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-Manglano, 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, Ciambrone, & 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).

The social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976) can also be used to explain co-residence of adult children with their older parents. This theory emphasizes the role of reciprocity in the relationship and the notion that both parents and their children strive to maintain equity in the relationship. Parents in general do not want their children to take care of them. They do not want to become a burden, and hope that they will be able to stand on their own two feet without their children's help (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2002). However, in a co-residence arrangement, adult children are overly dependent on their parents for support (Cobb-Clark, 2008; Kahn et al., 2013; Umberson, 2006). This could potentially bring tension and conflict into the relationship. Using these theoretical perspectives, the present study evaluates intergenerational relations following the returning home and the co-residence of adult children with their older parents.

The relationship between older adults and their adult children in Israel

Israel is a society in transition, between traditional values of interdependence and family care and modern values of individualism and independence (Lavee & Katz, 2003). Family relations in Israel have been characterized as high in solidarity as well as ambivalence (Lowenstein, 2007; Silverstein, Gans, Lowenstein, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 2010). Although the governmental support provided to older adults is quite generous (Asiskovitch, 2013), the assistance provided to the younger generations is somewhat more limited. As a result, the co-residence of adult children with their aging parents is quite common, though no statistical data are available (Ynet, 2013). Unique to Israeli society is the mandatory army service at the age of 18. Once drafted, most Israelis leave their home and for two (in the case of women) or three years (in the case of men) return home only for temporary breaks. Although the army service could potentially contribute to the emotional development of adult children, it might also delay the separation and differentiation from the parents as well as the professional and financial development of adult children, who often return to live with their parents, when they complete their army service (Mayseless, 2001).

A recent Israeli study (Dor, 2013) examined the attitude of parents toward adult children still living with them. Although parents reported positive feelings and tolerance of their child's lengthy stay back home, some parents were uncomfortable with the sudden lack of privacy, and their own tendency to offer criticism and to quarrel. Some experienced serious difficulties with the extension of their parental role, which was neither clear nor simple at this juncture in their lives; but parents in general were patient for a period, especially if the child actually had plans for the future. Another Israeli study on immigrants from the former Soviet Union has found that the co-residence of older Israelis with their adult children results in lower levels of life satisfaction compared with those who do not share a residence with their children (Lowenstein & Katz, 2005). These studies call for further exploration of this phenomenon of co-residence, which is not necessarily normative, yet has become quite common in Israeli society.

The current study

Earlier studies have for the most part viewed the topic through the lens of the adult children (Beaupre et al., 2008; Smith, 2003); this study focuses on the older parents who open the door to their returning adult children. Previous studies examined the reasons for young adults leaving home and returning to it (Beaupre et al., 2008; Kins et al., 2011; Seiffge-Krenke, 2009; White, 1994), but hardly addressed the *experience* of co-residence. The studies principally related to the subject from an economic perspective, less from a social and emotional one (Beaupre et al., 2008; Furstenberg, 2010; White, 1994). Furthermore, they tended to view the subject in a negative light, with little attention given to the potentially positive outcomes of such situations (Henig, 2010).

This study focuses on the experience of co-residence of parents and their adult children, aged 30+, who have returned home. It examines the subject from the mother's perspective, in particular her perception of her parental role, how she views the adult child who has returned to the familial home, and the issue of co-residence. It also explores the positive dimension of the situation, as the mother may see it. The study assumes particular importance in light of the prevalence of the phenomenon, which has become even more widespread as a result of economic crises of recent years (Beaupre et al., 2008; Furstenberg, 2010). The unique characteristics of Israeli society, a society between traditional values of family relations and support and modern values of individualization and separation provide a context for the present study (Cohen, 2003; Lavee & Katz, 2003).

Methods

Interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling, to achieve a maximum variation sample (Patton, 2005) in the circumstances of the son's or daughter's return home (e.g., relationship breakup, child care, financial or transitional housing), their family situation (e.g., married, divorced, single), and the family situation of the mother interviewed (e.g., married, divorced, widowed). Most participants were recruited via their acquaintance with the first author or were referred by colleagues or friends of the first author. We had approached 19 mothers. Three refused participations and two agreed, but were not interviewed due to scheduling difficulties. We lack further information about those mothers who were not included in the study.

