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## THE PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS ON ELDERLY ABUSE

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THE PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS  
ON ELDERLY ABUSE

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Melinda Cholico  
Fatima Graciano  
May 2021

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the perception of elderly abuse among the social work students. The research study explored students' understanding of different types of abuse among the elderly. The exploratory research project utilized a qualitative approach that consisted of one-to-one zoom interviews using open-ended questions to obtain information about the students' insight, feelings, and experiences on the topic of elder abuse. The study sample consisted of five participants of an MSW program. Zoom interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, and were transcribed for analysis. The research findings show that students who have experience working with older adults or know an older adult, are more informed about the various forms of elder abuse. These findings are significant to social work practice because the more knowledgeable MSW students are about elder abuse, the easier they are able to identify the various types of elder abuse.

Keywords: Elder abuse, MSW students, social work

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Formulation

Elderly abuse is not a new topic and was recognized as far back to ancient societies (Gorbien & Eisenstein, 2005). The United States Senate Special Committee on Aging began a systematic study on elderly abuse due to abuse and neglect of the elderly becoming so severe in the 1970s (Gorbien & Eisenstein, 2005). By 1981, the study concluded that elderly abuse was not a rare phenomenon but was almost as common as child abuse (Gorbien & Eisenstein, 2005). Due to life expectancy increasing, elderly abuse or mistreatment is now a matter that requires social work attention (Manoj, 2017). As life expectancy rises, the need heightens for current and future social workers to understand the parameters and causes of elderly abuse.

According to Band-Winterstein, Goldblatt, and Alon (2014), within the last 30 years elderly, abuse and neglect have become recognized as a social and health-related problem. Even if social workers do not primarily engage with the elderly or have a gerontology career, there is still a possibility of stumbling onto elderly abuse. This is evident in social work students' mandated reporting duties; if a client discloses abuse/ neglect of children or elderly, regardless if the victim is a client, social workers must report. Social work students must be knowledgeable about all abuse, including types and situations of elderly abuse.

Elder abuse is a social problem that has significant social work implications at a micro and macro level. On a micro level, there are many forms of abuse that an elder can experience. The various types of elder maltreatment include sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and neglect. These various forms of elder abuse can affect an individual's wellbeing and socialization. Elder mistreatment can occur in the home, in licensed care facilities, or an acute care setting (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2017). At the macro level, students will become more informed about these agencies and can become motivated to work in or with these programs.

Elderly abuse is a serious issue that has slowly been incorporated into the community and policy. Various agencies host events and workshops on how to recognize elderly abuse and ways to prevent it. Some of the agencies that work directly with the community include Adult Protective Services and Ombudsman. These two agencies assist the vulnerable population by protecting the rights of these individuals. In California, Adult Protective Services' objective is to investigate elderly abuse reports and help the vulnerable population live a life free from danger (Adult Protective Services and Elder Abuse Hotline, 2019). The Ombudsman program investigates elderly abuse reports made towards a staff member in a healthcare facility and ensures that the elderly and dependent adults receive the necessary care (Department of Health Care Services, 2019).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the understanding and perspective of social work students on elderly abuse, and this was to include both Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work students. As elder abuse increases, having social workers who can identify and intervene in elder abuse is imperative. Higher rates and social work needs to focus on elders can also contribute to more job openings in gerontology. Though additional training can be provided on job sites, this can be avoided or less necessary if students are motivated to learn about elder abuse during school. These practices can be embedded into social work programs and also be offered through electives.

Due to the limited research on social work student's perspectives and understanding of elder abuse, the study required a qualitative method. The study was completed through interviews and open-ended questions. This research design was selected due to the exploratory nature of the research topic. Exploratory studies are those which have none to very little prior research. The researchers developed the open-ended questions and discussed them via zoom interviews with bachelor-level and master-level work students.

## Significance of the Project for Social Work

Social workers play a vital role in advocating and assisting the elderly population to live a better and worthy life in all aspects of society (Manoj, 2017). In social work graduate programs, where a generalist model is utilized, social work students must have general knowledge in all client subject matters. Evaluating social work students' perspectives on elder abuse is needed to ensure that social work students are well prepared for their mandated reporting duties.

The findings from this study had significant implications for social work practice. These findings contributed to the self-awareness of understanding of elderly abuse. This helped motivate social work students to engage outside their scope of competence and practice to expand their knowledge of social work skill sets. These findings will help universities identify the importance of increasing social work students' understanding of elderly abuse.

