



## The experiences of older mothers following the return of an adult child home



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### ABSTRACT

*Context:* The present study examines the experience of co-residence of older mothers with their adult children who have returned home, as seen from the mothers' perspective.

*Methods:* The population of the study consisted of 14 women between the ages of 58 and 74, whose sons and daughters aged 30 to 40 had come to live with them. The study is a qualitative one, conducted on the basis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the mothers. The data were analyzed using constant comparisons.

*Findings:* The analysis of the interviews yielded four main themes: a) the mother's perception of the parental role; b) the mother's perception of the returning son or daughter; c) the mother's perception of living together with the adult child; and d) the emotional ramifications arising from co-residence. The differences among the mothers interviewed allowed for the distinction of three types: (1) the mother as rescuer (2) the ambivalent mother and (3) the involved mother.

*Implications:* The study sheds light on this late stage of the mother–child relationship, points to the complexity of the phenomenon, and offers insights for professionals working with clients in such situations.

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“The child is 30, he's running a fever, he lies on a couch in his parent's house. Yes, he's 30, he's running a fever, and he's back in the room he grew up in...” (A popular Israeli song; translated from the Hebrew, words and music by Israeli singer–songwriter Ehud Banai)

### Introduction

In the past, family relationships were viewed in the context of the traditional extended family. People married young, had many children, and in general lived very close to, or even with, the family of either the husband or the wife. The industrial revolution encouraged the modern nuclear family, which tended to be less inter-dependent and to live apart from the parents. Greater life expectancy also created a new domestic

situation, with families extending over four or even five generations (Bales & Parsons, 2014; Cowan, Field, Hansen, Skolnick, & Swanson, 2014).

With a longer period of early adolescence, and a slower transition to adulthood, young adults today achieve independence later than ever. They complete their education later, enter the job market later, and remain longer at home (Cobb-Clark, 2008). The transition to adulthood has become harder than in the past; and the amount of time young people spend in an unresolved search for identity may exacerbate their identity crisis, sow confusion, and retard the development of a stable sense of self (Côté, 2006). Nor are their parents immune to the confusion. On the one hand, they expect their children, as young adults, to make decisions about career and family; on the other hand, they tend to be protective of their children and involved in solving their problems (Arnett, 2000). As a result, the dependency of young adults on their parents sometimes continues, though the reasons for it may differ, into their late twenties (Furstenberg, 2010; Kahn, Goldscheider, & García-Mangano, 2013).

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Parenthood is a central and lifelong role (Fingerman et al., 2012). Even when the younger generation matures, the intergenerational connection is generally preserved to a greater or lesser extent, assuming that the adult children are able to conduct their lives independent of their parents, and that the parents themselves are not yet in need of their children's assistance and care (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2011; N Levitzki, 2009). In a study conducted in Australia on the parental role in the lives of adult children, most parents took the view that it was their responsibility to provide their offspring with assistance and guidance, and that their parental involvement played a significant role in their children's lives as well (Vassallo, Smart, & Price-Robertson, 2009).

When the last child leaves home, the parents (and their parental role) enter a new phase. The nest is empty and the parents are alone (Chen, Yang, & Aagard, 2012; Raup & Myers, 1989). Researchers once viewed this period as one of crisis and stress for parents, particularly for the mother (Oliver, 1982; van der Pers, Mulder, & Steverink, 2014). One reason cited was the loss of the maternal role; but mothers have additional responsibilities, both at home and outside it, beyond the parental role they filled when their children were young. The empty-nester may indeed experience a sense of loss, but with it comes a sense of liberation from the burden of responsibility and care-giving. Parents cultivate personal interests and enjoy an increased sense of privacy, freedom and well-being (Chen et al., 2012; McFadden & Rawson Swan, 2012).

Returning home is a similar, yet different, phenomenon to that of leaving home in the first place. Family and the familial home provide a framework and a refuge in the face of economic and emotional difficulties (Cobb-Clark, 2008; Kahn et al., 2013). Hence the return of an adult child who has already ventured out into the world seems unrelated to age, but rather to particular circumstances: economic needs, the completion of studies, abandoning studies, leaving or being dismissed from a job, or the breakup of a relationship or a marriage (Beaupre, Turcotte, & Milan, 2008; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998). Studies show too that the returnees may be young adults who have not 'found' themselves, have not established a family, or are unable to find work. Letting their parents make decisions for them allows them to deny responsibility, and defer to the parents (Sassler, Ciambone, & Benway, 2008).

Parents typically take responsibility for their co-resident adult children, providing for their needs and supporting them financially, in general without receiving anything of substance in return (Kahn et al., 2013). Recent studies have found that a positive attitude on behalf of the parents toward the co-resident adult child could include the role of mentor and emotional support for their adult children (Settersten & Ray, 2010; Vassallo et al., 2009). Parents learned to accept and adapt to changes, despite their awareness that when they were their child's age, they were more independent, financially and emotionally (Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2011). At the same time, parents often reported conflicts over money matters, and issues of privacy, life-style and daily routine. Such tensions demanded that the parents (and children) prepare themselves to deal with questions of separation anxiety, the process of individualization, and the difficulty of disengaging from the adult child and giving him or her freedom (Levitzki, 2009).

### *The theoretical grounds of the current study*

Early literature has focused extensively on the mother-child relationship during the early stages of development. Winnicott (1957) speaks of the "good-enough mother" who provides her baby's basic needs when it needs them, but is also able to adapt herself well enough to its changing needs in order to ensure its healthy emotional development. Over time, however, along with the mother's identification with the child, she allows more and more space for herself as a person in her own right, having her own needs (Winnicott, 1957). Consistent with this perspective, Benjamin (1988) writes about the need for abandoning feelings of omnipotence in a relationship with the child. She emphasizes that the mother's ability is a function of how well she deals with aggressiveness and dependency, of her sense of self as deserving an autonomous existence, and her confidence that her child is capable of surviving conflict, loss and imperfection (Benjamin, 1988).

In contrast to early stages of development, the parental role is less clearly defined in later stages (Biddle, 1986). The theory of intergenerational solidarity was developed to explain older parents-adult children relations over the life course. According to this theory, family solidarity between generations is a multi-dimensional construct, composed of six dimensions, including structural solidarity (geographic distance that constraints or enhances contact), affectual solidarity (emotional closeness and intimacy), consensual solidarity (agreement in opinions and values), functional solidarity (exchange of instrumental and financial assistance), and normative solidarity (strength of obligation toward other family members) (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997a, 1997b). These dimensions were later condensed to represent three dimensions of solidarity: affinity, opportunity structure, and function (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997a, 1997b).

Research has largely demonstrated continuity in intergenerational relations over time. However, the quality of the relationship might change as a result of life circumstances or increased need on the part of the parents (Hogerbrugge & Silverstein, 2014). Intergenerational relations have shown to be highly related to the characteristics of the older parents and their adult children. For instance, mothers are more likely to develop tight-knit relationships, whereas fathers' relationships with their adult children are often characterized as detached. Daughter relations too are more likely to be characterized as tight-knit, whereas sons' relations are more likely to be characterized as obligatory (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997a, 1997b).

An additional construct was later added to this framework to represent conflict, as a normative aspect of family relationships that could coexist with family solidarity (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002). Both conflict and solidarity were portrayed as somewhat independent entities, so that families could be low on conflict and high on solidarity, low on both, or vice versa (Silverstein, Chen, & Heller, 1996). A complementary view has argued that intergenerational ambivalence is common, especially in situations that elicit tensions between dependency and autonomy, or when conflicting norms about intergenerational relationships exist (Luescher & Pillmer, 1998).

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