The study population included 14 mothers, between the ages of 58 and 74, whose adult children – sons (n = 9) and daughters (n = 5) aged 30 to 40 – have returned to live in the family home after at least a year away. Nine of the mothers were retired and the remaining were employed. Most mothers were married (n = 9), four were widowed and one divorced. The main reason for the move was separation/divorce (n = 6), followed by financial reasons (n = 3), transitional housing (n = 2), and the birth of a child (n = 2). In three instances, the fathers were present during interview; but in light of the different parental experience of women and men, this study relates exclusively to the mothers' perspective. Table 1 details the characteristics of the participants, the characteristics of their returning children and the main reason for the return.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the mothers.

Interview #	Mother's age	Mother's marital status	Mother's employment status	Adult child's gender	Adult child's marital status	Who else moved in?	Main reason for the move?	Typology
1	72	Married	Retired	Son	Single	None	Separated from girlfriend	Mother as rescuer
2	67	Married	Retired	Daughter	Single	None	Absence of significant relations	Ambivalent mother
3	60	Married	Employed	Son	Divorced	None	Divorce	Ambivalent mother
4	58	Married	Employed	Daughter	Divorced	Daughter's son	Divorce	Involved mother
5	68	Widowed	Retired	Son	Divorced	None	Divorce	Mother as rescuer
6	74	Widowed	Retired	Son	Single	None	Financial reasons	Mother as rescuer
7	58	Divorced	Employed	Son	Married	Son's wife and four children	Transitional housing	Ambivalent mother
8	65	Married	Retired	Son	Divorced	None	Divorce	Ambivalent mother
9	70	Widowed	Retired	Daughter	Married	Husband and four children	Transitional housing	Mother as rescuer
10	69	Married	Retired	Daughter	Married	Daughter's husband and baby	The birth of the daughter's child	Involved mother
11	66	Married	Retired	Son	Married	Son's wife and baby	Financial difficulties	Mother as rescuer
12	68	Married	Retired	Daughter	Married	Daughter's second husband and two children	Financial difficulties	Mother as rescuer
13	62	Widowed	Employed	Daughter	Separated	Daughter's two children	Separation process	Involved mother
14	58	Married	Employed	Daughter	Married	Daughter's husband and two children	The birth of the second child	Mother as rescuer

The qualitative study was conducted on the basis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the mothers. The interviews were subject to prior approval by an ethics committee. All participants signed an informed consent prior to participation. Every interview began with an explanation of the study, of the interview and of the recording. The interviewees signed a form of informed consent. The goal of the interviews was to examine the return of the adult child to his or her parents' home, the perceived ramifications of that move, and how the mother saw her connection with her adult child. The interview guide appears in Appendix 1.

The findings were analyzed primarily by the main author, a social worker with older adults, and partly by the co-author, a psychologist with over a decade of experience in qualitative studies. Selected interviews were analyzed by several graduate social work students who provided feedback on the analysis. The first stage of analyzing the data included a meticulous reading of each individual interview, and its analysis using procedures of open coding. In the course of this phase, primary categories of information on the phenomenon being studied were established, with each sub-divided into sub-categories or characteristics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using selective coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994), categories that did not relate directly to the main subject – the experience of co-residence – were eliminated, in order to generate as clear and sharply defined a picture as possible. Next, using a table format, the interviews were placed on the vertical axis, and the categories and sub-categories on the horizontal axis. The table allowed for a comprehensive overview of all the categories and sub-categories with the intention of finding links between categories and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A vertical review of each of the interviews as a whole occurred in an attempt to identify prototypes of mothers who follow a unique response pattern on the particular themes identified.

Results

The analysis of the interviews yielded four main themes: a) the mother's perception of her parental role. The return of the adult son or daughter to the parents' home intensifies and focuses the experience of parenthood and the significance of the parental role, especially that of the mother, vis-à-vis their adult children. Her offspring, who has been away from home for some time, is now back, possibly temporarily. That new–old situation at this stage of life raises dilemmas and conflicts, but also new opportunities and a rediscovery of the parental role and its significance; b) the parent's perception of the returning son or daughter and the relationship with them. The mothers talked about the son or daughter's character and personality, as they perceived them; and the nature of their co-resident relationship, as regards issues of dependence-independence, giving and taking, and the difference between past and present relations between them; c) the parents' experience of living together with their returning adult children. The interviewees addressed the physical, economic and emotional aspects of the child moving back home, and the issue of conducting their daily lives under the same roof; and d) the emotional ramifications of the co-residence of the parents and the adult child. These ramifications were discussed in direct relation to the other three themes detailed above.

