Relational context and family dynamics: elder abuse

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This paper presents the results of applied research that aims to explore the relational context, dynamics and patterns in families in which elder abuse (EA) occurs. Although this area is especially relevant, given that most of these situations occur within the family environment, there are few studies that establish which family environment factors influence the emergence of an EA situation. This is the reason for our interest in carrying out research that could help to improve this lack of knowledge. The research has enabled the identification of the types of family situations in which EA emerges and the definition of five basic relational factors present in an abuse situation that contribute to evaluating the degree of family functionality or dysfunctionality. Last, in light of the results, a guide has been designed for relational and family diagnosis in EA cases, which includes guidance for the psychosocial approach aimed at basic social services (SSB) professionals.

Introduction

As part of the Plan for Knowledge Management, the Department of Social Innovation in Barcelona City Council's Area for Social Rights, Global Justice, Feminism and LGBTI Affairs is promoting the establishment of a culture of applied research in public administration, as a basis for intervention, continual improvement and innovation.

This research pertains to one of the priority lines of action for promoting the adequate treatment of senior citizens and improving the prevention and response to elder abuse situations that may occur in the city, and provides continuity for the work undertaken by Barcelona City Council in recent years in order to improve our knowledge about elder-abuse situations and for innovation in the types of rehabilitating psychosocial approaches, in the context of basic social services.

The research is part of a broader project that has been carried out in various phases. The technical development phase aimed to establish a theoretical and conceptual basis that would identify types of situations that lead to elder abuse, as well as the various factors, triggers and associated variables involved. The production of a map of key areas[3] marked the beginning of a process for defining family-functionality parameters involved in an elder-abuse emergency.

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Diagram 1. Structural and social factors
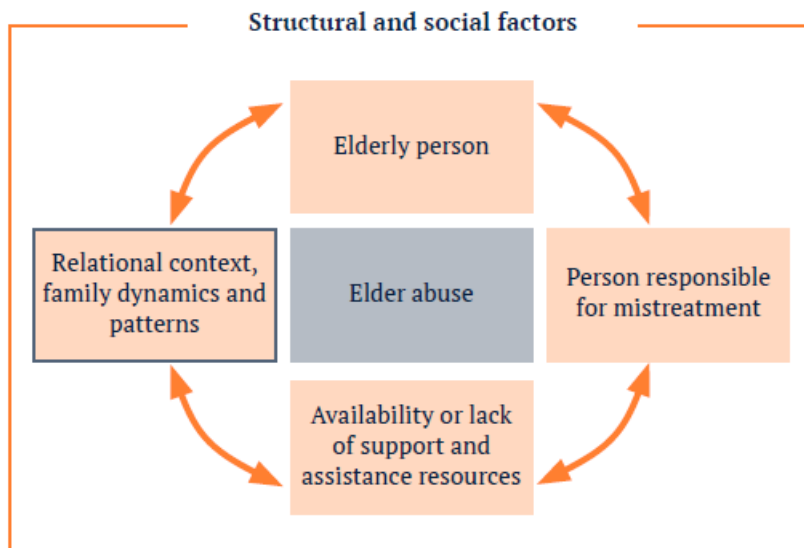
This map is a visual tool that organises the parameters that are relevant in an emergency and in the development of elder-abuse cases, as well as the way in which they interact with each other. It therefore shows the factors and features present in an elder-abuse situation, while also emphasising the multi-variable and relational nature of the cases. In other words, the map aims to compile and list all the interconnected factors involved in elder-abuse cases, in a schematic and summarised way.

This map is organised into four key sections which refer to the four main areas that must be taken into account when evaluating a possible case of elder abuse. These areas interact with each other, making the possible appearance of a case of elder abuse more or less probable. As shown in Figure 1, the four areas are as follows: a) the elderly person; b) the person responsible for the mistreatment; c) the availability or lack of support and assistance resources, and d) the relational context, family dynamics and patterns. In turn, all of these areas are influenced by a series of structural and social factors that determine the wider emergency context of elder-abuse situations.

