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Religious Coercive Control in Orthodox Jewish Marriage: Exploring the Lived Experience of Women Survivors

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Portfolio submitted in fulfillment of the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DPsych)

City St George's, University of London

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Table of Contents

List of tables and figures.....7

List of abbreviations.....8

Glossary of selected Jewish terms.....9

Acknowledgements.....10

Declaration.....11

Preface.....12

1. Overview.....12

2. Sections of the portfolio.....12

3. Exploring a sense of self.....13

References.....15

Part A: Doctoral research.....16

Abstract.....16

1. Introduction.....17

1.1 Position of the researcher.....17

1.2 Search methods.....18

1.3 Definitions.....19

1.3.1 Orthodox Judaism.....19

1.3.2 Coercive control.....21

1.3.3 Religious coercive control.....25

1.4 Gender, Orthodox Judaism and abuse.....27

1.5 Orthodox Jewish marriage.....29

1.5.1 Family purity.....30

1.5.2 Tzniut (modesty).....30

1.5.3 Arranged marriage.....31

1.5.4 Shalom Bayit (peaceful home) 31

1.6 Jewish divorce.....32

1.6.1 Get abuse....33
1.7 Literature on religious coercive control....34
1.7.1 Religious coercive control in Christianity and Islam....34
1.7.2 Religious coercive control in Judaism....36
1.7.3 Role of community and community leaders....39
1.7.4 The meaning of faith to abuse survivors....42
1.8 Gaps and future directions....43
1.9 Relevance to counselling psychology....45
1.10 Research question....47
2. Methodology....48
2.1 Theoretical foundations....48
2.1.1 Rationale for a qualitative methodology....48
2.1.2 Philosophical considerations....48
2.1.2.1 Ontology....49
2.1.2.2 Epistemology....49
2.1.2.3 My position....50
2.1.2.4 Reflexivity on philosophical position....51
2.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis....52
2.2.1 Phenomenology....52
2.2.2 Hermeneutics....53
2.2.3 Idiography....55
2.3 Rationale and reflections on IPA....55
2.4 Other methodologies....56
2.5 Research design....57
2.5.1 Initial data gathering....57
2.5.2 Recruitment and procedure....58
2.5.3 Ethical considerations and inclusion criteria....60

2.5.4 Reflections on the process of gaining ethics approval....63
2.6 Participants....65
2.7 Cost of resources....66
2.8 Data analysis....66
2.8.1 Process and reflections on the process....66
2.8.2 Evaluation....70
3. Analysis....74
3.1 Overview....74
3.2 Trapped and broken....75
3.2.1 “Rammed down my throat” - experiences of extreme abuse....76
3.2.2 Abuse was relentless....79
3.2.3 “Gobsmackingly devastated” - shattering impact of the abuse....81
3.3 Painful and empowering reflections....83
3.3.1 A growing sense of him....84
3.3.2 Grappling with a sense of self – reflecting on the person she was and is.87
3.3.3 Unfolding emotions over time....89
3.3.4 Weaving a story in making sense of the abuse....94
3.4 Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman....98
3.4.1 Frustration at being treated differently to men....98
3.4.2 Men use religion as a tool to abuse....101
3.4.3 “Women like you”....103
3.5 Changed relationships....105
3.5.1 Met and unmet expectations in relationships with others....105
3.5.2 Complexity of religious connection....108
4. Discussion....112
4.1 Discussion of findings....113
4.1.1 The unique nature of religious coercive control....113

4.1.2 Impact of the abuse on the participants....115
4.1.3 Sense-making....117
4.1.4 Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman....120
4.1.5 Changed relationships with religion....122
4.2 Strengths and limitations....123
4.3 Recommendations for future research....125
4.4 Implications for counselling psychology....126
4.5 A return to reflexivity....128
References....132
Appendices....147
Appendix A: Power and Control Wheel, The Duluth Model....147
Appendix B: Charities and social media campaigns in the UK....148
Appendix C: Charities approached during recruitment....149
Appendix D: Recruitment email and flyer....150
Appendix E: Participant information sheet....152
Appendix F: Participant consent form....156
Appendix G: Interview questions....157
Appendix H: Participant debrief sheet....159
[REDACTED] Part B: Combined case study and process report: Searching to Belong....160
Part C: Journal Article....161
Abstract....161
Introduction....162
Orthodox Judaism....163
Gender roles....163
Orthodox Jewish marriage and divorce....164
Previous research....165
Gaps and research question....167

Method....168
Participants and data collection....169
Ethics....170
Findings....171
Trapped and broken....171
Painful and empowering reflections....172
Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman....174
Changed relationships....175
Discussion....176
Trapped and broken....176
Painful and empowering reflections....178
Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman....180
Changed relationships....181
Further reflections....182
Recommendations for future research....184
References....184

List of tables and figures

Part A:

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria.....**61**

Table 2: Participants' experience of religious abuse.....**66**

Figure 1: Master themes and subthemes.....**75**

Part C:

Table 1: Participants' experience of religious abuse.....**200**

Figure 1: Master themes and subthemes.....**203**

List of abbreviations

BPS	British Psychological Society
CST	Communal Security Trust UK
IPA	Interpretative phenomenological analysis
IPV	Intimate partner violence
JWA	Jewish Women's Aid
PAR	Participatory action research
PCW	Power and Control Wheel
PTMF	Power threat meaning framework
PTSD	Post traumatic stress disorder
RA	Religious abuse
RCC	Religious coercive control
RTA	Reflexive thematic analysis
SA	Spiritual abuse
WHO	World Health Organisation

Glossary of selected Jewish terms

Agunah (plural: Agunot): Literal translation from Hebrew is a chained woman – a woman who is stuck in her marriage as determined by Halakha.

Bet Din (plural: Batei Din): The religious courts in which decisions of marriage and divorce are made, presided over by specially appointed judges/Rabbis.

Charedi (plural: Charedim): Ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups. Literal translation from Hebrew is to tremble before God.

Get: The religious bill of divorce.

Halakha (plural: Halakhot): An overall term for the code of Jewish laws.

Hassidic: Similar to Charedi, albeit a different subgroup of Ultra-Orthodoxy.

Kosher (noun: Kashrut): The dietary laws of Judaism.