The differences among the mothers interviewed allow for the distinction of three types: 1) the mother as rescuer sees

herself as the sole source of support for the returning son or daughter. From her perspective, it is her presence and the vital role she plays in his or her life that continues to sustain the adult child. She draws her strength from that role. She is the one that sets the rules for co-residence; and as long as her offspring does not bother her, she has no objection to the child continuing to live in the house. In fact, she perceives her returning child as weak and in need of her help; 2) the ambivalent mother struggles with the definition of her role as the mother of adult children who have returned home. Unclear boundaries leave her confused, ambivalent, and subject to conflicting emotions regarding co-residence with them. Her attitude toward them and the communication between them is complex and fraught with dilemmas; 3) the involved mother tends to be dominant, proactive and involved in solving problems. With respect to co-residence, she describes herself as taking charge, the one who gives and shares. She sees herself as the friend of her daughter or son, identifying with them and ready to fight on their behalf. This sometimes leaves her exhausted, and takes a toll on her physical and emotional health. The four themes identified are presented by type, with each defined by her individual response to the themes (see Table 2). Direct quotes from the text are provided for illustration purposes.

The mother as rescuer

The mother's perception of her parental role

Seven interviewees were defined as rescuers. With the exception of one mother, all were retired. The mother as rescuer saw herself as a hero, with everything revolving around her:

"He [son] had nowhere to go, so he came to Mother. [I] was his last resort… I found my boy back with me…"

[Interviewee #5]

The rescuer perceives herself as a parent with extraordinary abilities, who is prepared to do everything for her children. While she radiates gentleness and calmness, her comments convey a certain aggressiveness and interference in her children's lives. She leaves an impression that her child can do whatever he or she wants, as long as it conforms to *her* wishes and the limits *she* sets. She describes herself as a strong woman who becomes still stronger in the face of her child's weakness:

"I found strength, a confidence in being [his] mother, in still being a good model for him… There are days when I feel

weak, because of the energies that I [need to] call on to show my son that 'See! Here's someone you can rely on. Mother is here!'… At last I can breathe easy. My son has come back to me in this way. It's Heaven-sent… I have become stronger."

[Interviewee #5]

From her perspective, a good mother is one who helps, one who is always there for her children, cooking for them, and making sure that they lack for nothing. Even if she's not around at a given moment, she's always there, and the children know where to find her.

"And as any good mother says, 'you don't have to work, I'll help, I'll support you'… They know where I am, Mother is here…"

[Interviewee #11]

Her perception of the returning son or daughter

To the rescuer, her adult child is unable to manage without her. She perceives him or her as weak, even sickly, and in need of her help and protection. It seems that the weaker and more vulnerable the child, the stronger and more supportive the mother. In a sense, her strength weakens the child.

"He is well-brought up. A good boy. Nice to have around… We hope he'll get married and leave home. But not alone. I won't let him leave alone. He wouldn't be able to cope. I don't want him to get into the same mess again. He doesn't have the ability…"

[Interviewee #1]

The perception of co-residence

The rescuer sets the rules and the boundaries in the house. She doesn't ask questions; she wants to give the returning child calm. She is the one that makes decisions in the home, and the adult child must adjust, avoid arguments, be undemanding and satisfy his mother.

"He is careful not to argue. There are no arguments. There is no shouting and no arguments here. [God] help anyone who shouts… I don't allow it. No one shouts in my house and no one shouts at me. No such person exists."

[Interviewee #1]

Table 2
Mothers' typology in relation to the identified themes.

	Views of the parental role	Views of the adult child	Views of life with the returning child	The emotional ramifications of co-residence
Involved mother	Sees herself as involved, proactive, but weakening.	Relates to the child as an intimate friend and empathizes with his/her situation.	Open house, no privacy, unclear separation.	Fills a void and gives meaning.
Ambivalent mother	Sees herself as ambivalent, finds difficulty coping.	Ambivalent in the way she relates to the adult child because of the difficulties she experiences.	There are difficulties, dilemmas, ambivalence.	Mixed emotions.
Mother as rescuer	Sees herself as strong, indispensable.	The adult child is viewed as weak, both when younger and now.	Sets the rules in the house. No problem with son or daughter living with her as long as they do not bother her.	Is empowered and gets things done.

The mother is able to disengage, to find time for herself and protect her privacy. Sometimes she needs to break away completely, to leave the house in order not to hear the shouting and see the mess. Still, she is aware that co-residence is a temporary phase, and she does not look forward to the time when the children finally leave home.

