

# Nonphysical Abuse: Findings in Domestic Violence Against Older Women Study

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**ABSTRACT.** This article reports findings regarding nonphysical abuse of middle-aged and older women in intimate relationships based on 21 focus groups with 134 women ages 45 to 85 years. Computer assisted qualitative data analysis was used to organize and analyze data. Descriptions of nonphysical violence appeared clustered under the notion that power and control dynamics were integrally related to the effect of such abuse on older women and that as a result nonphysical abuse might be more difficult to endure and have more lasting effects than physical violence. Generational influences and the context of long-lasting, abusive relationships appeared to contribute to attitudes of participants regarding nonphysical

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abuse. These findings have not been previously documented in women in this target age group.

**KEYWORDS.** Domestic violence, elder abuse, nonphysical abuse, psychological abuse, power and control, middle-aged women, later life

The Domestic Violence Against Older Women study captured perspectives of 134 women age 45 and older regarding the experience of domestic violence in later life. The discussion protocol included queries regarding the language participants used to describe such violence, the context in which it occurred, and factors that prevented older women from seeking or obtaining help. This article describes previously unreported findings from the Domestic Violence Against Older Women study regarding nonphysical abuse of older women in intimate relationships.

Nonphysical abuse as used here includes experiences that were identified in the literatures on domestic violence, domestic violence in later life, and elder abuse with the words psychological, mental, verbal, and emotional in various combinations with action descriptors such as abuse, battering, aggression, and violence. The term "nonphysical" was selected because it incorporated multiple definitions used in previous research and also was inclusive of the wide range of ideas and feelings expressed by respondents in our study.

This article is organized into several sections. First, we examine nonphysical abuse in the existing domestic violence, domestic violence in later life, and elder abuse literatures. Next, we provide a brief overview of the research design, data collection, and data synthesis processes, followed by a description of results supported by respondents' own words. The article concludes with a discussion of results in relation to previous studies, and the importance of these results in terms of future research, theory development, and creation of effective intervention strategies for older women who experience nonphysical domestic abuse.

### ***NONPHYSICAL ABUSE IN THE LITERATURE***

The domestic violence literature describes the impact of nonphysical abuse on victims from research samples that do not include an older population or identifiable older cohort. Although the emerging literature on domestic violence in later life also addresses nonphysical abuse, with few

exceptions (e.g., Fisher & Regan, 2006; Montminy, 2005) this literature is largely silent regarding the impact of nonphysical abuse on victims in terms of how victims perceive their situation, how they cope and survive, and barriers to help-seeking. The elder abuse literature includes discussions regarding definitions and incidence and prevalence of nonphysical forms of abuse but focuses little attention on how these types of abuse affect victims. Results from our study address this knowledge gap, expand what is known about the impact of nonphysical abuse on victims of domestic abuse in later life, and establish that older women, like many of their younger counterparts (e.g., Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990; Marshall, 1992; O'Leary, 1999), often believe that nonphysical abuse is more harmful to victims than physical violence.

### *Nonphysical Abuse in Domestic Violence Literature*

Much research regarding nonphysical abuse in the domestic violence literature has focused on definition and development of assessment instruments, perhaps because there is widespread recognition that an empirical definition of nonphysical abuse will be difficult to develop (Kelly, 2004; O'Leary, 1999). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDCP's) recommendations for uniform definitions for intimate partner violence offered one of the most global definitions of nonphysical abuse (Basile & Saltzman, 2002). In addition to an almost exhaustive list of acts, threats of acts, and coercive tactics, the CDCP's definition acknowledged that in some cases victims' perceptions regarding abusiveness of certain behaviors would determine whether or not it was, in fact, a form of abuse.