Mikvah: A ritual bath for monthly immersion.

Niddah: The time of the monthly cycle when a married man and women are not permitted to be intimate.

Rabbi: A Jewish scholar, teacher, or religious leader.

Rebbetzin: The wife of a Rabbi, and a community leader.

Sefer (plural: Seforim): Holy books or texts.

Shabbat: Hebrew translation for the Sabbath, the 7th day of the week, and a holy day on which Orthodox Jews are not permitted to do any form of 'work'.

Shalom Bayit: Literal translation from Hebrew is a peaceful home

Shidduch: A marriage match.

Taharat HaMishpacha: The laws of family purity.

Torah: The 5 books of Moses, often referred to as the Old Testament.

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First and foremost, to the women who participated in my study, who so generously shared their stories, and did so with such bravery and openness, thank you. I feel privileged to be able to hear and share your experiences, and I hope that I have done them justice. To my supervisor, Dr Charlotte Whiteley, you have been a support both in the research/writing sense, but also emotionally – giving generously of your time, patience and guidance, and being forever understanding of life's challenges. I feel enormously grateful to have had your support these last few years.

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Declaration

I, Rachel Epstein, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Preface

1. Overview

This portfolio is comprised of three different pieces of work, which are woven together through a common thread - reflections on a sense of self. The thesis, journal article, and process report with case study, each offer an exploration of women, including myself, who seek to engage with this topic through their life experiences and identity.

Below, I first provide an explanation and understanding of each of the three sections of this portfolio. Following this, I offer reflections on the nature of this common theme and the ways which it manifested through both research and clinical work, and the impact of my identity on the work, alongside its impact on me.

2. Sections of the portfolio

Part A of the portfolio is my research thesis, which explores the lived experiences of Orthodox Jewish women who are survivors of religious coercion in their marriages. Following an IPA methodology and employing a critical realist lens, the women in this study shared their experiences of religious coercion with enormous bravery and deep reflection, considering the impact of their experiences on themselves both then and today.

Part B of this study presents the case study of one of my clients, Rebecca – a pseudonym - who I saw in my final year of training. It reports on, and evaluates, a ten-minute segment of a systemic session that we had together, including her formulation through a systemic lens, and a critical exploration of her family circumstances. The theme of this piece of work is ‘Searching to belong’, as this relates to the hypotheses I drew on and shared in my work with her, and my formulation of her distress.

Finally, Part C of this study is a condensed version of the research thesis, intended as a publishable piece for the journal “Religion, Mental Health and Culture”. Important aspects of the thesis were studied and presented, with consideration of the intended journal audience.

3. Exploring a sense of self

All three of these portfolio pieces offer significant reflections on one's sense of self, as this is a theme which permeated the experiences, and collection of these experiences, of client, participant, and myself.

In the research thesis (and subsequently, journal article), a sense of self is explored through the discovered themes. The participants had each experienced a significant life event - a trauma - and needed to recalibrate themselves to find new meaning. It is well documented that religious abuse can cause significant harm to one's sense of self as it is an attack on one's value base and sense of identity (Starr, 2017). Indeed, the participants reported experiencing a shift in how they viewed themselves, with both painful and empowering reflections on their time in their abusive relationships and their time afterwards. The diminished sense of self which was explored by the participants shows the impact of their experiences, and for some, the accompanying internal conflict shows how relevant this remains today. In conducting this research, I was struck by the weaving of narratives and meaning-making stories for each of the participants. The navigation of their experiences and the ways that they sought to make sense and find new meaning, are part of their quest to rebuild their sense of self, to create new lives with an identity which has ultimately been changed. The five participants in this study differed in their approach to this, which reflects their varied sources of strength and connection to resources, such as faith and community – each of these built up through particular sets of circumstances which relate to who they are.

The research study and journal article employed an IPA methodology, which invariably, involves an examination of myself as researcher. As part of this study I needed to consider my insider/outsider researcher status, and the ways that I hold both sameness and difference with the participants. This was important, as my own identity (and thus, sense of self), had potential to be both beneficial and distracting in my work with the data. I have endeavoured to be reflexive throughout the process of research and throughout the write-up below, as I have been conscious of the ways that my sense of self can impact the work I am doing.

I have also been conscious of the ways that my sense of self could be impacted *by* this work, and I have tried to be reflexive on this also. A reflexive diary enabled me to take note of thoughts and feelings which arose through the years of conducting this research, and I have included many of these reflections in Part A below. Most notably, I considered the sameness of myself and participants as Orthodox Jewish women, and I thought about how their stories evoked a sense of both pride and pain in my community and identity.

My client in the case study and process report is also an Orthodox Jewish woman, and this sameness was an unvoiced, but present, part of our work, which is explored below. My sense of self is important here too, and I used the Social Graces model to explore the impact of identity, power, and sameness/difference on the therapeutic relationship (Burnham, 2012). In the same way that my own sense of self can both impact, and be impacted by, my research, this has been reflected in clinical case part of the portfolio below also. Supervision (both research and clinical) was an important part of this work as it helped me to challenge any assumptions which I might unwittingly hold, and to remain curious to the processes at play.

This portfolio therefore connects the experiences of the participants in Parts A and B, with the client in Part C, and with myself, through its exploration of one's sense of self in light of their identity and circumstances. The three sections and the underlying research/therapeutic process, aimed to prioritise the women's voices and their

negotiated sense of selves, remaining curious about their subjective experiences and the shaping of their identities. This portfolio also reflects my development as a counselling psychologist, as the years of research and clinical training have culminated in this final piece. Both research and clinical work have been influential in establishing my sense of self as a counselling psychologist; I have learnt how to practice in a curious, holistic and relational way, and I recognise the utmost importance of cultural and societal circumstances, or the Social Graces which inform one's experience and identity.