> "I'm glad to be going out. I get back late from work. I don't want to be home at bath-time and supper-time, with all the yelling. I prefer not being there because I am tempted to say something, but I'm very careful [not to]. On [the weekend] I have no choice, we're together the whole [time]. It's hard for me… One [weekend] I stayed home and saw the chaos…"
>
> [Interviewee #9]

Emotional ramifications

The rescuer is content. She gets satisfaction from the situation of supporting a returning child who needs her. She doesn't talk of difficulties or show weakness: on the contrary, she is proud of what she has done.

> "…I don't have any worries. Nothing worries me."
>
> [Interviewee #1]

> "…and so, yes, I really do see myself having these strengths."
>
> [Interviewee #5]

The challenges that arise from the return home of the adult child allow the mother as rescuer to assume a significant role, and give the feeling that there is someone on whom to depend. In fact the difficulties empower her, enabling her to show fortitude and be a good model for a child beset by confusion, helplessness and dependency. The rescuer faces retirement and old age with trepidation. She is afraid that she will have nothing to do, and that her life will lack meaning. It would appear that her activity and the assistance she extends fill a personal need for meaning. She is proud of the help she gives her children. She describes her emotional investment and the fatigue, but at the same time, her satisfaction and pleasure. In her view she always finds a balance between them.

> "My life revolves around my grandchildren and my children. And my great-grandchildren. I have five great-grandchildren… they are my heart and soul… I live for them. I think that's what keeps me going."
>
> [Interviewee #12]

The ambivalent mother

The mother's perception of her parental role

Four of the interviewees fell into the category of ambivalent mothers. Two of the mothers were retired and two were employed. With the exception of one child, three returned due to a relationship breakup. The ambivalent mothers perceived themselves as accompanying the returning adult child through his or her difficulties, but were ambivalent about their maternal role in such a situation. They described struggles, different lifestyles, concessions, and even keeping co-residence a family secret. Two interviewees expressed the need for professional help, and it seemed that the problems with which they were grappling went beyond the dilemma of co-residence.

The ambivalent mother appeared a little confused. On the one hand, the returning child is an adult; on the other hand, there is the feeling that he or she has gone back to being a child. Mother wakes him up every morning with a cup of coffee; after a long time away, he or she is sleeping in the bed of his or her youth; and the mother suddenly finds herself thrown back to another era. The generation gap finds very tangible expression in the relationship between parents and children, in the daily running of the household, in their different ways of thinking, and in the communication between them. The parents want to help, but the right way of doing it is sometimes elusive.

> "My son has come home. He thinks he's 16. I wake him every morning with a cup of instant coffee, just like I did back then. He wouldn't get up without the coffee then, and he won't get up without the coffee now either… The house has become crowded. He has four kids. I've gone back to being a mother of little ones…"
>
> [Interviewee #7]

The ambivalent mother is unsure about her motherly role, and how to relate to her adult child and the new living arrangements. She wonders how a situation has come about that has thrust her back into motherhood. Can she make comments, ask questions, and say all sorts of things? One of the mothers even compared the situation to the period of the child's adolescence, when he lived at home but wanted the independence to do whatever he wished. It could cause discord, as happens now when the adult child returns home:

> "Somehow you feel… well, he's 37, he's not a child. I can't really tell him what to do, he already knows, he's an adult. You understand? He's an adult, so there are all sorts of things I can't come and tell him… so you keep quiet. On the other hand, because of these glitches [in communication] you feel that you can't [ask] him 'where are you going? what are you doing?'…"
>
> [Interviewee #8]

Her perception of the returning son or daughter

The ambivalent mother has an ambivalent attitude toward the returning adult child. On the one hand, he's a grown-up, smart and handsome, on the other; he's like an adolescent who has not yet found himself. The child is seen as a free-thinker, yet his opinions sometimes conflict with those of his parents, creating problems and causing arguments. Again, he is seen as capable, yet the mother is not sure he is able to cope. Because his return home is perceived as a failure, the mother does not always approve of the child's life-decisions. The ambivalent mother wants to help the child, but feels that he or she does not want her help. She feels like a victim but cannot rationalize the feeling. The child is angry with the parents and the mother cannot comprehend the reason.