The literature includes results of research regarding the notion that nonphysical abuse, at times in combination with physical violence, is a mechanism by which abusers attempt to gain power and control over their partners (Mezey, Post, & Maxwell, 2002; Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Walker, 1983). Several studies of younger women found that victims believed that nonphysical abuse was worse than physical violence. For example, in a sample of 234 young women who had some history of physical abuse, Follingstad et al. (1990) asked participants to rate relative impact of emotional versus physical abuse. Seventy-two percent of the women rated emotional abuse as having a more negative impact on them than physical abuse. Similarly, in a study of college women and a second sample of community women, Marshall (1992) found that emotional impact ratings were generally numerically higher (i.e., more acute) than

ratings for physical impact. Loring (1994) reported that victims of non-physical abuse had more difficulty identifying when abuse was occurring, and Marshall (1996) observed that such lack of recognition may negatively affect victims' abilities to defend against and recover from nonphysical attacks. O'Leary's (1999) comprehensive synthesis of findings from prior research on psychological abuse as a component of domestic violence concluded

... at levels of physical aggression that are most common in marriage and long-term relationships, psychological abuse appears to have as great an impact as physical abuse. Even direct ratings of psychological and physical abuse by women in physically abusive relationships indicate that psychological abuse has a greater adverse effect on them than physical abuse. (p. 3)

### ***Nonphysical Abuse in Domestic Violence in Later Life Literature***

The literature on nonphysical domestic abuse in later life includes a number of reports regarding nonphysical abuse of older women (e.g., Lundy & Grossman, 2004; Mezey et al., 2002; Mouton et al., 2004; Penhale, 1999). Gravel, Beaulieu, and Lithwick (1997; reported in Montminy, 2005) found that psychological violence, identified in 86.9% of 130 cases studied, was the most common form of abuse for elder couples. In a qualitative study of abused women, Zink, Regan, Jacobson, and Pabst (2003) concluded that in many cases women did not even identify psychological/emotional abuse as "abuse." In a quantitative study, Zink, Fisher, Regan, and Pabst (2005) measured psychological/emotional abuse in the context of multiple abuse types and found that it was reported most frequently, with 45.2% of subjects reporting occurrence after the age of 55 and 31.7% in the past year. Similarly, in Fisher and Regan's (2006) cross-section sample of community-dwelling women who were at least 60 years of age, 45% had experienced some form of nonphysical abuse since turning 55 years old. In another study of women aged 65 and older, 21.9% of the sample reported experiencing nonphysical abuse in their lifetimes, where nonphysical abuse was defined as threats or controlling behavior (Bonomi et al., 2007). Of nonphysical abuse victims, 92.9% reported "threats-anger" and 68.5% reported controlling behavior in combination with one or more other types of violence (Bonomi et al., 2007).

Marshall (1994) noted that subtle abuse may actually be more effective in controlling an abuse victim than physical violence, in that concealed abuse alternated with loving behavior may increase the victim's uncertainty about herself and her perceptions. In fact, some researchers have speculated that many of the negative ramifications previously attributed to physical violence victimization may actually be products of nonphysical abuse, which almost always accompanies physical violence (Follingstad & DeHart, 2000).

### ***Nonphysical Abuse in Elder Abuse Literature***

Two seminal research studies on elder abuse defined nonphysical abuse as chronic verbal aggression, which included insults, cursing, and verbal threats (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Podnieks, 1992). These studies found evidence of nonphysical abuse, although the prevalence was low (1.1% and 1.4% of the samples, respectively). Using a similar definition of verbal abuse but with markedly different results, Mouton et al. (2004) found that in the previous year 89.1% of respondents were exposed to verbal abuse only and 8.8% to both physical and verbal abuse.

Another landmark study, the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study (1998), labeled nonphysical abuse "emotional/psychological" and defined it to include verbal assaults, insults, threats, intimidation, humiliation, harassment, infantilization, isolation from family, friends, or regular activities, and giving the "silent treatment." Emotional/psychological abuse was substantiated in 54.1% of cases reported to Adult Protective Services in 1996.

The current study was designed to explore the language and attitudes of older women when they described "out of control" conflict and the effects of such conflict on women their age. In addition, the study focused on the context in which such violence occurred and the factors that prevented older women from seeking or obtaining help.

## ***METHOD***

### ***Research Design***

Maximum variation sampling measures were employed to recruit a diverse respondent pool (Patton, 1987). Respondents for 18 "nonvictim" groups (defined later) were screened for age, language, race, ethnicity, and family income to obtain the desired sample diversity, and based on an

assumption that unguarded focus group dialogue would be encouraged by assigning women to groups of similar age, ethnicity, race, and income characteristics. These respondents, primarily recruited through notices in local English and Spanish language newspapers in Miami-Dade County, Florida, were not screened for prior domestic violence experience.