Social work students need to familiarize themselves with elderly abuse, the signs, types, and interventions/ preventions. This study helped examine social work students' perspectives and understanding of elderly abuse in order to broaden their range of knowledge. Due to minimal prior research, this study is in the exploring phase in the generalist intervention process. For this purpose, our research question is: How do social work students perceive/ understand elderly abuse?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

According to Acierno et al. (2010) and the National Council on Aging (2019) approximately 1 in 10 Americans of the age 60 and older have experienced some sort of abuse in the past year. The range can be estimated to as high as five million elder adults being abused every year in the United States (National Council on Aging, 2019). This indicates the need for social work professionals working with the elderly will increase. To understand elderly abuse and its prevalence, this chapter will define the main four elderly abuse and present their commonality. This chapter will also address the gaps and limitations in literature and methodology of social work students' perspective on elderly abuse and the theories guiding conceptualization.

#### Types of Elder Abuse

Physical abuse. Physical abuse among the elderly population can cause physical pain and injuries to a vulnerable individual. There are various forms of physical abuse, including assault, battery, hitting, punching, shoving, or utilizing equipment to prevent the elderly from moving ("Physical Abuse", 2018).

According to Altintop and Tatli (2019), in most cases where elderly adults are victims of abuse, the perpetrator is a family member. According to the National Elder Mistreatment Study, most physical abusers are spouses or partners (Acierno et al., 2010). Hooyman and Kiyak (2018) state that even though

financial and emotional abuse happens more frequently, physical abuse gets reported the most. Though physical abuse can happen to an older adult, elderly with dementia have higher physical abuse rates from their caregivers (Dong, Chen, & Simon, 2014). An estimate of 2.2% to 18.4% of all elderly who present as patients in the emergency department are victims of physical abuse (Altintop & Tatli, 2019). In 2013, an estimated 500,000 elder adults were medically diagnosed to be victims of physical abuse (Altintop & Tatli, 2019). Medical professionals have seen the 500,000 elder adults, but the number may be higher due to elder adults not seeking medical help.

Emotional. Emotional abuse is often called psychological abuse, and this type of abuse often occurs when a caregiver intentionally harms the elderly by utilizing verbal and nonverbal communication. Some forms of emotional abuse include blaming the victim, demanding the elderly to do something, humiliating the individual, ignoring the needs of the elderly, utilizing intimidation, and yelling at the victim (Emotional Abuse, 2018). In 2010, 21% of psychological abuse complaints were in nursing homes, and 24% were in board and care facilities (“Abuse of Residents of Long-Term Care Facilities”, 2012.). In 2010, 50% of nursing home staff admitted to harming the elderly by utilizing physical violence, mental abuse, and neglect (“Abuse of Residents of Long-Term Care Facilities”, 2012.). A study conducted by Arcierno et al. (2010) found that 4.6% of the subject participants had recently experienced emotional abuse. Of the subjects who recently experienced emotional abuse, only 7.6% reported the authorities’

abuse (Arcierno et al., 2010). This study shows how those older adults do not report emotional abuse.

Financial. The most common form of abuse among elderly adults is financial abuse. Often referred to as financial exploitation, financial abuse occurs when there are inappropriate use of an elder's money, property, and/ or assets (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2018). The perpetrators of financial abuse are often neighbors, attorneys, caretakers, family friends, medical staff, and bank employees. ("Elder Financial Exploitation", 2019). 90% of the perpetrators are family members ("Elder Financial Exploitation", 2019). Jackson and Hafemeister (2013) studied pure financial exploitation, in which 71 adult protective service caseworkers and elderly clients were interviewed and found that the participants had lost approximately \$4.6 million. It was also estimated that \$82,967 was lost per elderly victim (Jackson & Hafemeister, 2013). The study also showed that 17 percent of elderly victims were exploited through the mishandling power of attorney, which resulted in a total loss of \$432,000 and averaged about \$48,000 per elderly victim (Jackson & Hafemeister, 2013). Of the elderly victims, 86 percent did not recuperate their exploited funds. When interviewed, adult protective service caseworkers stated that even though financial abuse is the most common abuse, it is more difficult to investigate (Jackson & Hafemeister, 2013). Caseworkers note that investigating financial abuse takes longer, requires more evidence that is difficult to find, and often the financial institutions are reluctant to help or cooperate (Jackson & Hafemeister, 2013). Due to the

difficulty in acquiring evidence and the time needed to investigate, victims are reluctant to report financial abuse. Within the past decade, one in 20 older adults has experienced financial abuse (“Elder Financial Exploitation”, 2019). According to Elder Financial Exploitation (2019), one in 44 financial abuse incidents are reported.