"He (son) is not a talker. His twin wouldn't shut his mouth and he is much quitter, gentle. He was like this ever since childhood. He has always been very connected to me. Very sensitive, but quiet. When he was still married and everything was good, he used to laugh with the daughter. I would say he was even a joker. And with other people, everyone says he is a charmer. Only with us, it is different. I think we are the victim. Somehow, we are the victim. That's how I feel. He is really angry with us. Many times, disproportionally. And we really want to help, but he gives interpretations to things. His approach is different."

[Interviewee # 8]

The perception of co-residence

The ambivalent mother sometimes sends mixed messages, both with respect to the issue of separation and boundaries in the house, and to her communication with the adult child. For example, she may make it clear that her bedroom is her private domain, yet allow a different grandchild to sleep in her bed every night:

"There is constant rotation among the beds. In the morning I see who has slept where. I close my [bedroom] door and say 'the moment the door is closed, no one comes in.' But when the kids wake up in the middle of the night, well that's something else… My granddaughter sleeps with me every night, but sometimes the boys want to do that too, so they take turns…"

[Interviewee #7]

Like the rescuer, the ambivalent mother understands both the positive and negative sides of the situation, but she deals with them differently. The rescuer creates her own space, and enjoys privacy and separation from the children. For the ambivalent mother, on the other hand, the boundaries are not well-defined, and she is in two minds about the situation. She notes, ironically, that just at the time in their lives when the parents want quiet and privacy, the adult child moves back in and everything changes.

"You, as a parent, yes, just when you are ready for peace and quiet (the child returns)… And there is a paradox here…"

[Interviewee #8]

Emotional ramifications

The interviews revealed mixed emotions of love and hate, anger and pain, restraint and loss of control. Also present was a sense of confusion, frustration, failure and guilt, both with respect to the mother's role and to her perception of her child. The pain of the mother's situation emerged in several interviews. For example:

"… I am in pain all the time. Pain. Because what does a mother want? Just for him to be happy."

[Interviewee #3]

The mother questions herself about her own guilt and about the responsibility she has for her adult child. There is a sense of

confusion: Is the child's return home a good thing or not? On the other hand, perhaps the confusion lies with the child, who has not fully matured and not become completely independent. There is also a feeling of disappointment, with herself for being unable to see the right way forward, and to some extent with the directionless child. the ambivalent mother also talks of pain, pain for her son or daughter struggling with a crisis, pain for herself, and pain for the poor communication between them. The ambivalence resonates across all four themes, and the mother is unable to come up with any clear solution.

The involved mother

The mother's perception of her parental role

Three of the interviewees were defined as involved mothers. All three mothers opened their homes to a returning daughter and grandchildren. The involved mothers are dominant and proactive, engaged in their children's lives and making decisions for both them and themselves. With regard to co-residence, they present an open house, making space for the returning child, whom they treat as a friend. The involved mother invests a great deal of physical and emotional energy dealing with the situation, which takes its toll on her health and her resources. That said, the experience of co-residence carries its own value and adds meaning to her life.

Like the rescuer, the involved mother takes charge, and is involved in – or insinuates herself into – decision-making and day-to-day affairs; she feels guilty if she fails to do it. However, in contrast to the rescuer, who is empowered by her role, the involved mother is weakened, physically and emotionally. Both assume heavy responsibilities and dislike others doing things for them; but while the former takes her role in stride, or, if she encounters some difficulty, is confident of her ability to deal with it, the latter is very cognizant of the difficulties of her role, and her need for support. The involved mother needs to feel essential, to feel that she is needed and has something to give. That helps her in her life and especially in any struggle with illness or other difficulty: she seems to need this encouragement. She is tired in body and mind; she wants peace and quiet and privacy. At the same time, she does not want to burden her children, or have them see this side of her and view her as pitiable. She does everything herself, rejecting any help. The burden becomes heavier with age:

"Every older person — if the Almighty loves him, let Him take him while he's still on his feet, not to be a burden to his children, not to become repulsive… We're pensioners. [We're] worn out. We want quiet. Just to be alone. Space to do things quietly."

[Interviewee #10]

Her perception of the returning son or daughter

The involved mother relates to her adult child as a friend. There is no distance between them, and the relationship is perceived as special. After a period of co-residence, and the need to confront issues, the relationship is perceived as even

stronger than before, and the child is seen as one who shares feelings:

> "I'm a worrier. I'm an anxious and concerned mother. My relationship with my daughters is very special. They are like close friends. I'm both their mother and their confidante. Every confidence… they tell me a lot."
>
> [Interviewee #4]

Like the ambivalent mother, the involved mother's house is open, but the boundaries are not always clear. The ambivalent knows that there is a time limit to co-residence. The involved, on the other hand, does not know how long the adult child will remain at home, and does not spend time wondering about it. She invests a great deal of energy in the daily routine, and on her concerns and involvements. She sometimes feels on the verge of collapse, and that her health is suffering, but she says nothing.