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Part A: Doctoral Research

Abstract

This thesis aimed to explore the experiences of Orthodox Jewish women who are survivors of Religious Coercive Control in their (ex)marriage. While there is a sizeable amount of literature on religious coercion by religious leaders, and religious coercion within other religions, Orthodox Jewish marriage in this context is understudied, and even more so through a psychological, and phenomenological, lens. This study sought to address the gap in literature and offer insight into the unique experiences of this phenomenon. Five women were recruited and participated in semi-structured interviews, which were then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Four themes were found: “Trapped and broken” explored the impact of the abuse on the participants; “Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman” captured their sense-making of their experiences within the intersection of being a Jewish woman; “Painful and empowering reflections” sought to understand how they looked back on, and made sense of, their experiences; and “Changed relationships” considered the impact of the abuse on their relationships with religion, and with others. The findings, their meanings, their clinical applications, and the relevance to counselling psychology are all discussed in the thesis below.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding into the experiences of women who have survived religious abuse in their homes at the hands of their husbands. This research focuses on the Orthodox Jewish community, with an exploration of how this community's identity, religious adherence, and cultural and societal norms form a backdrop to the abuse, where it occurs. While research into various multicultural groups has exploded in recent years, there seems to be a dearth of studies related to the Jewish community (Schlosser et al., 2009). For Orthodox Jews, Judaism is primary to their cultural, ethnic, religious and spiritual identities, and so a culturally sensitive approach is essential for counselling psychologists looking to work within this group (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000). This research acknowledges the uniqueness of an Orthodox Jewish identity and hopes to add to growing literature which can inform counselling psychology knowledge and practice.

This chapter begins with the researcher's personal position on the research topic and their relationship with the Orthodox Jewish community and lifestyle. It then seeks to define and explain Orthodox Judaism, coercive control and religious coercive control. It addresses the role of gender as a factor in abuse in the Orthodox Jewish community, before turning its attention to the existing literature. Finally, the study's relevance to counselling psychology, and the research question, will be attended to.

Given the centrality of the researcher's position to this study, within an IPA framework, first person will be used hereafter.

1.1 Position of the researcher

I identify as a Modern Orthodox Jewish woman. This means that I view the world through the lens of an ethnic, religious and cultural Jewish identity, while still engaging with the modern, secular world. My Jewish identity is incredibly important to me and is part of my daily life – it comes into how I relate to others, make decisions, and my daily activities. In this respect, I am an insider researcher, and I share knowledge of the world which my participants inhabit, as well as great respect for the community.

My experiences in this world have been shaped by the history of my people through centuries of persecution, and the mark that this has left both on me as an individual and on my people as a collective. I started this research in a pre-October 7th world, and I finish it now almost two years later, in a climate of rising antisemitism that leaves me in a constant cycle of distress, fear and anger. This undoubtedly has had an impact on how I choose to present this research and I found myself reticent at points to discuss or focus on particular points of data which I found 'embarrassing' or which I felt might feed antisemitism further by playing into stereotypes about Jews. I have needed to enact great reflexivity on this and to continuously examine my position as an insider researcher, which I will explore further in the Methodology section. Above all, I have remained cognisant of the fact that abuse of this nature does exist, and that hiding it or refusing to speak about it is a disservice first and foremost to its victims, and then to the community as a whole. There is an antisemitic trope which exists which suggests that the Jewish people think we are above all others, superior or arrogant. I hope that, in a backwards way, this research can combat that trope by showing that we are not above criticism and that we can recognise both the good and bad in our community.

Lastly, I am an 'outsider researcher' in that I have never been personally exposed to religious abuse and nor has anyone close to me, to my knowledge. This is important to state because it means that the experiences shared by my participants are unfamiliar. I hold a deep curiosity and a thirst to understand their experiences, and I come in without the need to bracket my own pre-conceived perceptions based on my personal position.

1.2 Search methods

Literature was found using the search terms "Religious coercive control", "Religious abuse" and "Spiritual abuse". While I did not find a written distinction between them (and will sometimes use the terms interchangeably), it is suggested that the first two are focused on manipulation of religious practices and the latter on acts which aim to tear down a woman's spirituality. As Judaism is a ritual- and practice-heavy religion, this is an important distinction.

Variations of the search terms included "religion" "religious" "faith" "spirituality" "Jewish" AND "abuse" "coercive control" "domestic violence" "intimate partner violence". Many

studies were also read on Christianity and Islam for definitions and background knowledge. Initial searches were carried out on PsycInfo and WebofScience; further studies were identified through key researchers and articles often cited. I took a year's maternity leave and set up an alert with those search terms, checking again for new research when I returned. Over 90 books, articles and religious papers were read. Grey literature, such as memoirs written by members of the Orthodox community, were also read for contextual knowledge. While many variations on the theme were found, religion as a *tool* of abuse is only just emerging in the literature and is understudied in the counselling psychology field.

1.3 Definitions

1.3.1 Orthodox Judaism

This study intentionally chooses to focus on Orthodox Judaism, which includes several subgroups with different interpretations of religious law. Although most Jewish groups share monotheistic beliefs, respect for Torah, and the scars of persecution, particular Jewish practices vary widely between them. What typically sets Orthodox Judaism apart from Reform, Conservative or Cultural Judaism, is a strong adherence to Jewish law, which in turn establishes an important context for religious abuse to occur.

Orthodox Jewry overall comprises a spectrum which cannot neatly be divided into categories (Schnall, 2006). The attitudes and beliefs of individuals, families, groups and communities are incredibly diverse along a spectrum from 'Modern' to 'Ultra' (Vass, 2025). For the purpose of this research, I have attempted two very broad categories:

Modern Orthodox Judaism is firmly placed within both the secular and religious worlds; there is strength of Jewish identity and adherence to the laws, alongside a deep value placed on living in, and contributing to, the secular community (Fishman, 1995). Kaplan (1979) describes the Modern Orthodox Jew as one who recognises the mutual demands of modern, secular life, alongside the old traditions of Judaism. Generally speaking, a person who identifies as Modern Orthodox is less strict in their adherence to Jewish law and there is far less pressure from the community on any particular law – leading to a spectrum of adherence.