Sexual. Sexual abuse is defined as any sexual act without the consent of both parties, in this case without the consent of the elder adult. Sexual abuse has further been defined to include: physical, sexual acts, showing an elderly person pornographic material, forcefully making the individual watch any sexual act, or forcing the elderly to remove clothes (Singh, 2014). In 2010, 7% of sexual abuse complaints in the United States were in nursing homes and board and care facilities (“Abuse of Residents of Long-Term Care Facilities”, 2012). These statistics show that sexual abuse is not a very common type of abuse among the elderly population. However, it is crucial to consider that many of the older adults who experience sexual abuse often have a disability that enables the individual to communicate. Many sexual abuse cases are not reported due to fear and embarrassment (“Elder Abuse”, 2016).

### Gaps and Limitations

Though there are plenty of articles on what elderly abuse is and the prevalence of elder abuse, there is limited research in the perspective and understanding of social work students on elderly abuse. From the previous research studies addressed, each lacked research in social work student’s

understanding. Therefore, this study reviewed the limited research available on the knowledge of elderly abuse of preprofessional students. Similarities and differences were also identified between the past studies and the current research study.

Policastro and Payne (2014) conducted one of the limited researches done on social work students and their knowledge on elderly abuse. Policastro and Payne (2014) stated that no previous research had been conducted to study the knowledge of preprofessionals enrolled in universities. Due to this void in research, Policastro and Payne (2014) conducted a study in which social work, nursing, health professionals, and criminal justice students were assessed upon their awareness of elderly abuse. The research found that students were well versed in child abuse but lacked knowledge of elder abuse (Policastro & Payne, 2014). Participants also indicated that they did not know enough about elder abuse and were unaware of the rule and protocols. This shows the importance of teaching the next generation of professionals how to spot and intervene in elder abuse.

Kane, Green, and Jacobs (2010) conducted another study focusing on social work students and their knowledge of elderly abuse. The study focused on human service students' ability to recognize domestic violence and elderly abuse. Human service students included departments of social work, criminal justice, psychology, and public administration. Participants were given three vignettes and were asked to identify which vignettes showed domestic violence

and elderly abuse (Kane, Green, & Jacobs, 2010). The research showed that participants were less likely to identify domestic violence when shown the vignette of an elder couple (Kane, Green, & Jacobs, 2010). Though the study did involve social work students, the elderly abuse aspect was limited to physical abuse ignoring emotional, sexual, and financial elderly abuse.

Both research studies showed the importance of studying preprofessionals, specifically social work students, and their knowledge of elderly abuse. The studies were limited in methodology as Policastro and Payne (2014) studied one specific university and survey 202 students, with only 27 social work students. There is weak external validity due to the small number of participants. Kane et al. (2010) had a larger sample size with 242 participants, with 132 social work students. Though the same size was larger, all students were from one specific university, showing limitations to methodology.

This research project had similarities and differences to the two previous research studies. One similarity is the methodology. Like Policastro and Payne (2014) and Kane et al. (2010), the research was completed through surveys and open-ended questions. Unlike the previous studies, this research was to include multiple universities. Also, unlike the previous study, the current research study was conducted only with social work students and did not involve other fields. The current research project was to include undergraduate and graduate social work students.

## Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Two theories used to conceptualize this study's ideas include Solution-Focused Brief Therapy and Oppression Theory.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is utilized to hold the client responsible for their solutions rather than their problems (Turner, 2017). The theory overlaps the strength perspective approach, which focuses on the positive aspects of the client's life (Turner, 2017). The SFBT focuses on developing a solution rather than talking about the problem the client is facing. It utilizes solutions and strengths in the client's treatment plan to further assist the client in meeting their objective. The SFBT is consistent with the social work values and the empowerment-based practice (Turner, 2017).