However, the research team wanted to ensure that older women who had experienced domestic abuse were included in the sample. Therefore, three additional groups were conducted. Participants for these three "known-victim" groups were separately recruited through local domestic violence programs and were comprised solely of older women with prior domestic violence experience.

Two strategies were used to enhance respondents' sense of privacy and to encourage candid dialogue. First, in the recorded discussion and on the consent document participants were allowed to use a pseudonym in place of their legal name. Second, the \$25 participant stipend, paid in cash, obviated the need for us to maintain any personally identifying respondent information. Research protocols and informed consent documents were approved by the local institutional review board.

### ***Data Collection***

Twenty-one focus groups of 5 to 12 women each ( $N = 134$ ) were conducted in community facilities where privacy during group discussion could be ensured. Sessions lasted between 1½ and 2½ hours. Each session was audio-recorded after obtaining participant permission.

The discussion protocol was constructed so that descriptive responses to the prompts would be in the participant's own words. For example, recruiting materials stated that the study focused on "conflict" in personal relationships, the same language that was used when screening potential subjects. Discussion prompts included what is "normal" conflict like in close relationships?; what happens if conflict gets "out of hand"?; how do situations get "out of hand" and is this ever "excusable"?; what does the term "domestic violence" mean to you and would you consider any of the conflict stories we've heard to be examples of domestic violence?; do people talk about it when there is violence, and if they don't, why not?; what happens to victims if they tell someone about the abuse?; what do you think happens to people who are violent with their older spouses or partners and is that what you think should happen?

After the initial probes regarding "normal conflict" and how "normal" was distinguished from "out of control," the natural flow of the discussion

determined the order of the remaining questions. The terms "elder abuse" and "domestic violence" were rarely spontaneously introduced by participants before the specific prompt was made by the facilitator, which did not occur until descriptions of conflict and out-of-control conflict were fully explored. The terms emotional, mental, verbal, psychological, and nonphysical abuse were never introduced by a group facilitator, nor were any descriptions of these or any other specific types of abuse.

With very few exceptions respondents were willing to share their thoughts and personal stories with group participants and the researchers. Quite a few mentioned how much they enjoyed the discussion and many exchanged telephone numbers at the end of their session.

### *Data Analysis*

All focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim, including the eight groups conducted in Spanish. Spanish transcriptions were translated to English to facilitate coding by the entire team and reviewed by bilingual members of the research team for accuracy and to make sure that idiomatic expressions were accurately interpreted.

Data were synthesized using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS, ti v. 5.2; Muhr, 2003–2005). The synthesis process involved independent coding of the first transcript by two research team members. The team then discussed and unified the coding strategies. Researchers employed the resulting strategy to code the remaining transcripts independently using the constant comparison method. Periodic meetings were held to confer regarding emerging codes and themes, which included external barriers to help-seeking (Beaulaurier, Seff, Newman, & Dunlop, 2005), internal barriers to help-seeking (Beaulaurier, Seff, Newman, & Dunlop, 2007), the relationship between abuser behaviors and barriers to help-seeking (Beaulaurier, Seff, & Newman, in press), and the importance of emotional abuse, and to reconcile discrepancies in coder interpretation (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000; Padgett, 1998).

Ongoing context-based confirmation of respondents' intended meaning helped weed out concepts and constructs not grounded in participant quotations. Additionally, although findings from this type of analytic procedure are not considered generalizable (Corbin & Straus, 1990; Newman & Benz, 1998), the research was designed to produce findings that were representative of the experiences and beliefs of all participants. To protect the integrity of the analysis and findings codes or themes not linked to

statements of at least two respondents in at least two groups were not considered in later analyses and are not reported.

## RESULTS

Overall, including the participants in the three "known-victim" groups, we estimated that one third of the sample described experiencing some type of domestic abuse over the course of their lifetimes. One or more respondents in 15 of the 18 "nonvictim" groups and all of the "known-victim" groups talked about nonphysical abuse in response to facilitator prompts relating to "out-of-control conflict" or in response to other participants' remarks during the discussion.