Ultra-Orthodox Judaism includes an even wider range of streams and groups, each with unique cultural emphases, customs and traditions (Dehan & Levi, 2009). According to the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in the UK (Graham & Boyd, 2022), at the last estimated count there were 313,000 self-identifying Jews in the UK and 80,000 of them were Ultra-Orthodox. These communities are typically more insular in their nature – the community lives, works, studies and socialises together with little input from secular society and with many separation barriers in place to protect its members from outside influence (Shaffir, 1993). The insularity and cautiousness around communicating with secular sources comes from several historical, cultural and political reasons. Firstly, an ongoing intergenerational trauma, fear of antisemitism, and an existential threat which has persisted, and which encourages Ultra-Orthodox Jews to keep their heads down and to themselves (Gabbay et al., 2017). Also, a resistance to change and innovation to maintain purity of values and culture (Tuito & Band-Winterstein, 2021). The Hebrew and colloquially used term for Ultra-Orthodox Jews is 'Charedi', (plural: Charedim), which literally means to tremble before God (Gabbay et al., 2017).

It is also worth noting that within the wider umbrella Charedi movement there are smaller subsections – most noticeably Hassidic and Mitnagdim/Yeshivish (the latter usually referred to simply as Charedi). The Hassidic communities differ slightly from other Charedi communities in their devotion to expressing their religious practice and worship with extreme joy and emotional elation, whereas Yeshivish communities adopt a more sober and analytic approach to religious life and religious learning. Also, Hassidic communities are intensely devoted to their 'Rebbes' - the most senior Rabbi of their particular sect and the foremost religious authority and expert (Gabbay et al., 2017). For the purposes of this study, 'Charedi' is the term which encompasses all Ultra-Orthodox communities – both Hassidic and otherwise.

Religious and spiritual beliefs are central to one's view of the world; this is undoubtedly true for those who identify as Orthodox Jewish, as Halakhot (religious laws) dictate almost every part of the day – from how they get dressed in the morning, what and how they eat, pray, are intimate or have physical contact with others. The halakhot are undiscerning in that they govern many areas of private and public life. For example, the

Orthodox community strictly follows the halakhot of Shabbat (the Sabbath), which prohibits any form of 'work' from sundown Friday to sundown on Saturday – including use of electricity, writing, drawing, cooking, or driving. The laws of Kashrut (dietary laws) are also important, and just like with the other halakhot, there are various levels of stringencies as to how much people are willing to eat, and where (Schnall, 2006). There are also strict laws around family purity, which will be discussed further in section 1.5.1, and strict gendered roles, which will be discussed further in section 1.4.

1.3.2 Coercive control

According to a WHO report (2012), domestic abuse, or intimate partner violence, comes in several forms – physical, sexual, emotional and controlling. Chronister and Aldarondo (2012) add to this description by including financial, spiritual and psychological abuse. Some terms, such as psychological abuse, emotional abuse and coercive control, are used interchangeably, while others find nuanced differences between them. It is noted that across the literature, many authors use self-constructed measures and study designs to explore coercive control, meaning that standardised and validated measures are less frequently employed – this affects the way that coercive control is defined and understood.

Evan Stark is one of the foremost researchers into coercive control and describes it as the 'entrapment' of women, stemming from the social endowment which men inherit through their acts of discrete (but deliberate and menacing) dominance over their female partners (Stark, 2023). They are able to do so, he argues, because of their privileged access to social and material advantages in a sexually unequal society. In other words, social gender norms create expectations of women's domesticity and confinement to the house, which creates greater dependence on their male partners and makes the broader public less likely to challenge their assumed roles. Stark (2023) compares a woman in a coercively controlling situation as akin to a hostage, emphasising that degrading rituals - such as lockdowns in the house, humiliating interrogations or physical examinations, unannounced room searches or bathroom inspections - are present in both the stories of battered women and stories of POWs from wars. As such, this framing of women who are victims of coercive control, who

have lost their individual liberties and rights, helps us to understand just how difficult it is for a woman to leave her situation.

In a comprehensive literature review, Hamberger et al., (2017) looked for definitions of coercive control and found that, while inconsistently defined and measured, it is perhaps best explained as an imbalance of power through a pattern of behaviours used to manipulate the actions of others. Hamberger et al., (2017) conceptualised power and control through a feminist framework and argued that gender roles and expectations lead to the establishment of dominance in a relationship, which is key to coercive control. Where coercive control is present, it's target endures lessened decision-making power and less independence, impacting on their self-image, relationships, finance, education etc. Psychological abuse, they suggest, is broader – and coercive control is a specific subtype of it.

Myhill and Hohl (2019) further explain coercive control as being beyond psychological aggression through the micro-regulation of everyday life. It can be conducted using multiple tactics and behaviours which serve to undermine its victim and cause significant harm to their thoughts and feelings (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). Subtle or covert abuse, which coercive control often is, when juxtaposed with loving behaviour, can be especially damaging to a person as it increases their uncertainty about themselves and the relationship.

The Duluth Model was developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs (DAIP, n.d.) and is often used as an intervention for men who have been convicted of IPV (intimate partner violence), specifically coercive control. It is based on feminist and sociocultural concepts of control where men use IPV as a means of exhibiting power and establishing control over their female partners (Bohall et al., 2016). The most used tool within this model is the Power and Control Wheel (PCW) (Appendix A), which is an illustration of a series of actions or behaviours which an abuser might use: each segment of the wheel presenting one of eight tactics, such as intimidation, isolation, and emotional abuse (Chavis & Hill, 2008).

Stark (2023) also speaks of isolation and control as two of the most-used strategies which a perpetrator uses in their abusive behaviour. He explains that isolation is used

so that a victim is prevented from disclosure and is forced into increased dependence on him, as well as limiting her access to support and choices. Control, as the central feature or tactic of coercive control, is utilised through three primary means: exploiting her capacity, abilities, finances, sexuality and other resources for his personal pleasure and gratification, depriving her of any means of escape, and regulating her behaviour to conform to stereotypical gender roles (Stark, 2023).

Indeed, these factors are often what makes CC difficult to spot and for some to believe, as they are insidious and subtle in their nature. Reeves et al., (2025) explored the ways that victim-survivors are often not believed when seeking help, and within the legal system, while perpetrators often *are* believed. This qualitative research explains that male perpetrators are already adept at manipulation tactics whereas female victim-survivors often have stories fraught with complex trauma, undermining her credibility (Reeves et al., 2025). This hints at just one of the challenges which law enforcement and the criminal system are faced with when considering how to police and prosecute coercive control, a topic which has been debated considerably in recent years (Myhill et al., 2023). After a public push by feminist activists to provide better protection for victims of domestic abuse, coercive control is now enshrined in the Domestic Abuse Act UK (2021). However, police officers still face challenges in the high threshold of evidence required and appeared to more often be able to pursue and prosecute individual incidents, rather than the broader patterns of abuse which are central to coercive control (Myhill et al., 2023). As such, these issues (alongside, for example, limited police resourcing) mean that coercive control is an offence not easily documented, pursued or prosecuted.