SFBT is a valuable intervention that can be utilized by social work students. Social work students can utilize SFBT to assist older adults who have experienced a type of abuse. Many of these older adults have developed depression, anxiety, loss of appetite, lack of sleep, etc., due to the abuse these individuals experienced. Some of the older adults who experienced financial abuse lost trust in other people. Utilizing this theory will help the client focus on a solution rather than the problem itself. It will allow the client to observe all the positive aspects of their life, empowering them.

The Oppression Theory is utilized in social work because it focuses on transforming the lives of the oppressed individuals in our society. The social work profession allows professionals to transform the client's lives by connecting them

to resources and services to enhance their wellbeing. (Turner, 2017). The theory relates to the power, privilege, and equality that many individuals lack in our society. The Oppression Theory focuses on social justice and the importance of advocating for the individuals who are not receiving equal treatment in our society (Turner, 2017). This theory can be applied to the settlement house movement, which occurred at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Turner, 2017). During this movement, social workers advocated for social justice and were actively involved in social policy (Turner, 2017). Their objective was to improve the living conditions of the immigrant poor, women, and children (Turner, 2017).

Social work students can utilize the Oppression Theory when providing services to their clients. In the helping profession, social workers are advocates, and their role is to care for the wellbeing of the individual. Social work students are exposed to a diverse population, and most likely, these students will work in an environment where they must provide services for an older adult. Social work students need to know the services and resources available to improve older adults' quality of life. It is also important to be aware of the laws affecting the population to better advocate for the client. Older adults who have experienced abuse are vulnerable, and they need a social worker to advocate for their needs.

### Summary

This study explored the perceptions of elder abuse among social work students. The elderly population continues to increase, and therefore, many social work professionals will be exposed to elderly clients. Social workers need

to be informed about the various types of elder abuse and know ways to prevent and report elder abuse. Social workers must be educated on the laws and regulations that affect this vulnerable population. As social work professionals, it is important to advocate for clients' needs and help with any problems.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This study examined the perception of elderly abuse among social work students. This chapter will detail how the research study was conducted. The chapter will be dissected into five sections: the study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, and protection of human subjects.

#### Study Design

The purpose of the study was to identify and evaluate the perception of elderly abuse among the bachelor's Social Work and master's Social Work students. The study explored the understanding and perception of elder abuse among social work students, including physical, emotional, financial, and sexual abuse among the elderly population. As previously stated, the elderly population is increasing over time, and therefore, there is a need for social workers in gerontology. Due to an increase in the elderly, social work students must be aware of identifying the various types of elder abuse and preventing abuse from occurring.

Due to the limited research on this topic, the study was conducted as an exploratory research project. Therefore, the study was to utilize a qualitative method for the BASW and MSW students to provide their perceptions and understanding of the different types of elderly abuse. The study was conducted

through an interview process via zoom utilizing open-ended questions as a tool to gather information. A qualitative method created an open environment for MSW students to provide insight and express their experiences, feelings, and insights on the topic of elder abuse.

The methodological strength is that these participants are not limited to one answer; open-ended questions allowed social work students to express their observations and viewpoints on elderly abuse. Participants provided the interviewer detailed information about what they have learned in their previous courses or work experiences applied to this study.

The study's limitation is the limited number of participants as the total did not surpass fifteen participants. Five students were to be selected from each of the BASW and MSW classes. This is an implication because the interviews were limited, and not every student received an opportunity to contribute to the research project. Another limitation is that interviews can be intimidating, and there is a possibility that the participants were nervous. A qualitative approach can make the participants uncomfortable answering questions and oversharing information. The interviewers conducting the research attempted to make the participants feel comfortable and welcomed before the interview to prevent unwanted incidents that can affect the study. Researchers received approval from the CSUSB Social Work Department before the data collection.

## Sampling

The study conducted utilized a purposive sampling technique to collect the data needed for the research project. The study used a non-probability sampling to specifically target social work students. The number of participants was five due to recruiting difficulties because of the COVID- 19 pandemic. All participants were in an MSW program. No BASW participants were involved. The researchers from this study chose students from each MSW program cohort, including first year part-time, first year full-time, second year part-time, and second year full-time. Due to the qualitative nature of the research project, the number of participants was low to accommodate the time restraints.

## Data Collection and Instruments

Qualitative data was collected via one-to-one zoom interviews that were held in the Fall of 2020. All interviews were subject to audio recording with the consent of the participants. Researchers utilized informed consent (Appendix C) before all interviews. Researchers discussed the purpose and a description of the study before conducting each interview. Researchers collected demographic information (see Appendix A) from each participant before beginning the one-to-one zoom interviews. The demographic information collected included age, gender, ethnicity, and the student's educational level (see Appendix A).

