



Investigating the Lived Experiences of Abused Mothers: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Domestic/family violence including child abuse, spousal abuse, elder abuse, and parental abuse is a common issue in the modern world. Adolescent-to-mother abuse is one of the phenomena that have been the focus of attention in recent decades due to its negative effects on the family system. The objective of the present study was to investigate the lived experiences of mothers abused by their adolescent children and to determine its final structure by surveying the research participants.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative and phenomenological method. Nine participants were selected using the purposive sampling method and in-depth interviews were conducted until data saturation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and then analyzed using a descriptive phenomenological psychological method.

Results: Data analysis revealed 11 components of mothers abuse by their adolescent children including: 1) Physical injury, 2) Emotional abuse; 3) Financial pressure, 4) The sense of being emotionally harmed, 5) Perception of child's behavior as an abusive interaction, 6) Spiritual harm, 7) Pathology, 8) Causality of abusive behavior; 9) Ambivalent perception of abusive behavior, 10) Cyclical nature of child-mother abusive interaction patterns, and 11) Intentionality of abusive behavior.

Conclusion: The results of this study showed that the depth of harms to mothers abused by their adolescent children can be very extensive and severe. The insights from this study provide many contributions to counseling centers and family therapists.

Keywords: Parental abuse, Abused mothers, Phenomenology

Introduction

Family violence refers to situations in which a family member engages in abusive behavior to control or harm another member of his or her family or someone close to him or her (1). Family violence is one of the most common types of abuse in today's society that may be committed in various forms including child abuse, partner abuse, elder abuse, and child-to-parent violence (2). Adolescent-to-parent abuse has been recognized as a serious

social problem in recent years and has attracted the attention of researchers (3,4). Cottrell referred to this type of family violence as parental abuse and defined it as, "any act by a youth that was intended to cause physical, psychological, or financial damage to gain power and control" (5).

Abuse is defined as a pattern of oppression or violence that results from one's power or control

over another. The abuse may involve physical aggression, but it is also characterized by other behaviors. According to Simmons, the term "parental abuse" involves a range of psychological, emotional, and physical aggression that a child inflicts on his or her parents and considers parental abuse as the most common form of family violence (6,7). Abusive behaviors typically include using offensive words, threatening to injure oneself or others, humiliating, damaging properties, theft, and physical violence. Parental abuse, like other forms of family violence, can lead to unpleasant short- and long-term harm including emotional consequences, physical and mental health problems, working and economic problems, and problems in family and social relationships (5,8). Parental abuse can occur in the form of verbal, emotional, physical, and financial abuse. Verbal abuse is a form of psychological abuse and a verbal attempt to change the behavior of the individual who conflicts with it (9). Verbal abuse involves a relationship aimed at causing psychological pain in another, or a relationship that has such a purpose. Communication action can be active or passive, verbal or nonverbal. These include naming or labeling obscenities, slapping something, utter silence or passive and nonverbal intent (10). Physical abuse is the act of perceived purpose or intent to cause physical harm or pain to another and involves an unequal relationship between the abuser and the victim. These include hitting, beating, pushing, hitting a family member, hitting an object, and attempting to kick a family member or squeeze his or her throat (11). Emotional abuse is identifying others' weaknesses to control, dominate, or harass them. When one knows that another person is in a weak emotional state and uses that weakness to abuse him or her, this behavior is considered emotional abuse (12).

Reviewing the research literature revealed that researchers have conducted (quantitative) research on patterns of conflict, parent-abuse scale validation, parent-child abuse, parent-child violence, family violence, and adolescent aggression (2-7,13-20), but no research has yet been conducted on the experience of living with mothers through their adolescent children. Intergenerational transmission of violence has been the main guide to parental abuse research (2,21-23).

There has been little research on parental abuse. Parental violence against children, especially physical violence against children, was found to be the strongest predictor of parental abuse (2). In a

study aimed at investigating 60 years of research on parental abuse, using the socio-ecological model, factors related to parental abuse, including age, gender, antisocial patterns of behavior, psychological factors, drug abuse, family relationships, parenting styles, exposure to violence, race, and ethnicity were investigated. The results suggested an integrated approach to understanding the phenomenon of parental abuse and an effective guide to preventing parental abuse (7). The results of another study showed that adolescents who abused their parents were significantly more exposed to family violence than other groups and that exposure to family violence was significantly associated with hostile social perception (6).