Dutton and Goodman (2005) conceptualise coercive control using a social power model, explaining that coercion occurs where a demand is linked with a threatened negative outcome for noncompliance. They note that coercion especially works in a relationship where there is already an expectation of negative outcomes, an exploitation of her vulnerabilities, a wearing down of her resistance, and/or her dependency on him. Further, coercive control must be understood within an ecological model – the threat of

leaving one's partner means something different for a new immigrant compared to a wealthy upper-class person with plenty of resources.

Stark (2023) furthers this point by explaining that immigrant and fundamentalist women are particularly vulnerable to isolation and thus abuse if their families are traditionally built around the husband's family, and any abandonment of her 'duty' as a wife could result in the loss of their support system. Honour-based abuse is one such form of coercive control which occurs more frequently in communities where the protection of family reputation is of utmost importance, and often used as justification (Mayeda et al., 2019). Other predictors of spousal coercive control were examined by Kanougiya et al., (2021) through a national health survey across India; they found that coercive control is in fact more common than other forms of IPV and most associated with sexual or physical violence. Other predictors of coercive control include being a younger woman, without education, a working woman and a woman in a lower wealth bracket. Overall, the research does not offer clarity about whether there is a significant difference in the prevalence of coercive control between ethnicity – some studies have found that white women are significantly more likely to experience it, whereas others show that there is no significant difference between various ethnic groups (MacDonald et al., 2024).

Women are overwhelmingly the victim of coercive control (WHO, 2012; Chronister & Aldarondo, 2012), which operates through sexual inequalities (Myhill & Hohl, 2019). Although coercive control does exist in LGBTQ relationships, adding to an existing minority stress, this study focuses specifically on male-to-female abuse. Stark (2023) explains that one of the most common tactics of coercive control is the focus on a woman's homemaking, caretaking and sexual partner responsibilities. Abusive relationships intersect also with other social identities, such as experiences of oppression and marginalisation. Chronister and Aldarondo (2012) suggest that, when tackling domestic abuse, the ecological, communal and contextual factors should take priority over individual causes. As such, we turn our attention to coercive control in Judaism – a minority group who experience current and historical marginalisation, alongside unique communal factors.

1.3.3 Religious coercive control

Coercive control is the manipulation and micro-regulations used by abusers in their quest for power (Blyth, 2021). Where a victim or survivor is a member of a faith community, the perversion and assault of their beliefs offer additional abusive opportunities – 'emotional abuse wrapped and justified in the cloth of religion' (Simonic et al., 2013). The Domestic Abuse Statutory Guidance UK (2022) defines 'Abuse relating to faith' using 10 examples, many of which are present in the literature below. The studies shared below help us come to an understanding of what religious coercive control is.

Mulvihill et al., (2022) explored the differences between coercive control in a faith context and outside of a faith context, finding firstly that many of the same experiences were common – such as social isolation, leveraging of children or migration status, and the manipulation of one's reality. The latter point was experienced in the faith context through the use of faith to belittle and threaten. As such, spiritual abuse was just one of the many ways a perpetrator might harm their victim. At other times, however, religion was at the very heart of the abusive dynamic; this they defined as religious coercive control. As shared by these participants, what is so different in faith-based abuse (compared to non-faith-based) was the complicity of family, friends and community – either intentionally, or unintentionally in the ways that community expectations might prime someone to, for example, stay in an abusive marriage (Mulvihill et al., 2022). Further, barriers to help-seeking for victim-survivors were compounded by the possibility that their perpetrators might have authority or be well-networked within the community. The leveraging of these positions of power was an extension of the manipulation tactics felt at home. Lastly, victims in faith-based contexts might feel further isolated after reporting the abuse, as community might expect them to be forgiving of the perpetrator, or even 'take their side'.

The terms religious abuse (RA), spiritual abuse (SA) and religious coercive control (RCC) are used somewhat interchangeably across the literature. In searching for definitions, it was observed that many articles referred to Dehan and Levi (2009). Using interpretivist participatory action research, an Orthodox Jewish women's focus group in

Israel met 37 times over 15 months to create a working definition of spiritual abuse. Participatory action research (PAR) focuses on real-world data, integrating theory and practice towards a collaborative and cultural understanding of a concept. As such, participants were empowered, and researchers gained a rich understanding of spiritual abuse. Participants decided that the 8 categories of the often-used Power and Control Wheel (DAIP, n.d.) did not quite capture the nuanced impact of their experiences. Conceptually, SA is an attack on the victim's spiritual self – her very sense of self – through mockery of her practice, forced transgressions, or belittlement of her beliefs. Participants in this study considered the term 'religious abuse' but felt that the spiritual meaning behind spiritual acts was the target of their abuse, not the religion itself. Charedi Jews see spirituality as an integral and all-encompassing part of life, with everything 'mundane' in daily life – eating, cooking, dressing – being performed in a spiritual way to make it more holy. Any deviance from this would be considered spiritually vexing and would be harmful or belittling to her spiritual life, self and worth.

In contrast to Dehan and Levi (2009), who specifically sought a singular category of abuse, Ellis et al., (2022) suggests that it is difficult to isolate religious abuse from other forms as they often occur alongside each other and are intertwined. Indeed, where belief in a higher power is present in an already abusive household, RA is present as a means of manipulating a person to stay in the relationship (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). As RA can be more subtle and less easily recognised by mental health professionals, it can be easily missed or misinterpreted by those looking to help. Through his systematic review, Ellis et al., (2022) defined RA or SA as a misuse of power in a religious or spiritual setting, causing spiritual and psychological harm. He found that the majority of research on this topic focuses on religiously abusive communities, such as cults.

