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Patterns of Relationship Difficulties: A Retrospective Study amongst Older Jewish Adults In South Africa

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Abstract

This research study employed a qualitative methodology to explore the retrospective experiences of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among older Jewish South Africans. Undertaking a phenomenological approach, the objective was to examine how this unique demographic group specifically navigated childhood experiences of parental abuse and neglect. The investigation extended to exploring the participants' experiences of various relationships over their lifespans and identifying environmental factors contributing to these experiences. Through semi-structured interviews with 9 Jewish South Africans aged between 60 and 80, the study sought to elucidate their experiences and their subsequent meaning-making processes. Employing thematic analysis, five principal themes emerged: Parental Abuse and Neglect in Childhood; Family Dynamics; Experiences of Familial Relationships through the Lifespan; Experiences of Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Relationships through the Lifespan; and Adaptation within the Ecological Systems. The findings revealed intriguing phenomena and patterns, shedding light on the nuanced aspects of post-adversity development. Shared themes of unhealthy and conflictual relationships arose, as well as repeated patterns of harsh or reactive parenting behaviours. However, many participants spoke about changing the patterns that they learned in their childhoods and experiencing and creating positive and supportive relationships with spouses, friends, or their own children. Aspects of the participants contexts were seen as potentially contributing to these positive changes, such as religion and spirituality, access to activities and hobbies, and the influences of the broader family and community. This research contributes to the knowledge bases of ACEs, generational trauma, and minority religions in a non-Western context, specifically within the framework of older Jewish South Africans. The conclusions and inevitable limitations of the study give rise to recommendations for future research, emphasising the need to delve deeper into uncovered phenomena and expand beyond the traditionally Western-centric theories that were utilised.

Keywords: *adverse childhood experiences, Attachment Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, generational trauma, Jewish, older adults, parental abuse, parental neglect, qualitative, South Africa*