The one-to-one zoom interviews were made up of open-ended questions. The interview guideline sheet (see Appendix B) was an instrument purposely established for this research study using McNamara's (1999) and Turner's (2010)

guidelines for conducting interviews. Questions were categorized within the topics: knowledge, feelings, opinions, and behaviors. Question examples include: (1) what is your understanding of elderly abuse, (2) how will you handle an incident in which an elder is abused, and (3) what are some examples of elderly abuse. Researchers documented answers. Due to the qualitative nature of the research, it was important to gather personal narratives, comments, and opinions directly from the participants on their perspective and understanding of elder abuse and not ask any subjective or leading questions. The goal was to identify any themes, patterns, and/ or concepts in the interviews and document them. If necessary, researchers asked probing and clarifying questions to understand the participant's answers better.

Using an interview guide (see Appendix B) specifically for this research study, there was a need to pretest and test for reliability. This was done through pilot testing. Pilot testing allowed researchers to determine if there were flaws, limitations, and weaknesses within the interview design (Turner, 2010). This allowed for the refinement of research questions. Strengths of using this instrument of one-to-one zoom interviews included gathering deeper content and information from participation, asking participants for clarification, observing nonverbal cues, and can gather unanticipated information. Limitations included the time needed to conduct one-on-one interviews, limited participants due to the time needed, and participants feeling pressured by researchers' presence, leading to answering what they believe is socially desirable.

## Procedures

After the CSUSB School of Social Work approved the data collection, the study's researchers conversed with MSW professors via email regarding asking their students to participate in the study. The three professors allowed the researchers 10 minutes at the beginning of zoom classes to ask students if they were interested in participating in the research project. Researchers provided the students and professors with the researchers' contact information to establish zoom appointments. The interviews were conducted via zoom due to COVID- 19 restrictions and stay-in-place orders. Both researchers were in charge of interviewing the participants.

## Data Analysis

All data that was gathered was analyzed through thematic analysis. First, researchers transcribed the audio recordings of the one-to-one interviews. Second, researchers identified themes, patterns, and/or concepts that arose in the audio recording. This was done through coding, which included using a word or short phrase that summarized the portion of what is said. To ensure organization, a numbering system was used to identify text on different themes. This allowed for categorizing ideas and identifying evidence about perspective on each theme. Due to the cyclical process of the data analysis, data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously.

Similar to how the questions are categorized, participant's answers were categorized within the topics: knowledge, feelings, opinions, and behaviors.

Possible constructs that occurred included social work students being knowledgeable about physical and emotion abuse, but not familiarized with sexual and financial abuse of the elder population. Another construct that occurred is social work students' feelings comfortable in their knowledge of elder abuse but may not be comfortable to identifying it in the field. The cyclical process ensured that researchers read and re-read transcripts to find themes within each individual transcript and among all the transcripts together. This ensured the finding of themes and subthemes.

Though the study is of qualitative nature, quantitative information was collected due to demographics. Descriptive analysis was used to quantify the age, gender, ethnicity, and educational level of the participants.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

The confidentiality and anonymity of these participants were protected. The interviews were conducted in a private zoom meeting where only the researcher and participant were invited. An informed consent (see Appendix C) was provided to the participants before the zoom interviews. Each participant verbally confirmed they read and agreed to the informed consent (See Appendix C) before starting the interview. The participants were advised not to disclose names, and the interviewer utilized numbers to distinguish the participants. The audio recordings of the zoom interviews were shared only between the researchers, and the dictation was shared with the researchers' advisor.

## Summary

The study's purpose was to gather information about elder abuse perceptions among the BASW and MSW students. Due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, only MSW students were interviewed via zoom. Due to the limited research on the topic of interest, this research project provided insights and understandings which helped identify the need for more education on elder abuse at the school level. An exploratory research method utilizing a qualitative approach was used to gather personal experiences and insights into these social work students' lives.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss data analysis and the results. The data was collected through a qualitative study. A total of five Master's in Social Work students provided their insights on their perception of elder abuse through an 18-question Zoom interview with the researcher. The demographics of the participants include four females and one male. Four of the participants were between the ages of 25-34, and one participant was between the ages 45-54. A total of two participants (40%) are Hispanics, one participant (20%) is Hispanic and Puerto Rican, one participant is African Americana and Asian Pacific Islander (20%), and one participant is African American (20%).