Quantitative and empirical studies have shown the importance of parental abuse. However, quantitative research does not provide an in-depth understanding of the essence of parental abuse and cannot answer research questions (e.g., what is the lived experience of people of the phenomenon under study?) (24). To study the lived experiences of people of a phenomenon, the most appropriate method is a phenomenological and in-depth study of the meaning of the phenomenon by a qualitative method. It seems that maternal abuse can have cultural implications since the norms of mother-child relationships and forms of abuse vary across cultures. To achieve the purpose of the study, it was necessary to explore the lived experiences of mothers abused by their adolescent children through a qualitative study by employing the psychological descriptive phenomenology. The present study seeks to examine the experience of mothers abused by their adolescent children and the ultimate structure of maternal abuse as the phenomenon under study. Besides, this study tries to explore the way the abused mothers describe the experience of being abused by their children.

Methods

Given the objective of this study and since qualitative research is an appropriate method for describing life experiences and gives meaning to them, this study was conducted using a qualitative method based on psychological descriptive phenomenology. This method provides a dynamic and lived context for participants and focuses on their perspectives without making any changes. Moreover, this method allows the researcher to retain the participants' perspectives in the research without analyzing and extracting their point of view (25).

The participants in this study were mothers who had experienced abuse by their adolescent children

(12 to 18 years) who lived in Khuzestan province from 2018 to 2019. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. Therefore, the main criterion for selecting participants was restricted to those who had lived experience of being abused by their adolescent children. To select the participants, counselors from family counseling centers as well as boy and girl school counselors were asked to report to the researchers if they knew any mothers who experienced maternal abuse and met the inclusion criteria. To ensure the maternal abuse experience, (daughter-to-mother) abuse scale (25) and (son-to-mother) abuse scale (26) were used. Furthermore, the mothers who gained one score of standard deviation above the mean score were selected as the respondents. Other criteria for purposive sampling were willingness to participate in the study and to share experiences with the researcher, having cognitive literacy needed to share their experiences with the researcher, being mothers of adolescent children aged 12-18, and having diverse experiences of parental abuse. The sample size was determined based on the data saturation criterion. After 9 in-depth interviews with the participants, the researchers did not find any new data. To ensure that the data were saturated, three additional interviews were conducted, the results of which were the same as the previous interviews. Therefore, the data collection process was completed. In-depth interviews with open-ended questions were used to collect data. To this end, the researchers recorded the participants' conversations and used follow-up questions and feedback to focus on the details of the parental abuse phenomenon.

To examine the experience of maternal abuse, a narrative was told about adolescents' parental abuse. Then, the participants were asked the following questions: Have you ever had similar experiences in your relationships with your adolescent child? Please tell us about your experience interacting with your adolescent child. How have these experiences been for you? How have these experiences affected you? What do these experiences mean to you? The interview sessions lasted between 50 and 90 minutes on average, and each interview was recorded with the consent of the participants. After recording the interviews, the researchers transcribed them into a text file. Giorgi's five steps were used to analyze the interview data and gain a clear understanding of adolescents' parental abuse. The steps taken for the data analysis were: 1) Taking notes and converting the participants' conversations into text, 2) Reading the data several times to extract meanings from the whole data, 3) Putting the semantic units into

parentheses without the intervention of the researcher's assumptions, 4) Transferring semantic units to psychological terms using imagination-based interventions, and 5) Specifying the final structure of the data (27).

In this study, four criteria of credibility, authenticity, transferability, and confirmability were used to ensure data reliability (28). To increase the credibility in this study, adequate time was spent to collect the data and establish a close and secure relationship with the participants. To ensure authenticity, the data were coded and analyzed separately by two other qualitative researchers and the results were very similar to the results of the present study. The interest and involvement in the subject matter showed the confirmability of the study. Finally, to check the transferability of the data, the results were provided to two researchers who also confirmed the results. Ethical considerations were observed in this study by obtaining written consent from the interviewees and taking their permission to record the interviews, giving assurance to participants about the confidentiality of their data, using codes in order not to reveal the real names of the participants, and allowing the participants to exit the study whenever they wished. The participants' age ranged from 37 to 51 years. Besides, the participants' education ranged from middle school to associate's degree. They also had at least one child and at most three children.

Results

The results of the study showed that the lived experiences of mothers abused by adolescent children were classified into 11 constituent elements shaping the overall structure of the participants' experiences.

Element 1: Physical Injury

The participants stated that they experienced a feeling of being physically harmed by their child's abusive behaviors by injuring themselves, developing an illness, and committing suicide. For example, one of the participants said: *"When I get very angry at my child, I beat myself in the way my whole body and face turn bruised and red. Once, I even committed suicide with a knife. I had recovered physically after my cancer, but my child's abusive behavior is killing me. My doctor says depression and stress are poisons to me. But my child makes me so angry that my face and body are filled with spots. He knows that my disease will recur"* (Participant 6). Another participant talked about her physical injury: *"When I took my phone, he beat me on the*

head so it started bleeding. I cannot control him. It's very painful when he is beating me with his hands. When things do not get well with him, he starts breaking everything that is at his disposal and beats me" (Participant 3).