Each of the key areas is one of the themes that must be evaluated in order to understand the situations that lead to elder-abuse cases. In order to facilitate this analysis, each area of the map includes a series of parameters that must be evaluated. Therefore, within each area there are indicators, variables or risk and protection factors that help the observer to decide on the probability of an elder-abuse situation occurring. In addition to evaluating each key area separately, it is equally important to take into account the relationship between each and every one of them. None of the key areas or indicators provide an explanation on their own, but rather act in combination with each other. It is therefore necessary to evaluate all of the parameters, risk and protection factors related with each area, as well as their possible combinations. Under no circumstances may any of the factors or areas be taken in isolation when evaluating the probability of an elder-abuse emergency.

The area of relational context, family dynamics and patterns is one of the four key areas; the bibliographical review undertaken enables us to affirm that this is the area where there is a lack of studies and scientific proof exploring its links with elder-abuse situations (Cardona, Meyer, Schiamberg and Post, 2007; Iborra, 2009; Sanmartín *et al.*, 2001; Tabueña, 2006). Therefore, in contrast to the other areas, there are almost no studies that establish which factors in the family and relational sphere affect an elder-abuse emergency, in spite of this being especially relevant, given that most elder-abuse situations arise in a family environment, as indicated in a number of documents, guides and protocols concerning care in elder-abuse situations.

This is the reason for our interest in undertaking applied research that would reduce this knowledge gap and contribute to improving both the prevention and diagnosis of elder-abuse cases, as well as intervention in them. In order to make this possible, collaboration was initiated with the Couples and Family Research Group (GRPF) at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational and Sports Sciences, Blanquerna-Ramon Llull University and Barcelona City Council's Area of Social Rights, with the following objectives:

To identify and describe the relational contexts, family dynamics and patterns involved in situations where elder abuse occurs.

- To evaluate the types of situations relating to elder-abuse emergencies.

- To identify which processes relating to family functionality are present and in what way they affect each of the situation types.

- To carry out a relational diagnosis in order to define the most appropriate psychosocial approach and intervention strategy.

The research methodology used was a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach.

1. Methodology

Design. The design of this research is based on a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach, with the aim of obtaining greater understanding of the research objectives. More specifically, out of the various possible types of mixed design, we have based our research on the explanatory design according to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), whose objective is to obtain quantitative information, with the subsequent use of qualitative information to explain, reinforce or modify the obtained results.

Procedure. This applied research was undertaken in four phases, following a sequential process in order to facilitate the collection of data through various techniques and its subsequent analysis (Diagram 2).

Diagram 2. Diagram of the four applied-research phases
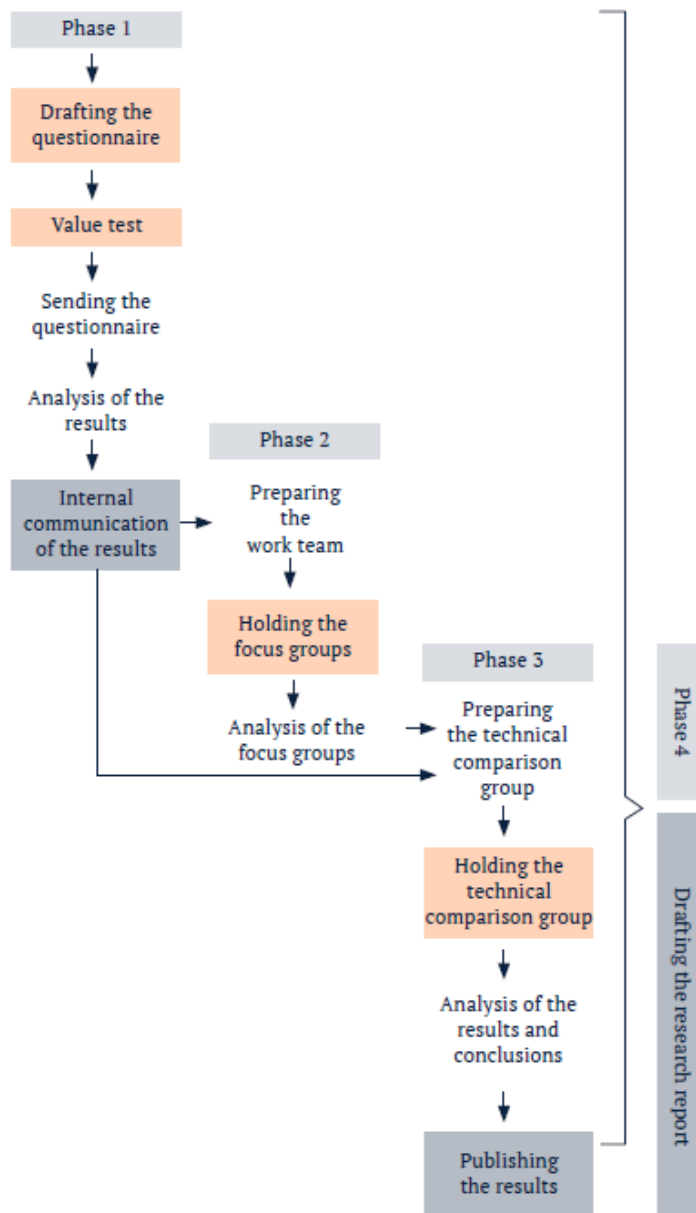
Techniques and participants. The fieldwork was carried out using three main research techniques.