#### Findings

Overall, the participants appeared to have a clear and good understanding of the various types of elder abuse. The researchers observed that the more exposure and interactions these participants had in working with the elders, the more knowledgeable they were. Since the Master's in Social Work Program in the university focuses on the generalist model, the participants clearly understand societal issues at a macro, mezzo, and micro-level. The topic of elder abuse is a social problem that continues to be addressed in Master's in Social Work courses. These participants' education encourages students to be familiar with the signs of elder abuse, types, and interventions/preventions needed to ensure that the elder is safe. These researchers concluded that students with

higher education or exposure in an environment where the individual works among the elder abuse population, the more informed and knowledgeable they are about elder abuse.

These researchers observed that some of the participants have elderly family members or caregivers to an elderly. When interviewing the participants, it was observed that these participants were highly empathetic and sensitive to some of the questions addressed in the interview. These participants were receptive to the questions and were willing to provide their personal experience on their perception of elder abuse. This section of the paper will be divided into four sections to discuss the significant common themes that participants addressed regarding the research question: How do social work students perceive/understand elderly abuse? The major themes include (1) types of abuse, (2) observation, (3) perpetrators, and (4) communication.

### Types of Abuse

When discussing the topic of elderly abuse, these participants had a clear understanding of the various forms of abuse. The various forms of elder abuse common among all the participants' answers include physical, emotional, and financial. Participants reported:

Participant 4: "My understanding of elderly abuse can be physical, financial, emotional."

Participant 2:

My understanding of elderly abuse is that anytime a person over the age of 65 suffers physical or emotional abuse at the hands of another person or institution who is supposed to care for, then that would be considered abuse. But there are other types of abuse like financial abuse.

### Observations

A second common theme was the observations that these participants made regarding physical, neglect, and financial. The participants were familiarized with ways they can determine if the elderly is experiencing these forms of abuse. Participants reported:

Physical abuse.

Participant 1: "I can determine if an elder is experiencing physical abuse by looking at their skin. Patients will have marks or bruises."

Participant 2: "I do think being mindful of the potential abuse and just looking out for those marking on the skin is extremely important."

Participant 3: "I would think it would be mostly through either seeing marks markings like unusual ones or if they're reporting that there is physical abuse."

Participant 4: "You want to definitely take a look at that person's body. Look for any new bruises and be careful to inquire about those."

Participant 5: "By seeing signs of physical abuse on their bodies."

Neglect.

Participant 3:

That one I think would be based off of like a lot of physical things that you would see. For example, like if uh there is like if their nails are super long and dirty. Only you know like if their physical appearance looks neglected.

Participant 4:

When you go in, you're going to look at the environment the tidiness and upkeep of the living situation, and you're going to definitely take a look at the care of the person. Like hygiene maintenance and upkeep cleanliness, so that will definitely be a little bit easier. Looking at, you know, the refrigerator foods, everything up to the trash taken out, bathrooms, things of that sort. So yeah, that would be a little bit easier because it will rely on visual evaluations and assessments.

Participant 5: "You will observe it through their appearance or because they mention something like being hungry or not making it to their doctor's appointments."

Financial.

Participant 1: "If a patient is experiencing financial abuse, they might have unusual activity on bank statements."

Participant 2: "They can start stealing, or they can just get frustrated with

the elderly person.”

Participant 5:

Maybe you know that they receive SSI or a pension, but they never have money to buy the things they need. Or you see that their appearance is disheveled, and it raises questions about their source of income and why they don't have money to care for themselves.

### Perpetrators

The third major theme that these researchers observed when dissecting the data are the similarities in perpetrators. These participants discussed that the perpetrators are usually someone that the elderly are familiar with. Participants reported:

Participant 1: “A perpetrator that I can think of is someone who is a family member, friend, or a health care member. The perpetrator is usually someone that the elderly knows.”

Participant 2: “I would automatically think of a perpetrator as somebody that is in care of an elderly person.”

Participant 3: “Sure, so there are I feel like most of them are probably caregivers like that's probably the most common.”

Participant 4: “Well, from my understanding of experiences, perpetrators can be family members who are given the responsibility or who are supposed to be there to help and support the seniors.”