Element 2: Emotional Abuse

The participants in this study stated that when interacting with their adolescent children, they experienced abusive behaviors in terms of threats, insults, stubbornness, ridicule, abuse, indifference to self-harm, misapprehending the mother, and comparing, and see these behaviors as a kind of emotional abuse. These participants described emotional abuse when their children used their weaknesses to control, dominate, or abuse them, stating that they were unhappy with their child's actions. For example, the one of the participants described her experience of emotional abuse as: "He tells me he kills himself or runs away from home. Even sometimes he says he hates me and he does not see me as his mother. Even when I get mad at him and start to beat myself, he does not care at all and he even makes fun of me" (Participant 1).

Element 3: Financial Pressure

Most participants perceive the rejection of family financial constraints by their adolescent children and the damage made to home appliances and personal belongings as the financial pressure imposed by the child. For example, a participant stated: "When my child gets angry, he starts breaking everything he finds access to. He does not think that we paid money to buy them. When I get home, I see the carpet is burned by a hot pot he has placed on it. Sometimes he takes money from my purse and he does not care about if I need the money or not" (Participant 9).

Element 4: The sense of being emotionally harmed

The participants described their experience of their adolescent child abuse with feelings of despair, resentment, alienation, suffocation, mental exhaustion, worry about the child's future, fear of losing the family reputation, anger, and crying as the feelings of emotional harm. For example, a participant described her experience of emotional harm as: "I am now like a 70-year-old woman; I don't know if I should think of my daughter or my son; I don't know what is going to happen to me. It looks like he wants to run away from me; he tells me I am a kind of a stranger to him. I feel like I'm losing him as if he just

wants his dad. He tells me if he sees me later in the street, he will not bring me back home" (Participant 2).

Element 5: Perception of child's behavior as an abusive interaction

The participants stated that they perceived behaviors such as aggressive behaviors, disobedience, lying, shouting and speaking aloud, commanding, disrespecting, and defiance as abusive interactions by their adolescent children to have control and dominance over themselves. For example, one of the participants stated: "With the smallest thing, she makes a fuss. She starts shouting and fighting and throws at me everything that is at her hand" (Participant 1).

Element 6: Spiritual harm

The participants in this study experienced a sense of spiritual harm by their child's abusive behavior through harming their religious beliefs and questioning these beliefs. As an example, one of the participants described her experience of the sense of spiritual harm: "My child has influenced my beliefs. For instance, I used to go on fasting every year, but this year is the first year that I did not do it, and I believe in nothing" (Participant 1).

Element 7: Pathology

Research participants described the pathology of their adolescent child's abusive behavior with self-blame, the sense of inadequacy, preoccupation, suicidal ideation, worry, wishing death, questioning self-sacrifice, regret for one's efforts, aimlessness, distraction, self-blame, and losing motivation to continue living. For example, one of the participants stated: "I feel like she doesn't need me anymore, she just wants her friends. I tell myself I did everything for her so why she is misbehaving me. Maybe I didn't care for her as she deserved it. When I get so angry with her, I wish she dies. I'm always thinking about her behaviors and why she treats me indecently" (Participant 3).

Element 8: Causality of abusive behavior

The participants attributed their experience of being abused by their adolescent children to several factors including observational learning, intergenerational transmission, friends and peers, the surrounding environment, parental divorce, the death of a parent, adolescence, patronage, parental encouragement, and marriage with a wrong person. One of the participants stated: "I think my daughter wants to show that she has grown up by engaging in abusive

behaviors or maybe she is imitating her father's behaviors. When Fatemeh hits me, my husband laughs at her even though he is an educated person. Perhaps she needs affection on the part of her father. A girl at this age needs the opposite sex to love her and to talk to her. Her father never takes her to a restaurant" (Participant 8).

Element 9: Ambivalent perception of abusive behaviors

The participants in the present study experienced two conflicting feelings in their experience of being abused by their adolescent children. For example, one of the participants described ambivalence as: *"I hate him when he mistreats me, that is, I hate him at that moment and then I regret it. I tell myself he is my son anyway"* (Participant 2).

Element 10: Cyclical nature of child-mother abusive interaction patterns

The participants described their experience of being abused by their children as interactions that are repeated cyclically between themselves and their children resulting in the continuance of abusive behaviors. For example, one of the participants described her experience of the cyclical nature of abusive interactive patterns: *"The more I care for him, the more he mistreats me"* (Participant 9).

