<i>Article selection step</i>	<i>Caregiver stress theory</i>	<i>Social exchange theory</i>	<i>Bidirectional theory</i>	<i>Social learning theory</i>	<i>Dyadic discord theory</i>	<i>Psychopathology of the caregiver</i>
Total number	2,908	6,045	2,932	4,833	5,854	3,657
Application of criterion a)	1,614	3,350	1,701	2,128	1,272	1,299
Application of criterion b)	217	376	351	161	47	118
Application of criterion c)	32	35	18	10	7	15

Data extraction

Selected articles were analysed independently by the two researchers, summarised by mutual agreement and are organised in a table, which displays the sample size, measurement of elder abuse, variable(s) of interest for the theory, the measurement instrument and main results. The table is available in the supplementary material.

The two researchers assessed the extracted results in three areas: conceptual/theoretical quality, methodological quality and evidence quality. To do so, the researchers used the following standardised checklist:

1. Conceptual/theoretical quality (0 = no; nc = not clear; 1 = yes):
 - a. Was the adopted definition of abuse specified?
 - b. Is a theoretical framework mentioned?
2. Methodological quality (0 = no; nc = not clear; 1 = yes):
 - a. Were the measures used validated for the assessed population?
 - b. Were participant characteristics identified?
3. Evidence (−1 = evidence against; 0 = contradictory evidence; +1 = evidence in favour):
 - a. Some results support/disprove the theory?

This checklist was created by the authors specifically aimed to assess the theoretical focus of each paper objectively. The methodological quality questions were created based on previous systematic reviews in the field of elder abuse. One question, presented above as “evidence”, was used to classify the results as favourable or contradictory for each theory. A consensus between the researchers resolved disagreements.

Results

A total of 89 studies were selected for final revision. Some studies included variables relevant for more than one theory; hence, they were included in all theories where their data were valuable, giving a total of 117 results to analyse.

Regarding the conceptual/theoretical quality assessment of the analysed articles, of the 89 studies, 62 (70%) defined how they understood mistreatment, but only 29 (33%) mentioned mistreatment in a theoretical framework. Regarding methodological quality, 51 (57%) studies used validated measures. Finally, 75 (84%) of the studies presented participant characteristics sufficient enough for replication.

Caregiver stress theory

In total, 32 studies were analysed regarding evidence for the caregiver stress theory. Of these, 25 presented caregiver stress or burden as positively associated with mistreatment, therefore favouring the caregiver stress hypothesis. Four studies showed contradictory evidence by finding an association between caregiver burden and some forms of mistreatment, but not others, for example, finding an association between burden and neglect but not physical or psychological mistreatment (Gainey and Payne, 2006; Orfila *et al.*, 2018). Three studies did not support the caregiver stress hypothesis. Cooper *et al.* (2010) did not find any relationship between caregiver burden, dysfunctional coping and mistreatment. The other two negative results are interesting to analyse, as they were intervention studies. One intervention programme could diminish mistreatment but not stress (Hsieh *et al.*, 2009) and another could diminish stress but not mistreatment (Reay and Browne, 2002). These results suggest the influence of other variables on the stress-mistreatment relationship. In line with these findings, two studies suggested that

stress might have a mediating role rather than be a direct predictor of mistreatment. For instance, with nurses' aides, caregiver burden acted as a mediator between work stressors and mistreatment, meaning that exposure to work stressors increases abuse indirectly by increasing the feeling of burden (Shinan-Altman and Cohen, 2009), whilst with the general population of caregivers, caregiver burden was a mediator for social support and resilience (Serra *et al.*, 2018). These mediation results are fascinating because they show that one of the main predictors of caregiver stress theory (caregiver burden) is not the direct cause of abuse but rather one piece of other causal relationships.

Of the total number of articles analysed, 20 focussed solely on non-professional caregivers of older adults with some form of impairment (e.g. dementia and physical disabilities). Of these, 16 studies presented positive evidence in favour of the caregiver stress hypothesis. Additionally, six studies focussed on professional caregivers (e.g. nursing home employees) and of these, 3 presented favourable evidence towards caregiver stress theory. Of the remainder, three studies focussed on victims or older adults signalled adult protective services and three focussed on community-dwelling older adults without disabilities. These characteristics of the sample are important to note. The functional status of older adult participants and the professional vs non-professional status of the caregivers may act as confounding variables.

