Breaking the Taboo: Sexual Assault in Late Life as a Multifaceted Phenomenon - Toward a Theoretical Framework

USC Judith D. Tamkin International Symposium on Elder Abuse

Tova Band-Winterstein, PhD
Hadass Goldblatt, PhD

March, 2018
Haifa – My Home Town
The University of Haifa
The Process of Developing a Theoretical Framework of Sexual Assault in Late Life

- **Practice wisdom** – a) intervention with domestic violence
- **Practice wisdom** – b) intervention with elder abuse and neglect
- **Exposure to elder abuse theories** through my MA and PhD studies
- **Research and writing** on lifelong intimate partner violence, elder abuse, self-neglect as a faculty member
- **Sexual assault in late life** – addressing specifically older women
Sexual Assault among Women in Late Life (SAWLL) as a Phenomenon: In Need for a Theoretical Framework
Theoretical Knowledge Bases for SAWLL

- Sexual Assault (SA)
- Elder Mistreatment (EM)
- Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
Sexual Assault as a Field of Inquiry

- Terminology

**Definition:** Sexual assault is a non-consensual sexual, physical contact with another individual. This contact is also considered an assault if the consent is reached by force, through threats or the exploitation of authority (Felson & Cundiff, 2014; Smith & Skinner, 2012).

- Sexual assault is not age specific and runs through the lifespan
Sexual Assault as a Field of Inquiry

The etiological dimensions of SA

- (1) Social factors, e.g., patriarchal-traditional social construction;
- (2) Psychological factors, e.g., offenders’ psychopathologies and personality disorders
- (3) Biological factors, e.g., hormonal dysfunction and damage in brain structures
- (4) Interpersonal relationships, e.g., early abuse experiences
Sexual Assault as a Field of Inquiry

Consequences

- SA is characterized by: taboos, stigmas, and prejudices
- SA long-term consequences
Elder Mistreatment as a Field of Inquiry

- Sexual abuse as a type of EM
- EM provides a perspective of vulnerability in late life in general. Older women are only part of it

- Etiology: Social Exchange theory; Psychopathology of the Caregiver; Political Economy theory; Ecology; Ageism

- Relevant risk factors:
  - Physical or mental impairment
  - Limited social support
  - Cohabitation with the offender (spouse and/or additional family members)

- EM occurs both in domestic and institutional settings
Intimate Partner Violence as a Field of Inquiry

- Sexual assault is also mentioned as one type of IPV
- Occurs in all stages of life
- IPV is originally rooted in social construction of gender inequality
  - Based on the feminist theory, violence is perceived as a result of power and control
- The family conflict view perceives violence as mutual
- Long-term Consequences
The Emergence of a New Field of Inquiry
What do We Know about Sexual Assault among Women in Late Life?

A Focused Review of the Literature
Sexual Assault in Late Life

Definition

- **Hands-on** offenses including rape, attempted rape, fondling, harmful genital practices, oral-genital contact, prostitution of victim, sadistic sexual activity, or sexualized kissing

- **Hands-off** offenses include exhibitionism, sexual jokes and comments, showing victim pornography, or voyeuristic activity

(Ramsey-Klawsnik, 2003)
What do We Know about Sexual Assault among Women in Late Life?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Perpetrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SAWLL in the Community</td>
<td>Path 1: Ongoing sexual assault</td>
<td>IPV - spouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Path 2: Sexual assault beginning in old age</td>
<td>(1) Spouses (who suffer from cognitive deterioration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Adult children or other family members (such as sons-in-law, grandchildren, siblings, and nephews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Quasi-relatives: caregivers living with the older women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAWLL in Institutions</td>
<td>Path 3: Sexual assault in institutions</td>
<td>Staff and residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Path 4: Ongoing Sexual assault</td>
<td>Family members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Suggested Additional Perspectives on SAWLL

(1) Life course
(2) Trauma
(3) The social constructionist perspective
What is the added value of this theoretical perspective?

- It provides a comprehensive view on the interplay of trajectories, transitions, and epiphanies played out over time interactively and interdependently by individuals.

- It forms a web of ‘linked lives’, which helps explain what it means to live in sexually abusive relationships in the context of the abovementioned paths.

- These paths are interlocked, both within and across chronological age, life stages, and are examined in their historical and socio-cultural context.
Trauma

What is the added value of this theoretical perspective?

- Knowledge about trauma and its physical and emotional consequences:
  - chronic and acute somatic symptoms
  - health problems
  - psychological disorders (e.g., PTSD)
  - wounded body and self-image
  - limited trust in others
  - loss of control over one’s life
- Cumulative and complex trauma
The Social Constructionist View

What is the added value of this theoretical perspective?

SAWLL occurs within the social context of ageism and sexism. ‘Sexuality and sex are for the young.’

Consequently-

On the public and professional level, the phenomenon is marginalized and ignored.

On the personal level, older women themselves tend to internalize ageist and sexist values.
SAWLL: A New Point of Departure for Research and Practice
תודה רבה!!! – Toda Raba!!!