Participant 5: “It can be anyone from a family member that cares for them, a neighbor, a partner, a grandkid taking financial advantage, or a nurse at a nursing home or skilled nursing facility.”

### Communication

Social workers can be familiar with the abuse the elderly is experiencing through an assessment with the individual. Interviewing the client will allow the social worker to understand the elderly’s situation better. Through the client’s conversation, the social worker can gather information about their demographics, finances, legal and ethical problems, and psychosocial concerns. This will help build rapport with the client, and the client will be prone to discussing any elder abuse with the social worker. The fourth common theme was communication between the social worker and the client. The participants reported:

Participant 1: “As a social worker, I would gather as much information as I can from the elder individual.”

Participant 2: “Also their body language, if somebody if the abuser is present in the room just being mindful of their body language. But other than that, it’s really just taking account of what the abuse is saying”

Participant 3: “I think the most obvious one would be well, I would think, would be physical abuse. Like if they see marks on the elderly individual or if the elderly individual reports being abused.”

Participant 4: “Communicate with the senior to ask questions.”

Participant 5: “We learned information by talking to a victim.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### INTRODUCTION

As previously stated, the study results showed that participants who were further into the MSW program or had more experience in the social work field were able to identify, define, and understand elder abuse more quickly. Though all participants were aware of mandated reporting in child welfare, one did not know that mandated reporting included persons with disabilities and elderly individuals. This chapter aims to review the significance of the results and whether the results answered or supported the research question. The chapter will be separated into three sections, including (1) discussion, (2) recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research, and (3) the conclusion.

#### Discussion

##### Significance of Results

The study results are significant as they allow for a preview of the ability of MSW students to identify and understand elder abuse. The study shows that regardless of the experience of incoming MSW students, students are educated on mandated reporting and have a brief understanding of elder abuse by the final year of the MSW program. The findings supported our research question as the findings showed the more experience the participants have in the social work field, the more they can identify abuse types. All participants were able to identify three main elder abuse, including neglect, physical abuse, and financial abuse.

All participants were able to note the importance of communication and observation when identifying elder abuse. The results also support the findings of the limited studies conducting regarding social work students and elder abuse. As Kane et al. (2010) found, all participants were able to identify some elderly abuse, including physical, neglect, and financial. Not every participant was able to identify emotional and sexual abuse as part of elder abuse. The results are also congruent with the findings of Policastro and Payne (2014), as most participants were able to identify how mandated reporting included child abuse, but some did not include elder abuse. Like the participants in Policastro and Payne (2014), two of the five participants did not feel ready to identify, report, and work in a field where elder abuse reporting may occur. As there was limited literature on social work students' perspectives and understanding of elder abuse, this study's findings cannot be compared or contrasted to many other published literature.

Identify unanticipated results and any possible explanations

As anticipated, students further into the MSW program were more knowledgeable and had a more significant understanding of elder abuse. Previous experience in the social work field also proved to be a major factor in participant's ability to identify and understand elder abuse, which was an unanticipated result. Participants who have been in the field longer may have already been exposed to elder abuse or have come across colleagues who have had experience with elder abuse. Participants who had more field experience

also felt more comfortable working with elders and identifying elder abuse. This can be due to being more comfortable in the social work field and acknowledging that consultation is a major social work component. Participants who stated they were confident in their ability to recognize elder abuse shared they would seek consultation, advice, and help from colleagues to ensure they report elder abuse in an accurate timely manner.

### Limitations

As this study was the first research project to solely focus on social work student's perspectives and understanding of elder abuse, limitations occurred. Initially, the study was supposed to include BASW and MSW students from multiple universities. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participation was limited and was conducting from one university. All interviews had to be conducted through zoom sessions, limiting the participants' engagement and making recruiting participants difficult. The study consisted of five participants, which makes the study have weak external validity due to the small number of participants. Due to the pandemic, researchers could not get participants from other universities, which is a limitation in methodology. All limitations were linked to the pandemic as it caused the researchers to pivot from the original plan and had to accommodate new research methods.

## Recommendations

As the research project was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the main recommendation would be to recruit more BSW and MSW program participants. Researchers also recommend including participants of other universities, as the study was involved only one university, and other schools may not have the same curriculums. Researchers recommend conducting interviews, if possible, in person as it may allow participants to be more at ease and conduct better rapport. Researchers recommend that social work students be exposed to elder abuse mandated reporting through courses and fieldwork as far as research for social work practice and policy. Training should be readily available to students to better prepare them for the social work workforce. However, the university allows students to take one elective course, including a gerontology course. Working with the elderly population and reporting elder abuse should be general information taught to all social work students.