Social exchange theory

There is no direct way to test social exchange theory; thus, we have explored the evidence for this theory, searching for studies that assessed the resources, needs and factors affecting dependency. Most likely, for this reason, the number of articles collected was 35, higher than the other theories. The first interesting result is the narrow variety of personal resources studied in association with abuse. Physical function/dependency was present in 28 studies, cognitive function/impairment in 18 and social function variables, widespread from social support to isolation and loneliness, were present in 20 studies. Eight studies included other resources, mainly economic such as income or working status.

Regarding the predictions of social exchange theory, 19 studies support the predictions, whilst 3 find evidence against them. In total, 13 studies find contradictory evidence. In these cases, only one form of personal resource was associated with abuse (Sasaki *et al.*, 2007) or different resources were associated with different forms of abuse (Orfila *et al.*, 2018). As we were interested in mistreatment in all its forms, these studies were classified as contradictory evidence, but it might not be contradictory after all, considering that different needs warrant different resources; therefore, different needs might lead to different forms of mistreatment. Finally, a few studies pointed out mediating roles for some variables of interest for social exchange. For example, in Conner *et al.* (2011), cognitive impairment does not directly predict susceptibility to abuse, but it is mediated by older adults' problematic behaviours. Kong and Jeon (2018) found no direct association between physical functionality and emotional mistreatment; however, self-esteem and family assistance mediated that relation. Social support also appears to affect mistreatment, mediated by caregiver burden (Serra *et al.*, 2018). These results suggest that we have limited knowledge of what resources are relevant to predict mistreatment and how they manifest themselves in behavioural terms, which is why finding these mediators is essential.

Social learning theory

Ten studies were analysed for evidence for social learning theory. Of these studies, four presented results in favour of the cycle of violence hypothesis, where experiencing or witnessing violence earlier in life would be a predictor of committing violent acts later in life (Dong *et al.*, 2017; Korbin *et al.*, 2005; Reay and Browne, 2001; Yan and Tang, 2003). Of these, Yan and Tang (2003) did not study mistreatment directly but rather the proclivity

to commit it and they found that participants who experienced violence earlier in life were more likely to find mistreatment to older adults acceptable. One important note is that, except for this last study, the participants in previous studies were always caregivers. However, three studies pointed out that experiencing mistreatment at an earlier age would be a risk factor to experience it again later in life (Grunfeld *et al.*, 1996; McDonald and Thomas, 2013; Stöckl *et al.*, 2012). In these three studies, participants were older adults receiving care. Two of the remaining studies showed contradictory evidence (Jackson and Hafemeister, 2011; Kong and Easton, 2018), where previous violence can be a risk factor for some forms of mistreatment but not for others. Last, the participants in Wuest *et al.*'s (2010) qualitative study added that caregiving a previously abusive parent is an opportunity to make amends.

From the collected results, it seems that there is contradictory evidence for social learning theory. Two main patterns emerge, firstly, those who experience violence are more likely to commit violence and secondly, those who have experienced violence are more likely to continue experiencing it. The second pattern is not entirely out of the theoretical principles proposed by social learning because when experiencing/witnessing violence at an earlier age, there is exposure to both aggressors and victims as role models. It would not be theoretically wrong to assume that one can learn how to be both abuser and victim.

Bidirectional theory

In total, 18 studies were analysed for relevant results regarding bidirectional theory. Of these, only 3 showed no relationship between caregiver mistreatment and care-receiver aggressiveness or violence (Cooper *et al.*, 2010; Heydrich *et al.*, 2012; Phillips *et al.*, 2001). The remainder of the articles supported the hypothesis that violence is mutual, showing associations between aggressiveness and violence of the care receiver and mistreatment by a caregiver. Of these supporting studies, 2 (Özcan *et al.*, 2017; Post *et al.*, 2010) show that when looking into the forms of abuse, different forms of violence can be used in response to different types of mistreatment; for example, neglect of the caregiver is associated with physical abuse by the care receiver (Özcan *et al.*, 2017).

Dyadic discord theory

Of the seven studies whose data could support dyadic discord theory, four focussed on relational conflict, finding a positive relationship between conflict and mistreatment (Cohen *et al.*, 2006; Pillemer and Finkelhor, 1989; Reay and Browne, 2001; Shugarman *et al.*, 2003). The three other studies focussed on relationship quality, all with consistent data that the poorer the relational quality, the higher the risk of abuse (Compton *et al.*, 1997; Cooper *et al.*, 2010; Jackson and Hafemeister, 2011). Both results are consistent with the predictions of the dyadic discord theory and therefore, all the studies support this theory. Important to highlight are the results of Jackson and Hafemeister (2011), who found inferior relational quality in victims of physical mistreatment compared to victims of financial mistreatment. These results suggest that different types of mistreatment may be related to different levels of relational quality.