1. Questionnaire

Designing a questionnaire to compile quantitative data that recorded information relating to the work of professional members of staff at social services centres (SSC) and their experience in attending elder-abuse cases. The questionnaire had three sections:

• The first section consisted of questions on each participant's professional data: their professional role, the district where they worked and their years of professional experience in BSS.

• The second section compiled information about the frequency of the type of family situations leading to elder abuse, with or without family dysfunctionality, which they had come across during their professional careers in SSCs.

• The third and last section focused on answering various questions relating to two random cases (Case A and Case B) from the seven identified types of dysfunctional situations. The series of questions in this last section referred to variables relating to elder abuse, the relational factors and indicators that evaluated the degree of family functionality.

This questionnaire was sent to all SSC professionals. A total of 64 professionals from the USTAC (Monitoring, Treatment and Collective Action Unit) who work with senior citizens answered the questionnaire. 89.06% of the participants were social workers, while 7.81% were psychologists and 3.12% educators.

In regard to the distribution of participants in the SSC districts where they work, 23.4% work in the district of Horta-Guinardó, 20.3% in the Eixample and 10.9% in Sant Martí, followed by 9.4% in the districts of Ciutat Vella and Sant Andreu. In regard to their years of professional experience, it should be noted that 34.4% have had a professional career lasting over 16 years. It can therefore be affirmed that the professionals that answered the questionnaire have a lot of experience in the field under study.

2. Focus group or group discussion

Three focus groups were organised in order to compile qualitative data, in accordance with the guidelines proposed by Breen (2006) and by Morgan and Krueger (1998). This technique is considered to be appropriate for facilitating the generation of new ideas in a context of interaction (Breen, 2006) and it is an ideal data-collection procedure for recording the needs of the professionals as a group, in order to facilitate a joint discussion and discover the subject matter through the professionals' own words as individuals and as part of a group. 24 SSC professionals took part.

It was structured in three parts:

• Exploring the questions associated with the referral and detection of elder-abuse cases.

• Compiling the difficulties encountered during the intervention (whether in the data-collection phase or in decision-making about the type of approach to be used), qualifying the family pattern in accordance with the reality encountered, in order to contrast them with the situation types detected during the technical development phase, and exploring the work method (interdisciplinary, in coordination or individual).

• Compiling the types of intervention carried out by the professionals.

3. Technical comparison group

Once the data compiled from the questionnaire and the focus group had been analysed, it was presented in a technical comparison group made up of six professionals, in order to evaluate and make decisions about the triangulated data. These professionals had experience in attending elder-abuse cases and they had also answered the questionnaire and taken part in the focus groups. The triangulation procedure made it possible to provide more consistency to the obtained data (Patton, 2002) and refine the proposal in order to adjust it to the day-to-day needs of the professionals who undertake interventions (Cantor, 2002). The aims of this phase were as follows:

• To reflect on the conceptualisation of the situation types.

• To compare and evaluate the categories and subcategories based on an analysis of the relational context found in families with elder abuse.

• To show and discuss the main lines of relational diagnosis with respect to the degree of family functionality based on the five basic relational factors.

• To analyse the use of relational maps for each validated situation type, when defining the most appropriate psychosocial approach and intervention strategy to deal with the family situation.

