

# Uses & Abuses Of Social Research In Social Work

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## The elder abuse and neglect phenomenon in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish society: social workers' perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** In the last 30 years, elder abuse and neglect has been recognized as a social and health-related problem. The aim of this paper is to describe the phenomenon of elder abuse and neglect in a separatist faith-based society (ultra-Orthodox Jewish society—UOJS).

**Methods:** A qualitative-phenomenological study with 28 social workers who underwent in-depth semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide consisting of the following items: visibility of the elder abuse and neglect phenomenon in the ultra-Orthodox society, and dilemmas and sensitive issues that arise when working with this population.

**Results:** Three main themes emerged: (1) Between the commandment to honor one's parents and concealment patterns: Cultural barriers to exposing the abuse and neglect phenomenon; (2) "Life is demanding." The unique expression of abusive and neglectful behavior in the UOJS; (3) Culturally related dilemmas when intervening with cases of elder abuse and neglect.

**Conclusions:** Ultra-Orthodox Jewish cultural belief is a differentiating component in the context of elder abuse and neglect. Social workers need to develop a deep understanding of the unique characteristics of the phenomenon and cultural sensitivity to cope with it to address the well-being of older ultra-Orthodox Jews.

**Key words:** elder abuse and neglect, elder mistreatment, cultural sensitivity, faith-based community, ultra-Orthodox Jews, social workers, qualitative research

### Introduction

In the last 30 years, elder abuse and neglect has been recognized as a social and health-related problem (WHO, 2008). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2008, p. 1) defined abuse and neglect as "one-time or ongoing actions, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person." Various forms of elder abuse have been observed, such as physical, psychological/emotional, sexual, and financial abuse (Burnes *et al.*, 2016). Intentional or unintentional neglect can also be included in the phenomenon (Fulmer *et al.*, 2005). More recently, abuse and neglect have been combined and defined as "mistreatment," which implies both an omission and a commission dimension (Muehlbauer and Crane, 2006).

Social workers are key service providers in this area. They take care of older adults' mental and physical health, safety, and overall well-being. In the context of elder abuse and neglect, reaching out, identifying, and intervening with victims and abusers are sometimes a matter of life and death (Alon and Berg-Warman, 2014).

In Israel, awareness of the elder abuse and neglect phenomenon is growing. The first national survey on elder abuse and neglect was conducted in 2003 (Lowenstein *et al.*, 2009). As part of the developed world, Israel is characterized by a heterogeneous multicultural society (Norris and Ingelhart, 2012) and has not yet emphasized the encounter between the elder abuse phenomenon and a cultural minority that chooses to segregate itself, such as the ultra-Orthodox Jewish society (UOJS).

### Old age and the UOJS

As a "faith-based community," the UOJS is a differentiated group within Jewish society in Israel and worldwide (Goodman and Witzum, 2002),

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