> "Support and encouragement. And helping her (daughter) when she falls… So whenever it happens we need to be strong all the time. Sometimes it's hard. Very hard. I won't let it show, but I sometimes feel I'm ready to collapse."
>
> [Interviewee #4]

Like the mother as rescuer, the involved mother also invests a great deal in helping her children, but the rescuer is able to step back and protect her privacy. For the involved mother, by contrast, there is never a free moment; she is always involved and the pace of her life never lets up:

> "You need to be here and be present in one get-together after another… shouts, kisses, hugs. And grandma always prepares surprises and food and good things. And you'll see toys scattered around the house… Never mind, they come and go. Sometimes they stay for two or three days…"
>
> [Interviewee #10]

The perception of co-residence

The involved mother indeed opens her house and gives of herself, but she nevertheless expresses a desire for her own space and a little peace and quiet. On the one hand, the house is filled with children who give meaning to life; on the other hand, the involved mother has almost no time for herself, no leisure to read or meet friends:

> "I enjoy having people in the house, but sometimes I feel the need for some quiet… When [my daughter] was away for two weeks, and we were alone at home, it was pretty nice to have a little quiet. I could read my book in peace and sleep as long as I wanted. Nobody bothered me. We need that too once in a while… The only difficulty is that sometimes there really is no privacy and no quiet. Especially in the evening, when it's bedtime, and [our] daughter is getting ready to go out, for example, and [the grandson] is still running around. Enough. I've already raised my own [children]… That's when it's hard…"
>
> [Interviewee #4]

Alongside the difficulties of co-residence the mother describes are the rewards she derives from the situation. She

needs having the (young) children around, and she enjoys a full house with everyone around her. A widow in this situation speaks of loneliness as the most terrible thing of all. Another mother, a pensioner, talks of the need for some occupation or tasks.

> "I have a need for this too. My need is that when they're around, we have something to do… I feel that my life is fuller, so as not to feel [depressed]"
>
> [Interviewee #10]

Emotional ramifications

The involved mother emphasizes the advantages of co-residence. She loves having the whole family together, and it is important for her to be there for the children, something that she herself may not have been able to take for granted in her own childhood. On the other hand, she takes things to heart. Because of her sensitivity and involvement in all matters, she is easily hurt and disappointed. She is exhausted and her health is affected by the co-resident situation, and the transition that demands all her physical and emotional energy. She too wants support and understanding, but does not find it forthcoming. The family feedback and togetherness do give her strength, however:

> "Don't see me that way! [i.e. strong] I'm very much on edge. I'm very vulnerable. But I know how to stop, to stop and justify everything… But it became impossible… I burst into tears… I'm more emotionally exhausted than physically, because I'm always trying to keep them from feeling that they're imposing on me. And it's tough for me."
>
> [Interviewee #10]

Discussion

This study examines the phenomenon of young adults who have already left home and separated from their parents, but because of personal or financial difficulties, family breakup or studies, have temporarily returned. The daily friction of living under the same roof revives emotions, conflicts, dilemmas, and questions about the parental role and the relationship between parents and their co-resident adult children. Exactly at this time of life, with the children grown and sometimes parents themselves, the mother is not quite sure of her role: When should she intervene and when not? And how should she relate to her returning son or daughter — as an adult like herself, or as a youth in transition who still needs her help, her advice and her support? Are these mutually exclusive? The results of the study indicate that the way mothers deal with this lies between two poles: from absolute commitment to the child's needs, to separation, clear boundaries and consideration of her own needs. On the one hand, helping and supporting her children give her satisfaction and the joy of having them around, while on the other, as an empty-nester, perhaps retired, she is looking for fresh meaning in her life. She wants her space and privacy, where she can enjoy her familiar habits. The return of the adult child changes all of this.

This dilemma arises in the first theme of this study, the mother's perception of her parental role. The subject

commonly appears in the literature with regard to the early stages of motherhood, when the baby is dependent on its mother, and later during adolescence. The expectation is that over time, the mother would allow greater separation and individuation to her child as well as to herself (Benjamin, 1988; Winnicott, 1957). Consistent with Winnicott's concept of the "good enough mother", in this study, the interviewees spoke of the "good mother"; and questions and dilemmas emerged, such as when to intervene and when to disengage, what authority does the mother have vis-à-vis her adult child, and what are her expectations of the child.