• And lastly, the joint work with these professionals made it possible to check the contents of the Guidelines for the diagnosis and treatment of the relational context, family dynamics and patterns which lead to elder abuse, as well as the structure under which it has been carried out.

2. Results

The results of the applied research we are presenting should be read from a more macro and general perspective on the classification of situation types leading to elder abuse, resulting from the descriptive analysis carried out. There is then an analysis of the degree of family functionality and the processes which explain it, based on the five basic factors (identity, structure, adaptability, communication and family dynamics). Lastly, there are conclusions extracted from a more detailed analysis, resulting from the most significant correlations between the indicators for a single factor and among the series of indicators for the five factors. Therefore, the conclusions are grouped into three main blocks:

• Classification of the family situation types leading to elder abuse

• Relational patterns in dysfunctional families, according to the five family functionality factors

• Conclusions of the analysis of intra-indicator and inter-indicator correlations of relational factors for the five dysfunctional family situation types prior to the elder abuse situation.

1. Classification of the family-situation types in cases of elder abuse

The validated situation types for elder abuse situations can be divided into two main groups, according to the presence or absence of family dysfunctionality prior to the elder abuse situation (Table 1).

Table 1. Family situation types in cases of elder abuse

Family dysfunction	1. Adult children who have never become independent and who live with the elderly person
	2. Adult children who go back to living with their parents: pseudo-individuation
	3. Gender violence situations in elderly couples
	4. Families with dysfunctional patterns established prior to the current situation
	5. Opportunistically taking advantage of relationships with distant relatives
Non-family dysfunction	6. Situations where the carer becomes overburdened
	7. Difficulty in facing the change of life-cycle stage. Family interdependence. Difficulty in changing roles and functions

Situation type 1. "Adult children who have never become independent and who live with the elderly person"

• These are children who have not undergone the process of individuation and who have never separated from the family because the established type of relationship has not made this possible.

• These are families that do not facilitate the self-sufficiency of their members and where there are mutually dependent relationships and ties that are merged and not clearly differentiated. However, emotional bonds are not well preserved and there is little feeling of belonging.

• Mental health issues and/or consumption problems may occur and are commonly observed.

• A frequent trigger is the death of a father or mother, which is a critical moment in time, causing greater demands on the child, who is not able to cope.

Situation type 2. "Adult children who go back to living with their parents: pseudo-individuation"

• The elderly person is once again living with their child, either because the child returns to the family home, or because the elderly person moves in with the child.

• Although there are similarities with the type-1 situation, here the process of becoming independent from the family has occurred, to a greater or lesser extent. The return could be linked to stressful events in people's lives, such as separations, losing their job or their home, chronic economic instability, etc., which cause new dependency situations.

• There is a relationship dysfunction and there are usually prior conflictive relationships.

Situation type 3. "Gender violence situations in elderly couples"

• The elderly person lives with their partner, who is the person administering the abuse.

• This violent behaviour is connected to the relationship that the couple has maintained throughout their time together. It must be taken into account that having to look after a partner may cause a change in the definition of "power" within the relationship. In couples with a history of violence, the role of the person who exercises the violence may increase, diminish or be reversed.

Situation type 4. "Families with dysfunctional patterns established prior to the current situation"

• Although they are not living together, it is observed that a conflictive relationship has developed over a long period of time, involving prior mistreatment or the use of violence to resolve disagreements.

• The dysfunctional patterns can be observed in two dimensions: vertical (from parents to children, children to parents, or both) or horizontal (between siblings).

• The patterns may go from not serious to very serious, and are situated on a continuum that ranges from conflict (degrading or discourteous messages) to established violence (physical mistreatment).

Situation type 5. "Opportunistically taking advantage of relationships with distant relatives"

• In most cases, the function of the carer is not clearly defined and, as there is no significant link, the care instils a feeling of obligation rather than commitment.

• The elderly person may become a hindrance, as their dependence and need for care increases, situations of negligence may occur, and if they have assets and material resources, there may be economic abuse.

Regarding type 6 and 7 situations, it has been shown that despite being evidenced in professional settings, these correspond to more functional and adaptive difficulties in families, where violent behaviour is to varying degrees an occasional symptom rather than an established, stable pattern of behaviour, which means they would not become a situation type in themselves.