Psychopathology of the caregiver

Of the 15 analysed studies, one did not find differences in the history of mental health problems, depression or alcohol consumption between caregivers who mistreat and caregivers who do not (Cooney *et al.*, 2006). The remaining studies show a positive relationship between mental health, depression, anxiety, substance use and mistreatment. However, two results seem of importance. Firstly, two studies found that neglect had no relationship to mental health (Conrad *et al.*, 2016; Leung *et al.*, 2017), whilst only one showed a relation between anxiety and neglect (Reay and Browne, 2001). These results

suggest that neglect might be a form of abuse not directly explained by this theory. Secondly, two studies suggest that mental health plays a moderating or mediating role between other variables and mistreatment; namely, depression and anxiety moderate the relationship between anger and the risk of mistreatment (MacNeil *et al.*, 2010) and depression partially mediates the relationship between relational rewards and the risk of mistreatment (Williamson and Shaffer, 2001). These results suggest that the caregiver's mental health might not be the first piece of the puzzle but an important risk factor for mistreatment that should always be considered.

Discussion

This systematic review analysed 89 research papers searching for empirical support for six theories used to explain elder abuse. Except for social learning theory, which had mixed results, all other theories were supported by empirical findings. These findings require some discussion to draw practice, research and theoretical implications.

Can all the theories be correct?

The more striking result we found is that five of the six explored theories had more evidence in favour than against their theoretical predictions (the sixth is a social learning theory, which had mixed results). These findings suggest that not one but rather all of these theories have a role in explaining abuse.

To understand these findings is important to consider how these theories came to explain abuse against elderly individuals. Different authors adapted theoretical formulations from other fields to explain elder abuse (Roberto and Teaster, 2017). The result is a series of (apparently independent) theories that focus on different facets of the phenomenon of elder abuse. For instance, we have caregiver stress theory and the psychopathology of the caregiver, focussed on the caregiver's role and bidirectional theory and dyadic discord theory focussed on explaining interpersonal violence. However, whilst these four theories are centred on specific interpersonal behaviour processes, social learning theory and social exchange theory are more general theories that can explain behaviours other than abuse. These theories can be used as frameworks to analyse, compare and evaluate all of the other theories and, therefore, may be considered metatheories.

When we find evidence supporting the more focussed theories (the caregiver stress theory, bidirectional theory, dyadic discord theory and psychopathology of the caregiver), we may be getting information about processes involved in elder abuse. Understanding abuse as a whole would require the integration of these theories into a bigger picture, that is, the use of a metatheory. Several of the analysed studies hinted that each theory explains only part of the phenomenon. The hints were evident in studies that used mediation analysis. For example, stress (Shinan-Altman and Cohen, 2009; Serra *et al.*, 2018), violent behaviour of the care receiver (Conner *et al.*, 2011) and the psychopathology of the caregiver (MacNeil *et al.*, 2010; Williamson and Shaffer, 2001) were found to have mediating roles, meaning that their causal effect on abuse is actually due to other variables. Thus, it is plausible that, despite all the favourable evidence, these more specific theories can miss other essential factors to understand abuse and that theories such as social exchange theory or social learning theory can be helpful. However, social exchange theory has two main problems: firstly, it is not clear what personal resources have a role in putting at risk or protecting against elder abuse and more research is needed to find new resources instead of focussing on general measures of ability, be it physical, cognitive or social and secondly, the theory needs further development, namely, in establishing a more concrete hypothesis regarding elder abuse. Social learning theory presents other limitations that we will explore further.

The case of social learning theory

Of all of the analysed studies, only 10 presented findings relevant to the test of social learning theory. The small number of studies is understandable; methodologically speaking, testing social learning theory predictions would be best accomplished by longitudinal studies, so testing the social learning hypothesis for elder abuse would require lengthy and expensive studies. In the absence of longitudinal studies, we analysed the findings from cross-sectional studies.

