



## Rosalie S. Wolf Memorial Lecture: *What Does the Elder Abuse Field Need? Perspectives of a Journal Editor*

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***Karen Stein, PhD***  
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First of all, I would like to thank NCPEA for this tremendous honor. It is especially meaningful, because Rosalie Wolf was such a pioneer in the field and someone I greatly admired. I am deeply humbled to receive this recognition in her name.

Let me tell you about the first time I met Rosalie Wolf. I was a young academic in my first university position. My field was public policy. I knew nothing about elder abuse and had no interest at all in anything to do with old people. But a professor in my college took me under her wing. Her name was Suzanne Steinmetz and she had just co-written a book that researched domestic violence called Behind Closed Doors. Anyway, she came across a federal RFP for demonstration projects in elder abuse and pulled me

into it, teaching me how to write federal proposals. We both were, basically, chasing the money.

While we may not have had any background in elder abuse, we did have good ideas and we were funded. We were called to Washington D.C. to meet with past funded investigators—and that consisted of exactly one person, Rosalie Wolf, who had just finished her study on 3 model intervention projects. Rosalie, at first, was a little put off that we—nobodies who had never expressed any interest in elder abuse—were getting very scarce federal dollars that would have otherwise gone to support her project. But Rosalie was the kindest, most instructive person you would ever want to have on your side, and she became a great mentor and friend, and, eventually, colleague. At that time shortly after we first met, when elder abuse research was just in its beginning stages, Rosalie told me 3 things to remember, just in case I continued in this field.

- *The end goal of your research is not just to publish, but to inform practices that can actually improve the condition of abused and neglected older people.*
- *Your end goal interests as a researcher are identical to the interests of practitioners, so understand each other and work collaboratively.*
- *You won't reach your end goal if you don't answer the most important question: What Works?*

So I could end right here with the shortest presentation on record and say that from my perspective of a journal editor, the elder abuse field needs to know “what works.”

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

But then, it's possible that someone here could say, “Wait a minute. Elder abuse research isn't in its infancy anymore. We've had a good 25 years of intervention funding

for a host of organizations and services ranging from protective services to multidisciplinary centers, 25 years of training programs developed for almost every conceivable profession ranging from doctors to hairdressers to judges to meter readers to bankers to postal workers; we've had 25 years of funding for a National Center on Elder Abuse. And we have an entire research journal, *The Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, dedicated to elder abuse research. I don't think its fair to say that we don't know "what works." After all this time and effort, how could we not?"

Well, that's a fair view. So let me back up a bit for historical context, and then go forward.

To start, let me read you a statement:

There are a plethora of "best practice" models for increasing the effectiveness of prevention and treatment efforts within service delivery agencies. However, without an evaluation of our current...systems...we do not have a valid basis upon which to institute these practice models. We still lack reliable knowledge of what types of programs and delivery systems function effectively given different sets of conditions and circumstances. In essence, we still need to determine what "works" and what doesn't "work." Given that many intervention programs and systems may involve high...costs, it is most important that we have a true indication of their effectiveness for different types of people under a variety of circumstance. (Stein, *A National Agenda for Elder Abuse and Neglect Research*, 1991)

When do you think that statement was written?

1991. And yes, that was a long time ago. And it indicates what we did not know at the time.

So let's compare the research agenda of 1991—which raised the most important questions for research to address at that time—with the *Elder Justice Roadmap* of 2014 that identified the field's most urgent current needs and highest research priorities:

<b>2014 Elder Justice Roadmap<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>1991 Elder Abuse and Neglect: A National Research Agenda<sup>2</sup></b>
Test and evaluate the efficacy of various types of multidisciplinary responses to elder abuse.	What is the effectiveness of interagency coordinating mechanisms (multi-disciplinary teams, state units, community organizations, etc.)?
Evaluate the efficacy of programs designed to address elder abuse, such as adult protective services.	What are the factors related to effective adult protective services? What are the appropriate outcomes of...APS?
Create and test intervention strategies that are designed to enhance strengths and ameliorate risks for elder abuse.	How do we measure the effectiveness of intervention? For example,...At what threshold point along the dimensionality continuum is early intervention effective for different types of abuse and for clients at different stages of functioning and competency? At what threshold points will intervention not matter?
Evaluate the availability of...victim service options for older victims. Evaluate existing services to determine which models best meet older victims' needs and preferences.	What programmatic and individual interventions are effective in dealing with each form of abuse (e.g. respite programs, day care, counseling, education, support groups?)

<sup>1</sup> Connolly et.al., 2014, pp. 23-24

<sup>2</sup> Stein, *Elder Abuse and Neglect: A National Research Agenda*, 1991, pp 20-22

The recommendations from the 2014 report indicate that prevention and intervention efforts still lack testing and evaluation. In essence, 23 years later, the strategic questions and quest for knowledge have not radically changed.

But those are just research *agendas*. If one examined the actual research studies conducted and published, wouldn't we find that we now have evidence of the long-term effectiveness of the many different prevention and intervention strategies and services used to reduce the occurrence or severity of elder abuse and neglect?