RCC is also explained by Sharp (2014), who explored survivors' means of resistance. 62 participants in this study were recruited and interviewed through maximum variation sampling, the researcher seeking religious variation and diversity. However, it is observed that while many Christian denominations were represented, no other religions were included in the study, impacting its generalisability. Regardless, Sharp's (2014)

definition offers clarity: a partner who specifically and intentionally exploits religious beliefs, scriptures or doctrines as a means of control, effective because of the significance of these values to a woman's self-concept.

Simonic et al., (2013) considers that it is not only the exploitation of religion, but the use of religion to justify behaviour. The researchers explored the unsound or erroneous interpretations of theology to reason away abusive behaviour, and to allow the perpetrator to deny any wrongdoing. Often this manifests in shame, guilt and fear, as religion, usually so pure and pleasant, is distorted.

Consolidating examples from across the literature, RCC within the Jewish context can be synthesised into the following four categories:

1. Being forced to transgress religious laws that are important and meaningful to the person (Dehan & Levi, 2009; Tuito & Band-Winterstein, 2021; Palant, 2004).
2. Being forced to obey religious laws against one's wishes (Cares & Cusick, 2012).
3. Being forced to obey religious laws to an extreme or unnecessary level (Cares & Cusick, 2012, Palant, 2004).
4. Being mocked or humiliated for one's religious practice (Dehan & Levi, 2009, Palant, 2004).

Examples will be explored further in the literature review below.

1.4 Gender, Orthodox Judaism, and abuse

Dehan and Levi (2009) ask the question – does wife abuse occur because of patriarchal ideologies, or from men suffering psychopathologies - and to what extent do gender inequalities in the Charedi lifestyle lend themselves to a position where SA can occur? It is important to note that all contemporary groups in Judaism, including Orthodoxy, have unequivocally condemned any form of abuse. However, some older scriptures and Torah texts are less forgiving. For example, some texts from the 12th to 16th century scholars speak of 'good' and 'bad' wives (Devoe et al., 2001). Overwhelmingly, the common pattern of domestic abuse within intimate partner relationships is men towards women (WHO, 2012). Stark (2009) argues that coercive control is a highly gender-influenced form of abuse, as the policing of gender stereotypes is its aim and derogation

of femininity is its means. As such, it would be remiss to discuss coercion or abuse in the Orthodox community without mention of the contextual importance of gender roles.

The Ultra-Orthodox community – distinctly different on this front to the Modern Orthodox community - is unmistakably patriarchal in its segregation of gender roles and in the clear division between sexes. Where man's main role is to devote himself to Torah study, a woman's role is to be keeper of the house, and in some communities, breadwinner also while their husbands study Torah (Abu-Hassan Nabwani, 2022). Social norms form the basis for women's compliance with traditional patriarchal structures (Szyfer Lipinsky et al., 2024; Freund & Band-Winterstein, 2017). Further, there is considerable pressure to conform to these gendered norms as not doing so might render a person less eligible for a good Shidduch (marriage match) (Schapiro-Halberstam & Josephs, 2018). Orthodox Jewish law and practice also historically favours men over women, with women 'released' from many of the Torah obligations and rules to devote more time to childcare and homemaking (Arowojolu, 2016; Ringel & Bina, 2007). For example, men are obligated to pray in synagogue three times a day – a duty which women are not bound to. This is socially and culturally considered to be a privilege for men.

Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz (2009) conducted a study in which they interviewed 11 Charedi men who had behaved violently towards their wives. Their overall findings were that there is indeed a link between violence and the cultural and social structures of the Charedi community which shape a specific gender identity. The centrality of Torah study in shaping male identity was overwhelmingly present for the participants and showed even in the way that they answered questions by quoting Torah scriptures, seemingly as a display of masculinity. Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz (2009) explain that secular men who are violent in the domestic home are more likely to encompass a 'macho' masculine identity as a principal theme in their life story. However, the image of the 'violent Jewish man' doesn't quite fit society's expectation, as Charedi men are stereotypically quiet, unassuming and calm (Steinmetz & Haj-Yahia, 2006). Where in other cultures physicality and being 'macho' are celebrated, in Orthodox Judaism this is considered a vice. Instead, the 'ideal' Jewish man is one who

is engaged in Torah study, fervent in his learning and prayer, and with religious intellectualism as his vocation (Goldberg & Yassour-Borochowitz, 2009; Schapiro-Halberstam & Josephs, 2018). In the Charedi world, this ideal is forced through community, and as there is little access to secular sources, a different image of a 'man' is unavailable. Even with this alternate model of masculinity, however, there is still a social and patriarchal dominance over women and pressure to conform to these ideals (Schapiro-Halberstam & Josephs, 2018), with a duty to lead the family in all spiritual matters (Goldberg & Yassour-Borochowitz, 2009).

So, there are several factors at play which create an environment for religious abuse to occur. Firstly, that the 'ideal' man is an intellectual one, one who is learned and knowledgeable in Torah – which guides him as the educational and spiritual authority in the home. Secondly, that women are expected to be homemakers and are released from Torah-learning duties. As such, the imbued patriarchal power structure in traditional gendered spousal roles may be used abusively where a man takes advantage of his 'superior' religious duties and knowledge (Arowojolu, 2016; Levitt et al., 2015). Where the religious-knowledge gap between genders is more pronounced, this subsequently facilitates a context in which men can use religious laws or texts as a means of establishing control (Levitt et al., 2015; Grodner & Sweifach, 2004; Ringel & Bina, 2007). As a real-world example, a survivor in Cares and Cusick's (2012) study felt ill-equipped to challenge her husband, whose attacks were based on Torah quotes; albeit a mischaracterisation of them. Thus, religious abuse was able to occur in this marriage.