Two major findings emerged from the analysed papers. The first is congruent with the hypothesis extracted from social learning theory; people who witnessed or experienced abuse earlier in life are more likely to become abusive caregivers (Dong *et al.*, 2017; Korbin *et al.*, 2005; Reay and Browne, 2001; Yan and Tang, 2003). The participants in these studies were adults caring for older adults. However, when studying past experiences of violence with samples of older adults, the results indicate that older adults who have experienced violence previously in life are more likely to experience elder abuse than those who have not experienced violence (Grunfeld *et al.*, 1996; McDonald and Thomas, 2013; Stöckl *et al.*, 2012). According to social learning theory, behaviour is learned and included in our behavioural repertoire by modelling exposure to other behaviour patterns (Bandura, 1978), which means that people exposed to violence in childhood would learn and adopt violent behaviours and use them when they became caregivers. This prediction is congruent with the results of some of the studies analysed. However, it is not clear what happens to explain the second set of findings, where older adults with a history of abuse in earlier life are more likely to experience elder abuse. An important hint for what may be happening is provided by McDonald and Thomas (2013), who found that older adults who were victims in childhood, young adulthood and adulthood were more likely to experience elder abuse. Therefore, on the one hand, experiencing abuse earlier in life increases both the risk of becoming an abusive caregiver and an abused older adult. It is not clear how social learning theory can explain both of these results. Too many questions are left unanswered. What exact behaviours are learned in childhood when witnessing violence? What determines who learns how to be violent and who continues to be a victim? More studies are necessary to clarify the predictions of social learning theory, especially longitudinal studies.

One abuse or multiple abuses?

Our main research question focussed on how much support each theory had in explaining elder abuse in general and not specific types of abuse. Likewise, all the theories included in this paper explain the emergence of elder abuse but consider abuse in general, not the specific types of abuse. There is an unspoken assumption here that the mechanism underlying the emergence of abuse is always the same, despite the form of abuse. However, this assumption is not supported by the results found in several of the analysed studies, for example, regarding caregiver stress theory. The results of Orfila *et al.* (2018) show a significant association between caregiver burden and neglect but not between this burden and physical/psychological abuse. Likewise, regarding caregiver psychopathology, the results of Leung *et al.* (2017) show that poor mental health in the caregiver is associated with an increased risk of psychological and physical mistreatment but not with neglect. The disparity between results across the multiple forms of abuse suggests that some theories might be better at explaining certain forms of abuse than others. However, given the general formulation of each theory, only aiming at abuse in general and not considering the differences between each form of abuse forced us to classify results such as the abovementioned “contradictory evidence”; they support the theory in some cases but not in all. Of course, if the theories considered that their predictions could be applied to some forms of abuse, but not all, then this evidence would not be contradictory at all. The idea that the theoretical explanation of abuse should not consider it a monolithic phenomenon

but consider the different forms of abuse that have been suggested in the literature (Jackson and Hafemeister, 2016) has not yet been fully explored. Therefore, it would be of great importance to understand what theories are better suited to explain any particular form of abuse.

Is theory no longer worth studying (mentioning)?

As part of the conceptual and methodological quality assessment, we searched how many of the studies included in this review referred to a guiding theoretical framework. The results were an indication of how little the field of elder abuse is concerned with theoretical development. The lack of interest in theoretical advancement indicates that elder abuse is a domain not worried about understanding the phenomena that underpin it. Theories are systematic ways of understanding and interpreting phenomena essential for practice, prevention, policy-making and, of course, research. Therefore, further theoretical exploration is imperative, in contrast with the overreliance on caregiver stress theory (Jackson and Hafemeister, 2011).

Close to this subject is the diversity (or lack thereof) of variables explored in the various studies. Many different variables of interest were expected in the studies that fit as evidence for social exchange theory, considering the multiplicity of resources and forms of power/dependence. However, we found a considerable focus on physical function or physical dependency. The message this finding communicates is that we keep studying the same variables, over and over. Perhaps, a new and inventive look at the theoretical approaches used to explain abuse can give researchers ideas to innovate and pursue new variables and new avenues of research.

Conclusion

In this systematic review, we summarised evidence in favour of or against six theories used to explain elder abuse. Overall, the research findings support caregiver stress theory, social exchange theory, bidirectional theory, dyadic discord theory and psychopathology of the caregiver. Social learning theory was one of the least explored theories and presented contradictory evidence, suggesting that more research is necessary to contextualise its use. Theories such as caregiver stress theory focussed on specific processes within care relationships seem to be entwined with other process-specific theories. Finding new mediators for stress, psychopathology and relational conflict is an important step to fortify or amplify these theoretical frameworks' predictive power and better understand how these theories relate to each other. A metatheory to help organise and compare the multiple specific inputs of a theory also provides an interesting research avenue. This effort could lead to an inclusive framework that considers all the key elements of these theories to shed light on how these theories interact. That approach could be the development we need to provide better predictions about elder abuse, which are necessary to provide trustworthy foundations for prevention programmes.

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