Many respondents in each of these groups were largely in agreement that, for older women who experience domestic violence, there was no clear demarcation between physical and nonphysical forms of abuse. Respondents reported profoundly negative effects of nonphysical abuse on self-esteem and self-image, and many expressed a belief that victims of nonphysical forms of abuse healed very slowly or never healed. Some women stated that nonphysical abuse was worse than physical violence. These unprompted observations, made in the context of all possible forms of conflict, abuse, and violence in intimate relationships, have not previously been reported for older women.

### *Power and Control Dynamics*

Focus group participants connected power and control dynamics with the impact of nonphysical abuse on older women. Power and control often were perceived to be related to the systematic destruction of the victim's feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy:

*"You cannot do anything right." "You are not capable . . ." "They completely annihilate your personality if you are not capable of thinking for yourself. They get you involved in a circle where you are just a cockroach stomped by an elephant's foot."*

Respondents reported that their abusers used a variety of nonphysical tactics. Some of these were perceived as abusive in their own right. Others seemed to have the effect of perpetuating the victim's vulnerability to the abuser. Nonphysical abuse tactics reported by respondents included fear,



jealousy, manipulation, taking advantage, and isolation and were described as particularly disturbing and perilous in later life when participants felt themselves to be largely invisible within their families and society.

At times, fear appeared to stem from a history of physical harm at the hands of the abuser. However, a number of participants who had not experienced physical violence described a sense of terror in their relationship with an intimate partner. Respondents indicated that abusers would often combine verbal threats with messages related to the victims' feelings of hopelessness and lack of resources:

*"The persons who come to fear, and then having fear, in order not to stimulate any more violence, they keep quiet, start to tolerate, then the abuser abuses more."*

*"... they want to have you all to themselves because they want to control everything that goes into your mind ..."*

Participants also linked jealousy with an abuser's need for control, describing behaviors like frequently interrupting telephone conversations or limiting contact with parents, other family, and friends:

*"He was ill with jealousy . . . he controlled everything. He wanted to know every thought in your head."*

*"The jealousy was terrible! He told me I had to be by him 24-hours a day. Not even to go to the bathroom! I had to go with him!"*

*"When he met me I was a lot thinner. Very pretty . . . He told me, 'I am going to make you fat so no one looks at you'."*

Manipulation was another form of nonphysical power and control dynamics discussed by focus group participants. Often the manipulation began early in the relationship and continued as an ongoing power and control tactic:

*"They don't show you these traits when they're lovey-dovey and trying to get you."*

*"... it's criticism, pickiness, what they call crazy-making. It's all of that. And I was in it, and I was never hit."*

*"... when someone's telling you that you're not feeling what you're feeling, in a sense, if it goes on for so many years, you start believing it. Even though you know, 'Hey, that's not how I'm feeling', you start believing."*

Respondents' identified a close connection between the concepts of manipulation and exploitation of a victim's vulnerability:

*"... some of them are just plain mean. That's all! They see someone afraid of them then they'll take advantage of them."*

*"... one needs to know how to deal with this type of person because you cannot answer yes to everything they say. If you agree to everything, you are losing your self-esteem. It is too much humiliation, [it] is too much tolerance, and the person will take advantage of that."*

Participants indicated that abusers often separated them from their families, friends, and the outside world. This kind of separation appeared to cut off not only avenues for escape but also messages and supportive resources not controlled by the abuser:

*"... he isolates her, and then [she is] isolated, without money... he does it gradually, like the drops of water eroding a stone."*

*"... so that other people don't get ideas into your mind like freedom, like they are abusing you, so they isolate you to have that control."*

Participants also described certain traits or qualities in older women, generally connected to generational values and attitudes, which made them particularly vulnerable to nonphysical abuse tactics. These included submissiveness, belief in the sanctity of marriage vows, and a notion that a woman had to be perfect. The following example incorporates all three of these themes:

*"... They taught us in such a different manner, that the woman had to be submissive, she had to tolerate in marriage, that matrimony was until death, so one sticks to that and gets hurt. The other thing is the shame, the embarrassment that one gets, because one says 'my friends, they are all married and tell them that I am going to get a*

*divorce?', and the kids too, I stay because of my son, then it is a very big problem."*

Many older women said that their inclination to be submissive was so deep-seated that it was difficult to resist, even in cases in which they knew these beliefs were being exploited:

*"I don't like to antagonize people or hurt people's feelings, that kind of thing, which kind of gets me in trouble because I think a person that is controlling or abusive looks for people that are timid."*

More often, however, women indicated that other factors, such as low self-esteem, contributed to their submissiveness:

*"It's amazing to me how a perfectly intelligent woman can become so lacking in confidence over a period of years . . . that they lose their confidence in themselves to the point where they can't function without this abusive person leading them around."*

Belief in the sanctity of marriage was often referred to with phrases such as

*"I guess if you're interested in marriage it just has to be for better or for worse and you have to work things out . . ."*

*"But, like I say, some older people done been together so long till they feel like, you know, when they married long time ago, they married till death do you part."*

Some participants described this belief as something an abuser would take advantage of. Generally, this was expressed as an attitude of older women that made escape from abuse more difficult. In a few cases, women even indicated that the sanctity of marriage was more important to them than abuse. Older women were raised during a time when the differentiation between gender roles was stronger and less permeable than is true today. Such roles, which have traditionally included subservience, pleasing the man of the house, and keeping a good home, could also be exploited by abusers:

*"When you start feeling bad about yourself, that's how you know it's out of hand. That's how I started understanding what was going*

*on, by feeling so bad and keeping everything inside and just ready, one time, just to burst and not knowing and trying to be more perfect and more perfect to make everything to be better and better."*

*"I had to be how he wanted me to be. I had to cut his steak, for example, the rice and beans. He had to have five course meals . . . I also needed to make him custard, had to make him flan (custard) and arroz con leche (rice pudding) desert."*

*" . . . we are women and we have to give an example to the kids. We cannot be divorced . . . one does not want to be divorced, without a husband . . . . One wants to be the perfect mother."*

### ***Nonphysical Abuse is as Bad as or Worse than Physical Violence***

The connection between power and control dynamics and the impact of nonphysical abuse on women in the study appeared to strongly relate to the frequently expressed belief that nonphysical abuse was worse than physical abuse. Thoughts like those reflected in the following quotations were repeated throughout the sessions:

*"There is no bigger sin than the one that comes out of the mouth, because when it comes out of the mouth it comes straight from the heart. And when there is violence, hurting things are said, things that can kill with words. Words hurt more than a beating."*

*" . . . when you say violence, you mean physical abuse. There's many people who've never had physical abuse, which I never had . . . You can do a heck of a lot by talking, innuendo, all sorts of things. And it's much worse than physical abuse."*

*"The psychological violence is worse than physical. It is total abuse. Then the time comes when the person goes mad. They get her crazy by mistreating her psychologically. The person gets emotionally sick."*

Nonphysical abuse was sometimes described as "invisible." Some respondents talked about the impact of the invisibility and linked this to the opinion that many family, friends, community social workers, law enforcement officers, and some victims themselves would not recognize nonphysical abuse as severe or significant. Participants felt that this perception, that nonphysical abuse was somewhere below the threshold of

what would be considered unacceptable or illegal behavior, could serve to keep some women in an abusive situation:

*"... because sometimes I almost wished [he would hit me]. If he hit once I knew I would be out of there."*

Many respondents described concerns regarding how people in the community might respond to nonphysical abuse. The following statement was made in the context of a discussion about the difficulty in obtaining assistance for nonphysical abuse from a domestic violence hotline:

*"... think of all the women who are not calling because their husbands are just being mean to them, but they're not hitting them."*

Law enforcement response was another concern described by respondents in the discussion of nonphysical abuse. In particular, participants believed that law enforcement officers would not recognize nonphysical abuse as a crime:

*"First speaker: [The police] want to see the bruises and the black eye and the teeth knocked out. Second speaker: They don't know sometimes mentally it's even more damaging. That's what's hidden. That's what never comes out."*

