

TITLE - Elder Abuse, Mother Abuse and Parenting in Later Life

AUTHOR(S) - Judith R. Smith, LCSW, PhD

SOURCE - Webinar (*recording [located here](#)*)

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

This qualitative study examines elder abuse within the broader framework of parenting in later life and focuses on the experience of mothers with "difficult" adult children. The sample is low income and minority older women 62 years and older. All of the women had allowed their adult children to move back into the family home when the adult children had become unable to support themselves due to mental health issues, break up of a romantic relationships or unemployment. The analysis of transcribed interview data, using constructive grounded theory, revealed that all of the women experienced stress from the strain of sharing their small living spaces with adult children who were disrespectful, unhelpful and violated the boundaries the women needed. The reason that the women gave for not having been able to take action to remove their adult child from the home was their concern about their child's safety if they became homeless and their inability to be seen as a "cold-hearted" mother. A surprising finding is that none of the women ever used the word "abuse," including those who had contacted law enforcement and/or had obtained an order of protection. Instead, they presented themselves as mothers who made the decision to protect their adult children over their own personal comfort or safety.

PRACTICE & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Underreporting within the field of elder abuse is a serious problem. The author suggests the utility of incorporating a feminist framework to highlight the unique experience of adult child-to-mother violence (mother abuse). If there was greater awareness of the pattern of mother abuse, mothers might feel less shame at reporting their abuse or problems with their "difficult" children, as they would recognize that mother abuse is a larger social problem and not caused by their personal "bad" mothering.

This study has a number of implications for adult protective service programs who respond to reports of elder abuse and workers who are trying to engage abuse victims in a service plan to end the abuse. For older women who are living with their adult children it is essential for APS workers to help the women examine the choices they are making as mothers. Building on the women's wish to protect their adult child, together the APS worker and the mother might find a safety plan that will address both the mother's and the adult child's needs. Helping them articulate and examine their commitment to what they think is being a good mother is important. The more workers' discussions focus on the choices they have as mothers, the more the mothers will feel understood. Finding solutions that also protect the adult child are most likely to be considered. Services for adult children, could include subsidized housing, mental health services and ACT teams for example. "Mother abuse" may be a useful term when working with older women who are victims of their adult children's aggressive behavior.

FURTHER READING

Burnes, D., Rizzo, V.M., Gorroochurn, P., Pollack, M. & Lach, M. S. (2016). *Understanding service utilization in cases of elder abuse to inform best practices. Journal of Applied Gerontology, 36, 10, 1036-1057.*

Hunter, C., Nixon, J., & Parr, S. (2010). *Mother abuse: A matter of youth justice, child welfare or domestic violence? Journal of Law and Society, 37(2), 264-284.*

Smith, J. R. (2015). *Expanding constructions of elder abuse: older mothers' subjective experiences. Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect, 27, 1-28.*



This research summary is part of a series sponsored by the National Adult Protective Services Association (NAPSA) and the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (NCPEA) joint Research Committee. The purpose of this research summary is to provide direct access to findings in order to enhance practice and clarify policy choices.

Prepared by
Judith Smith,
LCSW, PhD
Fordham University
Graduate School of
Social Service