

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**



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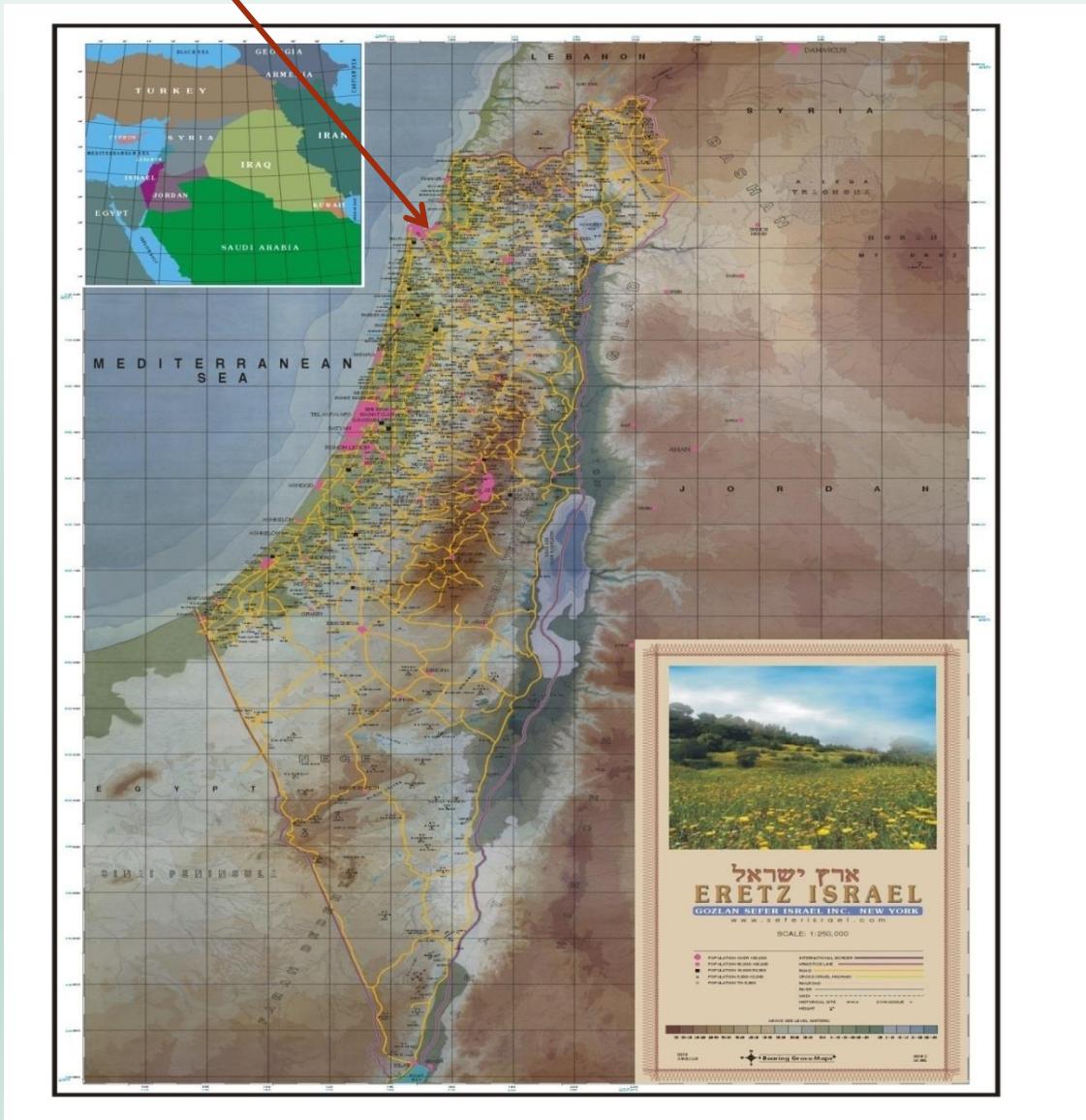
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Haifa