*"... mental abuse can be worse than physical abuse. You have no proof of it. You have nothing to show and you can't have them arrested..."*

Some of the most poignant focus group dialogue described the difficulty or impossibility of healing from emotional abuse. In some cases, participants compared healing from physical wounds to recovering from nonphysical abuse:

*"... a punch, a wound, is going to heal ... But the psychological abuse terminates you ... many women don't know it, but it is the worse crime. It is worse because you cannot see it. The psychological mistreatment is felt and it goes on destroying one from the inside ... this is worse than any other thing because it starts damaging a person's mind. Our entire life is damaged because of emotional violence."*

*"A physical bruise on the skin can heal, but emotional scars take a lot longer to heal. They're inside, see. They're not outside. It's like when you have an operation, the stitches on the outside heal much faster than the stitches inside."*

*". . . the mental part doesn't go away. You can hide the physical part, or you can make excuses for the parts that show, but mentally, you can't hide it. You can try going around laughing and being nice, but in your heart you're breaking, you're hurting, you're screaming for somebody to help you. But you don't know who to scream to, who to go to, nothing."*

Respondents identified the negative effects of nonphysical abuse on self-esteem and self-image as another reason why nonphysical abuse is more damaging than physical violence. For example

*"I don't know how much is even hitting. It's more your mind. It's like mind -- screwing around with your mind. Making you feel insecure."*

*". . . hurting things are said, things that can kill with words. Words hurt more than a beating. Then, when self-esteem is lost, one feels inferior to the other person as a human being, as a woman, as a person."*

Several respondents noted that abusers recognized and exploited the poor self-image they induced:

*"Generally, the more abused, the more vulnerable, so it becomes a vicious cycle."*

*"The person who is the perpetrator in the situation knew . . . that I would be silent about the abuse and that's mostly why it continued. He knew I would never say. And that was because of pride, foolish pride, not to let anybody know that I was going through this."*

## DISCUSSION

Authors writing from a feminist perspective have long held that non-physical abuse, at times in combination with physical violence, was a

mechanism by which abusers attempted to gain power and control over their female partners (Mezey et al., 2002; Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Walker, 1983). More recently, Fisher and Regan (2006) reported that 88.2% of those who experienced a type of nonphysical abuse labeled "control" said the abuse occurred often. Nearly 30% of abuse victims had suffered from psychological/emotional abuse in combination with one or more of the other four types of abuse measured. In another study of women aged 65 and older, 21.9% of the sample reported experiencing nonphysical abuse in their lifetimes, where nonphysical abuse was defined as threats or controlling behavior. Of victims, 92.9% reported "threats-anger" and 68.5% reported controlling behavior in combination with one or more other types of violence (Bonomi et al., 2007). Other elder abuse and domestic abuse in later life research (e.g., Fisher & Regan, 2006; Lundy & Grossman, 2004; Mezey et al., 2002; Mouton et al., 2004; National Elder Abuse Incidence Study, 1998; Penhale, 1999; Zink et al., 2005, 2003) similarly found that nonphysical abuse affected significantly more older women than physical violence.

Marshall (1994) noted that subtle abuse may actually be more effective in controlling an abuse victim than physical violence, in that concealed abuse alternated with loving behavior may increase the victim's uncertainty about herself and her perceptions. In fact, some researchers have speculated that many of the negative ramifications previously attributed to physical violence victimization may actually be products of the nonphysical abuse, which almost always accompanies physical violence (Follingstad & DeHart, 2000). Although the elder abuse and domestic violence in later life literatures are largely silent on this point, the findings of the current study are consistent with this notion. There is a need for research to explore and document this further.

Understanding physical and mental health consequences of nonphysical abuse is another area that requires more attention. Several studies of older women reported significant physical and mental health consequences for elders who experience ongoing abuse (e.g., Lundy & Grossman, 2004; Mouton, Rovi, Furniss, & Lasser, 1999; Zink et al., 2005). However, we found few research reports that focused on the physical and mental health consequences of nonphysical abuse as distinct from effects of physical violence. In a study of younger women (average age was 34.7 years), Sackett and Saunders (1999) found that nonphysical abuse correlated with depression, the only health factor examined in their study.