1.5 Orthodox Jewish marriage

Jewish texts teach that marriage should be a spiritual and wonderful union, a reflection of holiness and love (Devoe et al., 2001). The scriptures teach that a Jewish husband must love his wife as much as he loves himself, and must honour her more (Yevamot, 62b). Indeed, Schnall's (2006) study recorded that 74% of Jewish respondents to a marital satisfaction survey were 'mostly' or 'extremely' satisfied in their marriage. The study showed that the same stressors which impact secular couples also impact Jewish couples – such as finance, communication and children. However, alongside gender

roles and expectations as just discussed, there are several other several central themes in Orthodox Jewish marriage which are pertinent to this study, and which form a backdrop to potential abuse:

1.5.1 Family purity

Observation of the laws of Taharat HaMishpacha (family purity) are taken very seriously by Orthodox Jewish couples (Schnall, 2006). These are rituals related to a woman's menstrual cycle and sexual intimacy. Specifically, when a woman is menstruating and for up to a week afterwards, she is expected to be ritually and physically separate from her partner, and sexual intimacy is not allowed until she has immersed herself in the Mikvah (a ritual bath) (Frydman, 2022). These laws provide structure to the sexual life of the married couple and there are clear expectations of each partner. Taharat HaMishpacha is considered to be a woman's Mitzvah (good deed) and responsibility for tracking her cycle is placed on her alone, with her husband being told to place his trust in her (Marmon Grumet, 2022). In this way, women are empowered and given agency; the female voice is one of wisdom. Women in Marmon Grumet's (2022) study, which is about pre-marital classes for Charedi women, were taught by their marriage teachers that it is permissible to say no to sex, and they are taught to have agency in the sexual relationship.

1.5.2 Tzniut (modesty)

Typically, rules around tzniut (modesty) are related to style of dress for both men and women. This is observed to varying degrees between Modern and Ultra Orthodox communities and is interpreted differently between them. However, modesty is also relevant in other aspects of daily life as it governs what is considered, by community standards, to be appropriate or inappropriate (Frydman, 2022). Modesty is a major foundation of Charedi marriages and is used as a benchmark for the ideal couple when arranging marriage – a girl who is modest and compassionate, and a boy who is a scholar.

1.5.3 Arranged marriage

In Charedi communities, young boys and girls are kept separate from each other until the point of marriage. There is limited, if any, interaction with people from the opposite sex, apart from family members. Therefore, it is difficult to find a marriage match on one's own, and so they have adopted a system of matchmaking. Most often, when one reaches 'marriageable age' - typically 18 – a couple will be 'set up', either by an official matchmaker in the more 'Ultra' communities, or by friends and family in the less strict of the Charedi communities. In the former, the accepted dating period is one to several dates, and in the latter, it is anywhere between 7-20 dates (Rosenbach et al., 2021). Modern Orthodox communities tend to be more progressive in this area, with men and women dating for any length of time, sometimes several years, before becoming engaged, and often the couple meet naturally without external help.

Judaism places particular emphasis on the importance of marriage; there is an inherent communal existential angst and a fear of breaking a link in the chain of Jewish survival (Rosenbach et al., 2021). This anxiety from parents and community means that Orthodox couples are typically married earlier than their secular counterparts, and as aforementioned, after fewer dates. In Charedi circles, this pressure to marry, alongside expectations to suddenly form intimate opposite-sex relationships for the first time, and quick decision making about potential partners, fosters an environment in which couples might be poorly matched and not emotionally ready for marriage.

1.5.4 Shalom bayit (peaceful home)

Once married, couples then have the pressures of Shalom Bayit to contend with. Shalom Bayit – literally meaning 'peaceful home' - is core to Orthodox Jewish life and is central to perceptions of the harmonious Jewish family ideal (Devoe, et al., 2001; Vass, 2025). Some of the specific prohibitions which contribute to a peaceful home include laws against physical harm, shaming a person, speaking badly about others and forced sexual contact (Devoe et al., 2001). However, in a perverse sense, Shalom Bayit can also be a roadblock to a peaceful home: abuse or other problems might be covered up and women might be pressured to remain in abusive marriages, too ashamed to seek help because of her perceived failure at not meeting the cultural standards of a happy

marriage (Enger & Fortune, 2005). It is also socially expected that Charedi adherents would turn to their Rabbis for consultation on any manner of issues, include marital problems, as the Rabbis are a material and spiritual authority. The decision whether to leave the relationship is often dependent on the Rabbi's advice (Vass & Krane, 2024). There is a danger again of religion being twisted into something painful, as any form of marital discord, whether it be simple unhappiness or abuse, has the potential to be minimised or denied in the name of maintaining Shalom Bayit. A social worker in a Charedi shelter explained that women sometimes pay a higher price for divorce than living in in an abusive marriage, all in the name of family image (Band-Winterstein & Freund, 2013). As women are expected to be responsible for family stability and happiness, they face enormous pressure to accept their situations for the sake of family cohesion, and out of fear of embarrassment and stigma (Szyfer Lipinsky et al., 2024). Women who feel they do not meet society's expectation of a happy family feel a double sense of failure – not only because of the social repercussions, but also because of the missed opportunity to achieve one of life's main goals (Tuito & Band-Winterstein, 2021).

1.6 Jewish divorce

Despite pressure of Shalom Bayit, Judaism has always permitted divorce in the case of troubled marriages, with divorce proceedings taking place in the Bet Din (religious court). Historically, the Bet Din had complete judicial autonomy over matters of marriage and divorce; today the civil courts have greater involvement. There are several Batei Din (plural: religious courts) in any given wider community, each representing different denominations or groups within the Jewish community. In Orthodox courts, the presiding judges are Rabbis of great stature and respect (Devoe et al., 2001).

In order to be divorced in Orthodox Batei Din, a man and woman must present a Get (religious decree or bill of divorce). This is a male-centric process as the husband must initiate proceedings and grant his wife the Get, which she must then accept. This must be done of his own free will and without coercion from courts, Rabbis, or any other parties (Murugan, 2023; Devoe et al., 2001).

1.6.1 Get abuse

There are, unfortunately, cases where the man refuses to grant his wife the Get, and then she becomes an ‘Agunah’ - a chained woman. Although no longer married in anything but legalities, the woman is unable to be remarried and any future relationship is considered adulterous (Devoe et al., 2001). For an abusive man, withholding the Get is a tactic of abuse, and is sometimes done out of pure malice or spite, and sometimes as leverage to force his wife to agree to harsher demands in the civil courts, such as custody over children or financial gains (Arowojolu, 2016). In the wrong hands, it is a readily available, legal and religious means of establishing power and control when those have been lost in other aspects of their marriage (Starr, 2017). For this reason, it is a type of abuse which occurs throughout the spectrum of Orthodox, and indeed Jewish, subgroups.

