



## Departure scripts and life review of parents living with abusive adult children with mental disorder

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Increasing numbers of aging parents are finding themselves in the role of caregiver for their mentally ill adult child due to global deinstitutionalization policy. The aim of this article is to explore preparations for the end of life in light of the life review process among old parents of abusive children with mental disorder.

**Method:** Data collection was performed through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 parents, followed by phenomenological analysis.

**Results:** Five different types of departure scripts emerged: a pragmatic departure script, a burned-out departure script, a dead-end departure script, an optimistic departure script, and a violent departure script.

**Conclusion:** The parents in this study tended to interpret events in their past to fit their perception of the current relationship with their child, thus connecting past, present, and future into one coherent picture. Years of extended care have led to a unique aging process which does not allow separation from the child or the development of a sense of closure that characterizes the aging process. This calls for better insights and deeper understanding in regard to intervention with such families.

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### Introduction

In the past three decades, social and therapeutic changes have led to the attempted integration of people with mental disorders into general society. As a result, an increasing number of aging parents feel obligated to care for their adult child with mental illness who resides with them (Cohler, Pickett, & Cook, 1991; Lefley, 1987). A close examination of this growing population of aging parents indicates that some of them are living in high-risk situations in which they have to contend with unpredictable, often aggressive behavior from their adult child with mental disorder (Band-Winterstein, Smeloy, & Avieli, 2014; Cooper, Selwood, & Livingston, 2008). As parents grow old and become aware of the finiteness of life and their

approaching death, questions arise regarding the meaning of their life in the shadow of abuse and their child's destiny after their departure. The aim of the present article is to explore preparations for the end of life in light of the life review process among old parents of abusive children with mental disorder.

### Elder abuse by adult children with mental disorder

Studies in the field of elder abuse have recognized the vulnerability of older parents living with adult children who are dependent on them due to mental or physical disability (Lachs & Pillemer, 2004; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1989). These parents have to deal with their caregiving responsibilities alongside their own age-associated issues and health risks (McGarry & Arthur, 2001, p. 182).

Caring for an offspring with mental health problems has been shown to be accompanied by major life disruptions, heightened levels of distress, and strain in the marital relationship (Cook,

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Hoffschmidt, Cohler, & Pickett, 1992; Lefley & Wasow, 2013; Marsh, 1992). In addition, friends might be lost due to the social stigma of mental illness (Lefley, 1989), work disrupted by the unpredictability of the demands of caregiving (Maurin & Boyd, 1990), and family assets reduced because of the cost of psychiatric care (Clark & Drake, 1994). These social, occupational, and financial strains often lead to elevated levels of health problems and psychological distress (Gallagher & Mechanic, 1996; Reinhard & Horwitz, 1995; Seltzer, Greenberg, & Krauss, 1995), particularly in mothers (Cook, 1988).

Some studies refer to the deviant behavior of adult children with mental disorder toward relatives who support and care for them. They often report experiences such as verbal and physical abuse, including shouting, swearing, threats, and serious injuries (Solomon, Cavanaugh, & Gelles, 2005; Vaddadi, Gilleard, & Fryer, 2002).

### Late-life parenting of abusive adult children with mental disorder

"Few models describe parenting in later life. Rossi (1968) and Galinsky (1997) created a scheme for analyzing stages of parenthood. The last stage is called "disengagement" by Rossi and "departure" by Galinsky. Rossi also pointed out that there is no socially accepted way of becoming an ex-parent and that parenting in later life includes "an attenuated process of termination with little cultural prescription about when the authority and obligations of a parent ends" (Rossi, p. 30)" (Smith, 2012, p. 127–128, referring to Rossi, 1968; Galinsky, 1997). Late-life parenting is not guided by legal or social norms. Parents and adult children manage the conflicting poles of autonomy and dependence. Older parents can hold conflicting feelings of wanting to support and protect their adult children, while also wanting their adult children to be self-sufficient (Smith, 2012). Previous studies have discussed the unique features of late-life parenting to an abusive child with mental impairment (Cohler et al., 1991; Cook et al., 1992). A recent study focused on the relationship between older parents and their abusive adult children with mental disorder and concluded that old age becomes an arena for redefined relationships combining increased vulnerability of the old parent and a competition over whose needs come first (Band-Winterstein et al., 2014). Together with this, research on this unique population has not referred to the life review process and the approaching end of life in describing the old parent's experience.

### Life review as a theoretical framework

As people approach the final years of life, they tend to look back at life's major events and trajectories and reevaluate the meaning attributed to these events (Reker, Birren, & Svensson, 2013; Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014). All people probably undergo this process, even if unwittingly (Beaver, 1991). Butler (1964) referred to this process as "life review" and pointed out that old people organize their lives over certain consecutive themes that allow them to resolve conflicts, deal with the notion of death, and create a better understanding of past events while emphasizing some of them and blurring the meaning of others. It has become increasingly common, particularly with elderly persons, as a therapeutic method of

reestablishing meaning and promoting self-worth (Birren & Cochran, 2001). In the same context, Thorson and Powell (1988) claimed that life review reduces death anxiety. Both Erikson (1950) and Butler (1964) recognized the therapeutic value in life review since the final stage in Erikson's developmental model (ego integrity vs. despair) summons the need to evaluate one's life while defending the choices one made along the life course (Erikson, 1950). In the spontaneous process of life review, elders formulate a realistic approach regarding their life in the present, together with a view of their future, and after their death (Beaver, 1991).

This retrospection cannot be separated from its socio-cultural context. Parents look back on their lives and achievements in a society that sanctifies health, productivity, and independence and in which stigmatization and social rejection is the prevailing norm regarding adults with disabilities such as mental disorder (Banks, 2003; Oliver & Barnes, 1998). Considering the social context of life review processes in the case of mental illness, and the lack of literature regarding the life review process in aging parents of abusive children with mental disorder, the aim of this article is to describe the way aging parents reflect on their lives and construct their departure scripts in the context of life-long care for an abusive adult child with mental disorder.

### Method

For the purpose of the current study, a qualitative approach was adopted. This research method enables us to reach an in-depth description and examination of parents' experience of caring for an abusive adult child with mental disorder (Patton, 2002). This inductive and interpretive method sheds light on the phenomenon under study, and attempts to interpret it in terms of attribution of meaning, while relating to the lived experience of the people involved in the context of the approaching end of life (Creswell, 2007; Denzin, 1989).

#### Participants and sample

The participants were purposefully selected (Patton, 2002) by criterion sampling to reach a variety of parents being abused by their adult children with mental illness. A total of 20 parents participated in the study (13 mothers and seven fathers), all Israeli citizens, with medium to low income rates. The age of the participants ranged from 58 to 94. The participants were recognized by the welfare services as individuals exposed to abuse and mistreatment at the hands of their adult children coping with mental disturbance. The participation criteria were speaking fluent Hebrew and no cognitive deterioration. All participants suffered from deteriorating health and had a basic education level. (For detailed participants' data see Table 1).

#### Instruments and research procedure

Research tools included semi-structured in-depth interviews, based on an interview guide developed by the researcher for this study. It included several content categories such as: the nuclear family, which covered parent-child relations, abusive relations over the years, abusive relations in parents' later years, and the abusive child growing up. It also included a glimpse toward the future, which covered a description of parents'

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