The patterns that characterize the maternal role become stronger and sharper at a time of crisis, in this case the return home of the adult child and his or her need for help and support. It would appear that nurturing in the form of care and protection persists in all stages of parenthood, even when the parents are growing old and their children are parents themselves. That said, the parental role at this stage is less defined. The study shows a gap between the mother's perception of her role and the actual physical and emotional situation in which it is played; there is a constant attempt to reconcile the two. While parents learn to accept that their returning son or daughter is no longer a child but an independent individual (Aquilino, 2006), they are faced with the dilemma of how to relate to them.

The ambivalent mother is confused and indecisive with respect to her parental role. Like the mother as rescuer, she wants to assist her children, but is not always sure how best to go about it. She feels helpless and lacks confidence in her maternal role. In her words, she loves her children and wants to help them, but they refuse to cooperate with her, and are not always inclined to seek their parents' advice. The mother is conflicted. If the children are unhappy, why do they stay? And if they upset their parents, why do the parents support them? Do aging parents have any authority over their adult child? The child, she relates, feels that his parents are too critical of him, and the mother doesn't know what to do. There seems to be a failure of communication, and the gap between them grows wider. The rescuer resolves the dilemma by retreating: she avoids interfering or says nothing at all. The study indicates that the parental role in such situations is not sufficiently defined. That finding is consistent with theoretical studies which have argued that what was obvious in the early years, when the children were little or in their teens, was less obvious when the children had grown (Biddle, 1986).

The literature on the ambivalence of aging parents regarding their adult children ascribes it to unclear norms in their relationship. Parents report a heightened ambivalence deriving from mixed emotions of affection and disappointment when their children fail to fulfill normative adult expectations — studies, economic situation, marriage or having children (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2010; Pillemer & Suitor, 2002). In the present study, this point emerged most prominently among ambivalent mothers and involved mothers, who saw their child as a "good kid," though they may sometimes be disappointed by the way he or she functions. There is an extensive literature on ambivalence in intergenerational relations that finds expression in contradictory feelings and conflicts within the family. The family attempts to reconcile the values of tradition and modernity, while individual members are suspended between unity, trust, closeness and identification on the one hand, and separation, distance and autonomy on the other (Lüscher, 2002; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998).

The relations between the mothers and their co-resident adult children assume a different character for each of the types. The mother as rescuer welcomes her child into her home. She is in complete control and makes all decisions: the child has to adapt. He is essentially swallowed up in her world and has no personal place for himself/herself. The mother sees the child as dependent on her. The child is thus absorbed into the mother, like a fetus that is connected, dependent, not yet its own person. By contrast, the mother sees herself as having her own life, her own space, and as not being dependent on her child.

The ambivalent mother is in a dilemma about co-residence with the returning child. She wonders whether it's a good thing to have the child living at home or whether he or she should move out. She's uncertain how to relate to her child. The child is an independent adult with responsibilities, yet in some ways her child has regressed into adolescence. The mother speaks about a generation gap and lack of understanding between her and her child. The separation between them can reach a situation of almost complete disconnection.

The involved mother identifies with her child, who occupies a major place in her life. There is no unequivocal separation in their co-residence, and the mother is left with little room to call her own. There is very little personal space for either of them, a situation that has both advantages and disadvantages. It is characterized by chaos, boundless giving and great fatigue; but the mother's generosity answers her own emotional need, and blunts her feelings of loneliness.

The perception of co-residence can be understood in the context of the social exchange theory (Cook, Cheshire, Rice, & Nakagawa, 2013). Most of the mothers garnered strength from the fact that they were able to help their children, thereby fulfilling their parental role. This is consistent with the finding that parents in general do not want their children to take care of them (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2002). It is not surprising, therefore, that the rescuer is empowered by her children's weakness and need for her support. The involved mother, in contrast, identifies with her children, takes everything to heart, and is involved in everything — at the price of her health; but she feels it as a call to duty, something that imbues her life with meaning. The ambivalent mother feels that relations with her children are conflicted, and the co-residence takes its toll, but it also presents a fresh opportunity to resolve the conflicts. On the other hand, adult children, who reside with their parents, are overly dependent on their parents for support (Cobb-Clark, 2008; Kahn et al., 2013; Umberson, 2006). Therefore, assessing the perspective of adult children likely would have resulted in very different findings.