Therefore, the psychosocial approach would not be as complex and would probably require an intervention involving resource management and assistance

However, it should be noted that when these circumstances appear together with the validated situations of family dysfunctionality prior to the EA situation, they are an additional factor that make things more difficult and complex.

2. Relational patterns in dysfunctional families, according to the five family functionality factors

Family functionality is an essential component of the emotional and physical health of its members, as it is considered that the quality of their relationships determines the promotion of the family's health and acts as a predictive factor in family dynamics (Castilla and Palma, 2014). Although the family is considered to be the ideal place for protecting its members, it can also become an environment where more conflicts and family dysfunctionality may be observed (Reyes, Valderrama, Ortega, and Chacón, 2010). When the family's functionality is inadequate, problems or frustrations become a threat to its internal dynamics. Evaluating the degree of family functionality can help to identify the conflicts and dysfunctions that are present in the family, with the aim of providing tools that help to mitigate them.

Reformulating the proposal of Martín and Menéndez (2014), we consider five main factors for understanding the degree of family functionality (family identity, structure, adaptability, communication and dynamics or relational game). In order to evaluate each of these factors, a series of binary parameters are used, which make it possible to identify the type of family functionality within a gradient that runs from less to greater functionality. In addition to these factors, we have identified a series of indicators for each of them, which make it possible to discover the reality of each family context (Table 2 and 3).

Table 2. Evaluating the degree of family functionality

Factors	Parameters	
Family identity	Individuation- differentiation of family members Independence of thought, feelings and judgement	Symbiosis - precarious boundaries between family identity and individual identity, mutual dependence, fusion and little differentiation
	Belonging – cohesion emotional proximity, mutual commitment, intimacy	Emotional distance - lack of social contact, prevalence of individuality and emotional distance
Family structure	Structure - stable family framework. Clear boundaries between roles and hierarchies, complementary behaviour patterns	Breakdown - lack of agreements on the complementary nature of behaviours. Lack of clarity on rules concerning family functionality, boundaries and hierarchies
Family adaptability	Flexibility - the capacity to adjust to various conditions and changes	Rigidity - inadequate, stereotyped responses to various conditions
Family communication	Clear communication - exchanging information openly and effectively	Confused communication - Confused exchange and a negative-style of interaction
Family dynamics or relational games	Functional - Family dynamics and relational triangles that are flexible and adaptable to family life cycles	Dysfunctional - Family dynamics and relational triangles that are rigid and not adaptable to family life cycles Triangulation (condemnations) or coalition (disconfirmatory)

The results obtained have shown that the defined relational factors are valid and useful for evaluating the degree of family functionality in terms of elder abuse and also make it possible to discern whether there are relational processes that are more discriminating than others, in order to guide diagnosis and treatment.

In regard to the family identity factor, it is observed that the indicators tend towards polarisation and make up two relational patterns. There are families with cases of elder abuse where family identity tends to be characterised by strong emotional bonds, with a strong feeling of belonging and diffuse boundaries between individual and family identities, which facilitates the possibility of there not being differentiation among the family members (symbiosis). There are also families in which the pattern of family identity is characterised by strong emotional detachment, with a strong feeling of independence and the presence of rigid boundaries between family and individual identities, which facilitates the possibility of there being pronounced differentiation and self-sufficiency among family members (indiviuation). In accordance with the contributions made by Minuchin (1974) and Minuchin and Fishman (1982), we can speak of families with elder abuse, according to the indicators that make up family identity, with a degree of functionality that tends towards aggregation or a degree of functionality that tends towards detachment.

Table 3. Evaluating the degree of family functionality

Factors	Parameters
Family identity	- Emotional bond
	- Sense of belonging
	- Individuation and symbiosis: boundaries and the presence of differentiation and self-sufficiency
Family structure	- Roles and hierarchies
	- Rules and regulations
Family adaptability	- The capacity for responding to an unbalanced situation
	- Mistrust and resistance to sharing a problem
	- The capacity to ask for help
Family communication	- The presence of positive, clear and effective messages
	- The presence of double messages
	- The capacity for openly sharing emotions
	- The presence of mistrust
	- The use of language that is excessively critical and disqualifying
	- The use of disconfirmatory language
	- Communicative and conflict-resolution abilities
Family dynamics or relational games	- The presence of triangulation-type dynamics or relational games
	- The presence of coalition-type dynamics or relational games

It can therefore be concluded that family identity is a relevant and necessary relational process, but that it does not discriminate enough to help in understanding the degree of family functionality in elder abuse cases.