Only one report was found linking nonphysical abuse with negative physical and emotional health outcomes in an older population. Fisher

and Regan (2006) reported that older women who experienced nonphysical abuse alone, repeatedly, or with other types of abuse had significantly increased odds of reporting bone or joint problems, digestive problems, depression or anxiety, chronic pain, and high blood pressure or heart problems. Although the results were comprehensive, the lack of confirmation of these findings and the knowledge gaps regarding the connection between specific types of nonphysical violence and specific physical and mental health outcomes is a compelling argument for more research.

Although many participants in our study recognized the negative consequences of nonphysical abuse, a large number also believed older women may not acknowledge nonphysical abuse as unacceptable or serious, and therefore are unlikely to seek help. This finding, not previously reported in studies of older women (Montminy, 2005), is consistent with studies conducted with younger female samples. For example, Loring (1994) reported that victims of nonphysical abuse had more difficulty identifying when abuse was occurring. Marshall (1996) observed that this lack of recognition may negatively affect victims' abilities to defend against and recover from nonphysical attacks.

The fact that community services and justice systems are unprepared and unable to respond to "unseen" acts of violence and their consequences has been widely discussed in the domestic abuse in later life literature (e.g., Dunlop, Rothman, Condon, Hebert, & Martinez, 2000; Vinton, 1999; Wilke & Vinton, 2005), although it has not been described specifically in relation to nonphysical violence. Lack of preparation is partly a function of the large knowledge gap described in this article.

Related to lack of knowledge is lack of training in many service sectors regarding how nonphysical abuse is manifested, barriers to help-seeking for older victims, and effective intervention strategies. Additional research is needed in each of these areas. The issue of systemic response and consequences for nonphysical abuse is particularly complicated with regard to the justice system, which is structured to respond to victims who report experiences or events that are clearly defined as illegal. The insidious nature of nonphysical abuse creates great challenges in terms of translating related behaviors into criminal code. Nevertheless, in the absence of some sanctioned response from the victim services and justice systems, many older women suffer terribly with no hope of safe harbor.

In summary, findings regarding nonphysical abuse in the Domestic Violence Against Older Women study are important for a number of reasons. First, it is likely that significantly more older women in our



sample were affected by nonphysical abuse than physical violence. Second, most victims and nonvictims in this study considered nonphysical abuse to be more damaging over time. Third, physical and emotional health consequences of ongoing nonphysical abuse on older women may contribute to chronic physical and mental health problems among elder women. Fourth, despite recognition of negative consequences, older women may believe that nonphysical abuse does not "count" as a legitimate or reportable problem and therefore are unlikely to seek help. Fifth, community services and justice systems appear to be unprepared to respond to nonphysical abuse, leaving many older victims with no place to turn for assistance.

Finally, the potential impact of nonphysical abuse is likely to dramatically increase as the baby boom generation ages. The numbers of elders in proportion to the total population are predicted to grow significantly over the next 20 to 30 years, which is likely to spur growth in the number of victims of domestic abuse in later life. For all of these reasons, the need for research, theory development, and creation of effective intervention strategies for older victims of nonphysical abuse is compelling.

### ***Limitations***

Some of the limitations in these findings result from the study's approach. For example, Miami-Dade County is a large metropolitan area with a broad cross-section of residents. However, because we used a self-volunteering subject pool, there is a possibility of bias based on residency in any single geographic area, a factor we did not directly attempt to control. Furthermore, although we employed a sampling strategy designed to maximize variation, study respondents do not necessarily represent older women in any other community.

Respondents generally learned about the research through advertisements about a study of "conflict in intimate relationships." To minimize the potential for selection bias, we purposely avoided the use of the word "violence" in the subject recruiting materials. However, it is still possible that the word "conflict" may have contributed to the relatively high number of women who had experienced abuse volunteering for the study.

Results of the Domestic Violence Against Older Women study data are consistent with other important findings about nonphysical abuse and older victims. Clearly, many pieces of this puzzle have been identified. However, there is still an urgent need to fit it all together, particularly in terms of older victims.

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