Israel



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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

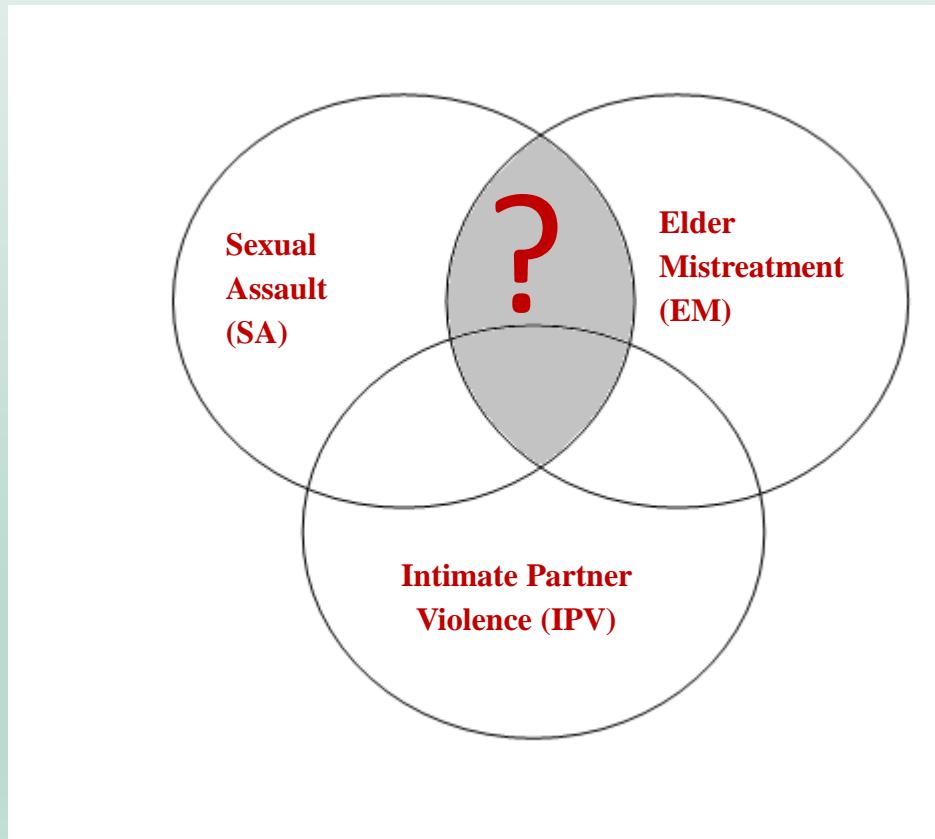


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Sexual Assault among Women in Late Life (SAWLL) as a Phenomenon: In Need for a Theoretical Framework



