

# “A frail little thing, but she’s wily”

## Police Brutality Meets Dementia: a Narrative Inquiry

Kelly Marnfeldt, MSG  
kellyfor@usc.edu

### BACKGROUND

- From 2010 to 2020, circa 12,000 older adults were admitted to the E.R. due to injuries caused by encounters with police or private security.
- Ms. G, a 73-year-old woman with dementia and sensory aphasia, was arrested on June 26, 2020, in Loveland, Colorado, when she left a large retail store with \$13.88 worth of merchandise she did not pay for.
- The two arresting officers caused Ms. G. to suffer multiple injuries, including a dislocated shoulder and a broken arm.
- Despite her injuries, she did not receive medical care for over 6 hours while in custody.

### AIMS & METHODS

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to explore publicly available archival data sources.

#### Sampling

Extreme (or deviant) case sampling was used to gain insight into the arrest of Ms. G.

#### Data sources

Primary data sources include surveillance camera footage, 6 hours of police body-worn camera footage, and audio-enhanced precinct footage; a 2.5-hour, in-depth, open-ended interview with a family caregiver.

Additional data sources included police reports and legal filings by a civil rights attorney representing Ms. G’s family. Supporting data sources included domestic and international newspaper reports, as well as a third party independent organizational assessment of the Loveland, Colorado Police Department.

#### Analysis

Immersion in the data to identify and extract meaning units, both verbal and non-verbal, was done in NVivo 12 software for written data, and through immersive journaling for video data, aimed at moving from shock toward sense-making.

Meaning units were clustered to identify the themes and patterns that best captured the essence of the phenomenon.

### FINDINGS

“Why isn’t this elder abuse?”

~ Ms. G’s Family Caregiver

#### THEME: Ageism

“She’s ancient.”

“...she’s been drinking or something...”

“She’s 73, I’m a little worried she’s like, senile and stuff.”

#### THEME: Road side as borderland

“I thought I broke her shoulder. Did you hear the pop?”

“Are you finished? *Stand up!* We’re not going to hold you!”

#### THEME: Failure of narrative mind reading

“She just stole from [the store] and refused to stop, refused to listen to lawful orders, and she fought me. This is what happens when you fight the police.”

#### THEME: Apathetic othering & mis-recognition

“If it was a big dude, it would have been different, but she was like 20 pounds.”

“Bodycams are my favorite thing to watch.”

### OVERARCHING THEME: UNCONSCIOUS CONSTRUCTION OF STIGMA

*Ageism + Unconsciously Constructed Dementia Stigma = Double Jeopardy for Vulnerable PWD*

### IMPLICATIONS

The training of officers to handle encounters with people with dementia (PWD) must be specific to the disease and its unique vulnerabilities and should not be conflated with mental illness.

Training should include raising officer awareness of how overt and implicit bias toward both older people and PWD act in tandem to contribute to stigmatization, othering, and dehumanization.

Unconscious dementia stigma among law enforcement toward PWD must be assessed at recruitment and be part of ongoing training to mitigate violence by police against PWD.