In regard to the adaptability and family structure factor, it is observed that families with elder abuse tend towards low adaptability (little response capacity when faced with a destabilising situation and little capacity for sharing problems with their natural support network), to a type of family structure that is characterised by diffuse roles between subsystems (especially parent and child), with the presence of implicit and secret family rules and regulations, as well as a low or very low capacity for requesting help. This means that the family structure is confused and does not allow for functional, healthy adaptation (Minuchin and Fishman, 1982), and that the family members are less able to adequately deal with the challenges posed by the life stage they are experiencing (Segrin and Flora, 2001; Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Lastly, in terms of family communication and dynamics, the most common pattern in these families is characterised by a type of communication based on mistrust, with great difficulty in openly sharing emotions and an elevated presence of double messages. In accordance with the contributions made by Watzlawick *et al*, (1985), these families are characterised by emitting confused and contradictory messages that affect healthy. fluid communication between their members.

In the same way, if we consider Segrin and Flora (2011) and Smith *et al*, (2009), these are families in which communication is clearly negative. In other words, they habitually use criticism, the negation of feelings and excessive conflict, and they do not show any capacity for listening.

In addition, if we add the analysis of relational games of a triangulation or coalition nature, we can form a more precise picture of the degree of family functionality or dysfunctionality, as it reveals the degree to which disqualifying or disconfirmatory messages are present.

According to Guerin *et al*, (1996), identifying relational triangles within a family system helps to recognise the extent of chronic and rigid relational conflict among its members. In accordance with the contributions of Minuchin (2003), families with relational games of a triangulation nature often use the elderly person as an instrument for their own benefit, and the interaction between its members is based on disqualifying messages.

It should be said that in this study, coalition-type relational games have not been observed as frequently. However, some cases have been detected, and therefore, it must be considered that coalition becomes a more pathological and conflictive relational game, given that the alliance between the two members has the aim of going against a third member (Minuchin, 1986).

Therefore, these considerations follow the same line as Corsi (1999), when they highlight the importance of family communication as an obligatory focus for analysis, as the evaluation of this area is a vital tool and resource in psychosocial intervention processes and a highly efficient predictor of the degree of family functionality.

3. Conclusions of the analysis of intra-indicator and inter-indicator correlations of relational factors for the five dysfunctional family situation types prior to the elder abuse situation.

Situation type 1. **Adult children who have never become independent and who live with the elderly person.**

• Family identity: the lack of differentiation between the family members correlates with strong bonds and the presence of disconfirmatory messages.

• Family structure and adaptability: low levels of adaptability to unbalanced situations are observed, with little ability to share problems and ask for help. There is also a clear presence of diffuse roles, along with implicit and secret rules and regulations.

• Family communication and dynamics: there is an explicit presence of double messages, emotional communication based on mistrust and a great difficulty in openly sharing emotions, factors that are also related with low communicative abilities and a low capacity for requesting help. There are also disconfirmatory and disqualifying messages that may facilitate the presence of triangulations and/or coalitions.

The most discriminating interrelated indicators are those of family adaptability with those of family communication.

Situation type 2. Adult children are once again living with their parents: pseudo-individuation.

• Family identity: strong emotional bonds and feeling of belonging, which involves a lack of differentiation among family members and the presence of diffuse boundaries, roles and rules. Mistrust in terms of sharing problems is observed. In contrast to type-1 situations, there are families where there is a certain level of emotional bonding and the presence of clear messages, but while this does not necessarily mean greater capacity for asking for help, there is less likelihood of coalitions.

• Family structure and adaptability: low levels of adaptability when faced with unbalanced situations. There is a clear presence of diffuse roles, implicit and secret rules and regulations which are related to a lack of differentiation and the presence of double messages.

• Family communication and dynamics: the presence of double messages and disqualifications, emotional communication based on mistrust and a difficulty in openly sharing emotions. There may be triangulations or coalitions. There may also be families in which the messages are clear,

which indicates the presence of emotional bonds and therefore, a better prognosis for the family situation.