Theoretical Knowledge Bases for SAWLL



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

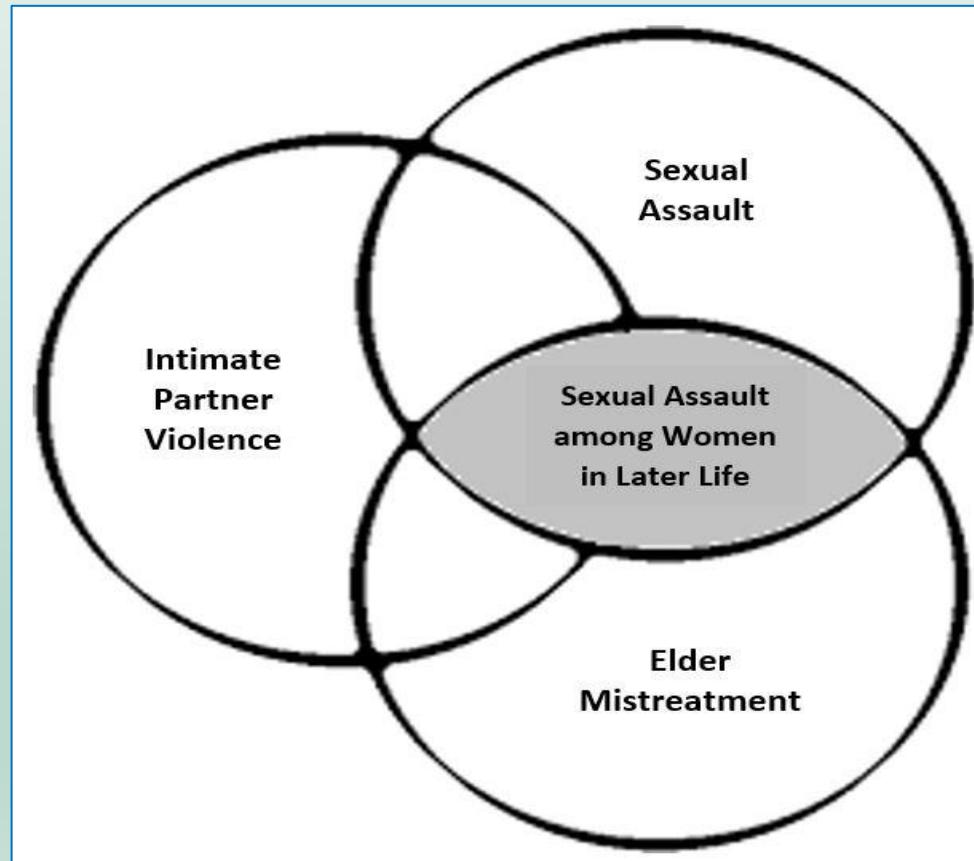
Elder Mistreatment as a Field of Inquiry

- ▶ 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-Klawnik, 2003)

What do We Know about Sexual Assault among Women in Late Life?

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

Suggested Additional Perspectives on SAWLL

- (1) Life course
- (2) Trauma
- (3) The social constructionist perspective

Life Course 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.

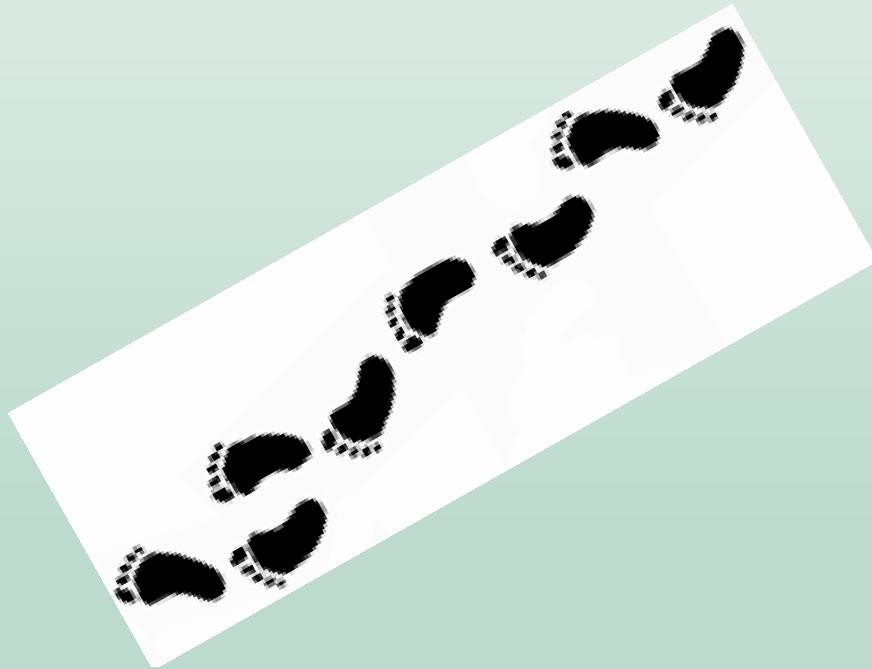
Trauma

- 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!!!