## Conclusion

Overall, the research project findings validated the researcher's implications for social work, including establishing participant's self-awareness of their understanding of elder abuse. Participants noted whether or not they felt confident in their ability to identify elder abuse and reestablished the significance of social worker's mandated reporting. As this research topic has minimal prior research, the study was exploratory. In broader implications for social work practice, social work programs and field internships can provide social work

students with more experience working with the elderly population, identifying and reporting elder abuse. Due to the limitations of the study, further research is needed and recommended.

APPENDIX A  
DEMOGRAPHICS

## Demographics

1. Please indicate your gender:

Female

Male

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Please select the category that includes your age:

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65 or above

3. Please select your ethnicity:

African American

Asian Pacific Islander

Native American

Hispanics and/or Latino

Caucasian

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your current level of education?

BASW

MSW

Developed by Melinda Cholico and Fatima Graciano

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

## Interview Guide

1. What is your understanding of elderly abuse?
2. How would you handle an incident where an elder individual is abused?
3. What are some examples of elderly abuse?
4. What challenges do social workers encounter when reporting an elder abuse incident?
5. How can a social worker recognize when an elder is experiencing abuse?
6. What are some examples of perpetrators in an elder abuse incident?
7. What is your understanding of mandated reporting?
8. What is the most common type of elder abuse?
9. What places are some common places where elders experience abuse?
10. What experience do you have when working with elders?
11. What interventions are needed when an elder has experienced abuse?
12. How can you determine if an elder has experienced physical abuse?
13. How can you determine if an elder has experienced sexual abuse?
14. How can you determine if an elder has experienced emotional abuse?
15. How can you determine if an elder has experienced neglect?
16. How can you determine if an elder has experienced financial abuse?
17. What are your feelings on elderly abuse?
18. Do you feel that you are prepared enough to identify and work with elder abuse? Why?

Developed by Melinda Cholico and Fatima Graciano

APPENDIX C  
INFORMED CONSENT

## INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine social work students' perspective of elderly abuse. The study is being conducted by Melinda Cholico and Fatima Granciano, graduate students, under the supervision of Dr. Armando Barragán, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the study is to examine the perspective of social work students on elderly abuse.

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be asked questions related to their understanding of elderly abuse, their understanding of mandated reporting, and interventions used when confronted with elderly abuse.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your responses will remain confidential and data will be reported in group form only.

**DURATION:** It will take approximately an hour to complete the interview process.

**RISKS:** Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

**BENEFITS:** The benefits of this study include encouragement of expanding knowledge on elderly abuse prior to entering social work field. This study may also increase knowledge of interventions and mandated reporting. This study may show if universities need to expand courses and focus on elder abuse and gerontology.

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Barragán at (909) 537- 3501.

**RESULTS:** Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2021.

\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*\*\*

I agree to have this interview be audio recorded: \_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

\_\_\_\_\_   
Place an X mark here Date

APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL EMAIL



July 7, 2020

**CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**  
Administrative/Exempt Review Determination  
Status: Determined Exempt  
IRB-FY2020-247

Melinda Cholico Armando zzzDELETED\_Barragan, Fatima Graciano  
CSBS - Social Work  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Melinda Cholico Armando zzzDELETED\_Barragan, Fatima Graciano

Your application to use human subjects, titled "The Perception of Social Work Students on Elderly Abuse" has been reviewed and approved by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino has determined your application meets the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants. The exempt determination does not replace any departmental or additional approvals which may be required.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action.

- Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.
- Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.
- Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.
- Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mgillesp@csusb.edu](mailto:mgillesp@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2020-247 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Nicole Dabbs

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair  
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

ND/IMG

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## ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

Through the partnership of the researchers, this study has been a collaborative effort. Both researchers have been part of each section within the study, helping and guiding each other for the purpose of examining the perspective and understanding of social work students on elderly abuse. Both researchers were involved in the problem formulation and the literature review. Melinda Cholico authored the section on gaps and limitations, while Fatima Graciano penned the section on theories and guiding conceptualization. Both researchers were involved and collaborated in the study's methods section. Both researchers collected the data, while Fatima Graciano completed the results and Melinda Cholico completed the discussion.