A 2009 literature review of the effectiveness of elder abuse and neglect interventions concluded that there was not sufficient evidence to attest to the effectiveness of any elder abuse prevention intervention (Ploeg, Fear, Hutchison, MacMillan, & Bolan, 2009); (National Research Council (US) Panel to Review Risk and Prevalence of Elder Abuse and Neglect, 2003).

That was a pretty significant wake-up call to the field. But equally if not more shocking was a 2016 review of the literature that confirmed that conclusion (Pillemer, Burnes, Riffin, & Lachs, 2016).

Now, as journal editors, don't we receive manuscripts that evaluate prevention and intervention programs and strategies? Of course. We get a lot of submissions. But here's what we mostly find. Studies that assert to test outcomes usually evaluate a single program, often with small samples. Descriptive, bivariate statistical analyses are primarily used – and very often misused to draw causal conclusions about significant relationships – when all they really reveal are associations. So we really don't know if the impacts of a program or intervention are due to the intervention – or to the characteristics of the program, or to its people who are delivering the intervention.

Well, that doesn't sound too good. And while I tend to be a very blunt person, my friend and fellow editor Sharon Merriman-Nai told me it would be really good if I were to be aspirational tonight. So, here's the good news! Our present state of elder abuse research is great news for you – because it opens up a world of opportunity for you to do work that will make a profound difference in the elder abuse arena. This is not a field in which all the important work has been done and it's a struggle to even find a topic or problem worth investigating.

So, as you move forward to that end goal of expanding knowledge through research that informs effective practices and policies, an intermediate step is putting your work to the test of peer review with the hope of eventual publication.

Here are six pieces of advice, based on my perspective as a journal editor. Which is another way of saying, "Do these, and your chances of being published and becoming the Rosalie Wolf of your generation just got higher."

1. Put the *science* back in social science. You need to be expert in methodology, statistical analysis, and data interpretation.
2. Develop a research team of people who hopefully like you, but who aren't like you. My closest colleague is Sharon Merriman-Nai and I would rather work with her than anyone else in the world. We share a common view, we have the same strengths, and we understand each other. And those are exactly the reasons why we, by ourselves, make a terrible research team. Find and work with colleagues who have different strengths and viewpoints – not just those who think like you and have the same skill set.

3. Your work should not only contribute new knowledge, but also be important. If you've done a pilot project in a community in New Mexico testing outcomes of an intervention, ask yourself why a researcher/practitioner in Ohio would care. If you can't answer that question, what you have may not be appropriate for a research journal.
  
4. Just like no wine before its time, no manuscript before its time. Thinking about that pilot project in New Mexico—maybe it's not ready to be published because you're really not finished. Maybe you need to expand your pilot project to four other sites in areas of different population characteristics and governance (and that's why you need a research team). Do your initial results still hold? Why do they or don't they? Now what you have is new and potentially important. (And, of course, we are assuming a rigorous outcomes evaluation, not just descriptive statistics based on a pre-and posttest immediately prior to and after the treatment).

And before we leave the subject of no manuscript before its time – nothing drives a peer reviewer to make nasty comments more than reading a manuscript that is really a draft, is filled with grammatical and spelling errors, and has statements like “I'll discuss the meaning of these results later if the manuscript is accepted.” Guess what – it won't be accepted.

5. Be interesting. Borrow and use frameworks from other disciplines to further our understanding of elder abuse and neglect phenomenon. Develop new theoretical constructs to help us think about old problems in new ways. Don't interview ten experts, and, based upon an intensive focus group process, walk away with only the obvious conclusion that people exhibiting early Alzheimer's are more susceptible to financial exploitation.

6. Finally, *if you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with* (with thanks to Bachman-Turner Overdrive).

What the field loves now are large-scale experimental designs and controlled randomized treatments that forge a definite path forward towards what works. But we can't all *be* with those kinds of studies. We might be, instead, with non-experimental community level programs or intervention practices that are of low cost and small scope. And if those are the projects we're with, we can love them too by generating evidence-based assessments.

Let me give you an example. In the past decade, World Elder Abuse Awareness Day has grown into a national and international movement involving thousands of communities and people. It's safe to assume that the costs are substantial, though widely distributed across these thousands of organizational events. It's a really big deal. And we have no idea of the impacts of all this activity. We have no idea if WEAAD makes a difference, and yet we continue to pour scarce resources into this annual event. What if we considered WEAAD not just as an international day of activity to promote public awareness, but also as a measureable outcomes-based prevention intervention (Stein, 2016)?

Could we do that? Absolutely. In fact, I have laid out a blueprint for doing just that, complete with measureable outcomes. You can find it in the No. 3 issue, Vol. 28 of JEAN. It's important evaluative research just waiting to be done, and I hope someone in this room will take up this challenge. It's my gift to you.

So, after all this, let me finally come back around to the actual question that's the subject title of this presentation. Bill Mahr has a segment on his show called "I don't know this for a fact, but I know its true." What the elder abuse field needs, is to know what's true, based on fact.

Rosalie Wolf was our field's first staunch advocate of employing rigorous research methodology to test the outcomes of elder abuse interventions. This is Rosalie Wolf's legacy to us. It's time we made good on it.

## References

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