Element 11: Intentionality of abusive behavior

Concerning the intentionality of abusive behavior, the participants stated that their children's abusive behavior intended to control mothers and make them surrender so as to achieve their demands and wishes. One of the participants described the abusive behavior of her child as: *"He annoys my granddaughter to force me to do whatever he wants or to make me silent and listen to him"* (Participant 3).

Discussion

In this study, the participants described the sense of being physically and mentally abused by their children's abusive behaviors with being afflicted with illnesses and even attempting suicide. The abusive behaviors committed by children against their parents lead to short-term and long-term injuries, including physical problems (3). Physical abuse is the act of perceived purpose or goal of causing physical harm or pain to another person, which involves an unequal relationship between the abuser and the victim resulting in physical harm. These behaviors include hitting, beating, pushing,

pressing, beating a family member, hitting with an object, and attempting to kick a person (11). The mothers who participated in the present study pointed to factors that led to emotional abuse by their adolescent child. Recently, there has been a great deal of research on emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is identifying others' weaknesses to control, dominate, or harass them. Emotional abuse occurs when one knows that another person is in a weak emotional state and uses that weakness to abuse him or her (12).

The participants in this study stated that they were exposed to behaviors from their adolescent children that led to financial pressure imposed on them. Financial abuse of children against their parents is done through stealing money or parental property, selling family property, destroying and damaging home appliances or parental property, creating debt to be settled by parents, and forcing parents to buy things for them (29). The means-end theory can also explain the financial pressure exerted by adolescents. Based on this theory, perpetrators of violence can achieve their goals (e.g. having an expensive mobile phone) by making the victims vulnerable. According to the perpetrators, this is the victim who induces them to engage in violence, while the victims perceive the perpetrators' actions as hostile behaviors (30).

In this study, mothers who were abused by their adolescent children mentioned the feeling of being emotionally harmed. Because of parental abuse, parents feel hopeless, helpless, and emotionally harmed as they are unable to control the situation with the fear of the potential physical dangers. These parents lose their leadership role in their families which annoys them (4,5). According to the family system theory, in parent-child interactions, mothers are affected by abusive behaviors of their children and they experience emotional abuse (13). In the present study, the abused mothers emphasized that their adolescent children had abusive interactions with them and that these relationships triggered and facilitated their child's abusive behaviors. It can be concluded that many studies on parental abuse (2-4,7,8,13,14,31) underlined the abusive behaviors of children in their interactions with their parents as underlying causes of parental abuse.

Many parents who were exposed to parental abuse by their adolescent children reported low self-confidence due to feeling guilty about abusive behaviors committed by their children. Besides, many parents hold themselves responsible for the

abuse exposed to them by their children (4). According to the cognitive-behavioral approach, rules are based on ineffective assumptions that determine when and how individuals' beliefs become strongly activated. The process of applying these rules is linked to automatic thoughts that are capable of influencing quickly and creates a behavior pattern that is ultimately based on pathological belief systems (32).

In their interviews, the participating mothers pointed out several causes for their child's abusive behaviors as underlying factors of parental abuse. According to social learning theory, children have the potential to imitate the behaviors that are modeled for them (21,22). Moreover, based on the intergenerational transmission theory of violence, one of the main theories supported by family violence researchers, for children who witness their mother being beaten by their father, abuse is a plausible way to achieve their desired goals. The main hypothesis of this theory is that every generation involved in family violence learns to become violent (13). The abused mothers in the present study believed their child's abusive behavior was an intentional attempt to make their parents fulfill their demands. This theme was also identified in previous researches on parental abuse from the perspective of many researchers. It has been emphasized that adolescents aimed to control and dominate their parents with their abusive behaviors. Benbow et al, defined abusive behavior as a purposeful behavioral pattern that evolves in a way that a person can exercise his/her power, control, and coercion over another (1). Another study showed that parent-adolescent conflict is different from parental abuse concerning the goal of gaining power and control over the parent (33).

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Since the present study examined the lived experiences of mothers abused by their adolescent children in a particular context, care should be exercised when generalizing its findings.

Conclusion

The present study explored the experiences of mothers abused by their adolescent children in the socio-cultural context of Iran. As the findings of this study indicated, the mothers suffered from cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual harms because of being abused by their adolescent children. They perceived these behaviors to be intentional. This study also revealed a number of factors as underlying causes of maternal abuse. Finally, the mothers resorted to ineffective strategies to solve this problem. Due to the great importance given to parental status in the Iranian culture, the results of this study indicated that parental abuse has significant pathological implications and consequences. Therefore, while emphasizing the need to conduct more research on parental abuse, family and school counselors should take preventive measures to improve the interactions between mothers and their adolescent children. It is suggested that similar studies be conducted on paternal abuse in other contexts.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest in this study.

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