The most discriminative interrelated indicators are those of family communication with those of family dynamics.

Situation type 3. **Gender violence situations in elderly couples**.

• Family identity: strong emotional bonds and feelings of belonging are observed, and therefore a lack of differentiation. It is shown that there are diffuse boundaries between personal and conjugal identities, with the presence of double messages. According to what is shown in the results, individual and family identity is merged with couple identity. This factor is more discriminative in this type of situation than in types 1 and 2.

• Family structure and adaptability: there are confused, implicit and secret roles and rules. It is also observed that there is little capacity for reaction in the face of unbalanced situations and mistrust when sharing problems and asking for help.

• Family communication and dynamics: there is a confirmed presence of double messages that are related to the existence of diffuse boundaries between individual and couple identities. Emotional communication based on mistrust and difficulty in openly sharing emotions and problems. The use of critical and disconfirmatory language by the partner who adopts violent behaviour. Furthermore, it is observed that the partner who receives the abuse does not have much communicative ability, and has less capacity for asking for official help, information or resources.

The most discriminatory interrelated indicators are those of family communication with those of family adaptability.

Situation type 4. Families with dysfunctional patterns established prior to the current situation.

• Family identity: there is a lack of differentiation between family members, with strong emotional bonds and feeling of belonging, which is also correlated with diffuse boundaries between individual and family identities. The family structure is characterised by it functioning with diffuse, secret or implicit rules, which cause a reversal of roles and hierarchies. Communication is based on mistrust and it is complicated to share problems and emotions. There is an increase in the use of critical, disqualifying or disconfirmatory language.

• Family structure and adaptability: there is little capacity for requesting help, or for reacting when faced with unbalanced situations; at the same time, the more implicit and secret rules and regulations there are, the more confused the boundaries between individual and family identities will be, and the more diffuse the roles will be.

• Family communication and dynamics: there is a perceived presence of double messages and disqualifications, emotional communication based on mistrust and a difficulty in openly sharing emotions. Furthermore, in regard to family dynamics, there is a presence of triangulation or coalition, a use of critical disqualifying and/or disconfirmatory language which is related to confused, secret and implicit rules.

Family communication, structure and dynamics are factors that have a significant weight when evaluating the degree of family functionality in this type of situation.

Situation type 5. **Opportunistically taking advantage of relationships with distant relatives.**

• Although the existence of this situation has been confirmed, they are not the most frequent type, and for this reason, the analysis of the data has not been as exhaustive as for the other types of situation analysed.

• However, it should be emphasised that in order to fully explore this type of situation, the most discriminative factor is that of family communication and this is related to the strength of emotional bonds (family identity) between the elderly person and the relative with a distant-relative relationship. Triangulation (family dynamics) and diffused roles (family structure) are also present.

3. Conclusions

Given the results obtained, it can be affirmed that the planned objectives of this applied collaborative research have been achieved, as it has been possible to identify and describe the relational contexts, the family dynamics and patterns that lead to mistreatment, validate the classification of family-situation types in cases of elder abuse and identify what processes relating to family dysfunctionality are present and how they affect each one individually.

These results have led to the design of the *Guidelines for the diagnosis and treatment of the relational context, family dynamics and patterns which lead to elder abuse,* which aims to provide BSS professionals with useful strategies for relational diagnosis and offer recommendations for the psychosocial approach and social and psychological treatment.

This guide is divided into two parts. The first part is concerned with contextualisation, providing a framework and compiling the most relevant aspects at a conceptual and technical scale, which leads to the second part, which is the guide itself.

The resulting document is a very practical workbook that provides help with the following:

• Systematising the compilation of information that is decisive for the case: analysis of the claim.

• Providing elements that facilitate the exploration of the family and relational system: a three-generation genogram and relational map, risk and/or protection factors relating to the elderly person and their relatives, a support and resources network.

• Compiling information to evaluate the degree of family functionality, based on the defined relational factors: identity, structure, adaptability, communication and family dynamics.

• And lastly, it provides work guidance for professionals in relation to the family dynamics of each and every validated situation type, defining work objectives and offering the most relevant elements for the social and psychological approach and treatment.

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