

“Older people are weak”: Perceptions and Meanings of Ageing and Abuse Against Older People

Summary

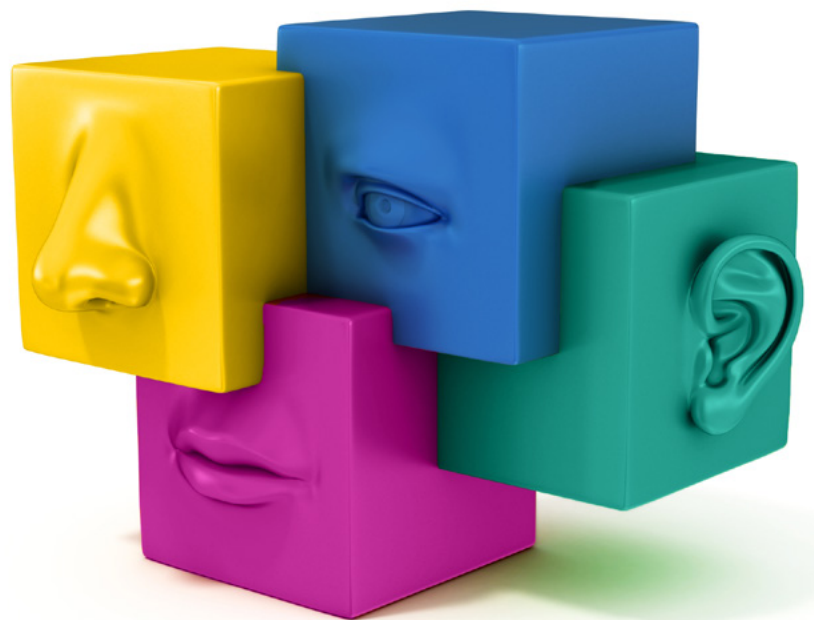
The study explores how aging is perceived in society and how these perceptions relate to elder abuse. Interviews with Portuguese individuals aged 60 and above revealed that societal attitudes, which often depict older people as weak or burdensome, contribute to normalizing violence against them. The study emphasizes that elder abuse is not just a private issue but a violation of human rights, which requires broader societal acknowledgment and intervention.¹

Methods

A qualitative approach was used, involving 45 semi-structured interviews with older adults aged 60 and above. Participants were from the EPIPorto cohort, a longstanding population study in Portugal. Grounded theory was applied to analyze their responses, focusing on their views of aging, types of abuse, and societal treatment of older people.

Results

Participants highlighted that societal narratives contribute to the invisibility and normalization of violence against older people. Abuse is often seen as a result of power imbalances, worsened by weakened family support systems. Psychological abuse emerged as the most prevalent, followed by financial and physical abuse. The research also highlighted that these forms of abuse often occur in domestic or institutional settings.



¹ Dias, I., & Fraga, S. (2024). “Older people are weak”: perceptions and meanings of ageing and abuse against older people. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 8, 1329005. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1329005>

Key Takeaways

- **Ageist attitudes:** Negative views of aging make elder abuse more socially acceptable.
- **Exposure to abuse:** The risk of abuse increases with diminishing family support and community networks.
- **Factors impacting abuse:** Abuse is associated with power imbalances between older people and perpetrators.
- **Abuse types:** Psychological and financial abuses are common, with psychological abuse often being more insidious.
- **Broader understanding needed:** Abuse should be understood beyond the family setting to include public and institutional domains.

Limitations

The study's qualitative nature and limited geographical scope (Portugal) make it less generalizable. Furthermore, participants were community-dwelling older adults, which means that those in institutional care were not represented.

Implications for Practice

Healthcare professionals and policymakers must develop interventions that challenge ageist perceptions, improve family and community support, and ensure that abuse in both private and institutional settings is addressed. The perspectives of older people should be elicited and integrated into the design of social policies to prevent violence against elders. Training and education about elder abuse should be widespread, emphasizing respect for the autonomy and dignity of older individuals.



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