The theory of intergenerational solidarity explains transfers of resources such as time, money and care between the generations (Bengtson & Mangen, 1988; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Opening one's home to a returning child potentially encompasses sharing all of these resources, with the primary direction of transfer of resources being from older parents to their adult children (i.e., downward). Nevertheless, even though the tangible, more easily quantified resources were primarily downwardly transferred, it is clear that the mothers also experienced some emotional gratification and derived personal meaning as a result of co-residence.

For mothers, the emotional ramifications, as they perceive them, of co-residence with their returning adult child are complex and varied. The mother as rescuer is strengthened, empowered, and feels that she is fulfilling her role of protecting her child. The ambivalent mother has mixed emotions. She is happy that she is able to help, but will be happier still when they leave. She is frustrated that, from her perspective, she is not able to cope with the co-resident situation. She is also disappointed in the child who has not found a new direction. She feels helpless and in need of support and guidance. For the involved mother, co-residence is not easy, either physically or emotionally, but she feels an obligation to her children, and her support for them fills an emotional void. The close connection with her family gives her strength and meaning in her life.

Drawing from a lifespan perspective, it is clear that the relationships and dilemmas portrayed in the present study are not static, but rather have evolved over time and are likely influenced by a variety of factors, including the personal characteristics and circumstances of the mothers and their adult children, their lifelong relationships, the entire family constellation and the society in which they live (Hogerbrugge & Silverstein, 2014; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997a, 1997b; Silverstein, Conroy, Wang, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 2002). Although the small size of the study and its lack of representativeness do not allow for statistical inferences, the findings suggest that almost all mother as rescuers were retired. Potentially, having a "weak" child to care and provide for fulfills the mother as rescuer with meaning and strengthens her at times, when her own professional activity has dwindled.

The gender of the returning child could potentially explain the response of the involved mother, who overly identified with her retuning daughter. Past research has demonstrated the strong interdependence that evolves between mothers and their daughters (Miller-Day, 2012). Possibly, it is easier to "weaken" a returning son and become a rescuer, whereas with a retuning daughter, one is more likely to become overly involved or involved in a tight-knit relationship, as was previously portrayed in past research (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997a, 1997b).

The ambivalence portrayed by the ambivalent mother could potentially be driven not only by the characteristics of the involved parties, but also by the sociocultural characteristics of Israeli society, a society that values individualism and personal success and at the same time emphasizes the importance of the family unit (Kulkarni et al., 2011; Lavee & Katz, 2003). Returning home due to a relationship breakup (a common experience of the returning child of the ambivalent mother) potentially reflects a "failure" not only of the returning child, but also of his or her parents. Past research has stressed the dialectic tension in the role of older parents to adult children (Levitzki, 2009) and the high level of ambivalence in intergenerational relationships in Israeli society (Lowenstein, 2007). The present study adds by providing an in-depth understanding of the nature of this ambivalence and its unique circumstances.

Despite its importance and distinctiveness, the study has some limitations. The four themes relate to each of the three types of mothers, with each group numbering three to seven interviewees. The three types identified represent ideal types as in real life; boundaries across the three types are more permeable. Furthermore, the study relies on the mothers'

perceptions alone. It may be assumed that interviews with the fathers and the returning adult children would have enriched and validated the study, and may have provided a broader perspective and deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Further areas for study may include: a longitudinal study of the same group of mothers with respect to their parenthood and their relationship with their children, after the child leaves home for the second time.

Practical applications

This study suggests an additional direction from which to observe the relationship between aging parents and their adult children, particularly from the mother's perspective. The overall complexity and the differences among the mothers highlight another facet of parenthood of adult children. This in turn could be helpful for therapists, mediators and other professionals in understanding the conflicts, dilemmas and complexities involved. This subject matter gives legitimization to aging parents (in support groups or social centers, for example) to talk about dilemmas in their relations with their children, and the ability to differentiate between their socially expected parental role and where they are personally at this stage of their lives in terms of their own capabilities and needs.

Appendix 1. Interview guidelines

1. Why did your son (or daughter) make the decision to move back home?
2. What is it like today living in the same house as your son (or daughter)? — physically, financially, socially, and emotionally.
3. Describe a situation that is an example, in your view, of what it's like living together.
4. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of living together?
5. How would you describe your relationship with your son (daughter)?
6. What do you wish for yourself?

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