Keshet Starr is a lawyer, Agunah advocate and has written extensively on the topic. She writes that categorising Get abuse as spiritual abuse rather than emotional or psychological is of utmost importance, as it recognises the damage it inflicts on the Agunah’s sense of self, world and community through a spiritual lens. Get abuse fits into the categories mentioned previously in section 1.3.3 as it twists a religious act into an abusive one, belittles her beliefs by challenging her view of Judaism, and prevents her from performing spiritual acts by keeping her separate from a marital and potentially motherhood identity, which is central to an Orthodox woman (Starr, 2017). An attack on one’s spirituality is fundamentally different to other forms of abuse as it so heavily impacts one’s identity and worldview, leaving scars not only on the mind but also on the soul.

Often a religious woman in this situation will approach her Rabbi for help and guidance, and they can, in turn, petition the Bet Din for help. Murugan (2023) found that while Rabbis and Rebbetzins (the Rabbi’s wife) are often very supportive and empathetic, they are also strict followers of Jewish law and can sometimes inadvertently belittle a woman’s experiences by encouraging her to forgive her partner and work on the marriage in the name of Shalom Bayit. Sometimes the Bet Din can be helpful by placing sanctions on the man, such as barring him from community events or synagogue

(Devoe et al., 2001). In recent years there have been charities and social media campaigns set up to raise awareness about the issue (and religious coercion more broadly), and to publicly and socially pressure the man to grant the Get (Appendix B). Recently also, Manchester courts convicted one such man with coercive control (BBC, 2022) and the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) has been revised to include Get abuse as a form of coercive control.

With the pressure of a 'good' and peaceful marriage, the cultural importance of family within Jewish tradition, and the potential difficulties in obtaining a divorce, women who are abused face a huge burden in leaving their marriages and receiving help (Tuito & Band-Winterstein, 2021; Devoe et al., 2001).

1.7 Literature review on religious coercive control

The majority of available research on religious coercion is concerned with abuse from pastoral leaders to their congregation, or religious abuse which occurs in other religions – primarily Christianity. The section below explores relevant research, borrowing briefly from other religions, to explore what is known today across the literature.

1.7.1 Religious coercive control in Christianity and Islam

Studies on Christian coercive control have continuously emphasised that biblical teachings which highlight the man's right to discipline his erring wife can be taken as license to abuse (Takyi & Lamptey, 2020). Ending religious abuse is harder when either perpetrator or victim is justifying it through God's sanctification (Simonic et al., 2013) and attacks on the victim's religious self-esteem are so effective as their adherence to doctrines is essential to their Christian identity and connection to their community (Sharp, 2014). Stotland's (2020) case study described the abuser's obsession with Bible injunctions, used to monitor and control the thoughts, actions and attitudes of his family. Manipulation of Bible quotes were also used to justify forced sex or reproductive abuse in Knickmeyer et al.'s (2010) study.

Davis (2015) explored religious abuse in the African American community and found that abusers quoted scriptures or used the woman's relationship with God as a means of instilling shame, fear and guilt in their victims. Participants in this study were not

exclusively from one Church denomination, focusing rather on the cultural nuances of African-American influence, a reminder of the relevance of other aspects of one's identity.

Interestingly and unusually, Davis and Johnson-Reid (2020) conducted a focus group of (Latino) perpetrators, offering insight into their use of faith in partner violence – misusing texts to evoke guilt in their manipulation of male privilege. One participant noted that religion (e.g. the doctrine of forgiveness) was convenient when forcing his wife to forgive his infidelity. It is worth noting that participants in this study were part of a Parish-based intervention group and thus being supported to examine their own behaviours, which likely impacts their insights.

This study was similar to the aforementioned one by Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz (2009), which also explored the role of male identity in the perpetrators' explanations of abuse. This suggests that there are common themes to be found across religions.

Similar to the idea of Christian submission, Muslim women also may adhere to the cultural and religious duty that good wives are obedient to their husbands (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a). Further, men may view their actions not as abusive, but as a duty or right. For one participant, obedience was reflected in being expected to fetch her husband water at 2am just because he asked her to, and because her husband is her imam (leader). I observed that it was difficult to find further phenomenological literature specifically on religious coercive control and Muslim women.

There are certainly similarities in the experiences of RCC across Christianity, Islam and Judaism, the three Abrahamic faiths; such as the exploitation or manipulation of religious doctrine or texts, and the leveraging of one's gender role. However, differences in the ways in which religion is practiced and adhered to enable different opportunities for abuse, which are interesting to note. For example, the idea of Christian submission to one's husband (Davis, 2015) and obedient Muslim wives (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a) does not exist in Judaism. Instead, there is a devotion to Halakha and the practice of Judaism, rather than to one's husband – so the abuse occurs where a man who is more knowledgeable in Halakhic texts manipulates this knowledge to control his wife (see

paragraph 1.4 above). Also, Christianity emphasises the notions of ‘sin’, ‘guilt’ and ‘forgiveness’ (Davis & Johnson-Reid, 2020) which can be reframed somewhat easily into an abusive strategy, whereas in Judaism theological terror is less prominent than social and communal expectations. These differences between religions offer an interesting and useful insight into the potential wider impact of the abuse, such as the ways that survivors are treated by community after disclosure – as discussed further below.

1.7.2 Religious coercive control in Judaism

In a large (n=174) and uniquely diverse (multiple Jewish sects) qualitative study looking at clinical case studies in a Jewish domestic violence service agency, Cares and Cusick (2012) found many examples of religious coercion or abuse. Abusers were creative in using religious laws advantageously, purposefully interfering with spirituality in a deeply upsetting way, causing community humiliation and isolating the victim further. The researchers found that the use of Judaism as a tool of abuse was reported by 28% of women involved in this study, where men violated Jewish laws and customs. It was noted that this overwhelmingly occurred in Orthodox rather than non-Orthodox communities, which are more ritualistically observant. To illustrate, a man refused to pay his wife’s synagogue membership fee, leading to her non-attendance, social isolation, and lesser spiritual fulfillment. In another example, a man took his children to a sports event instead of family dinner on the Jewish New Year, and another man brought ham into the house to cook in a kosher kitchen. In all of these examples, there was a purposeful interference with spiritual or religious practice, which the participants found to be upsetting, shameful, and embarrassing.

Many participants in this study also found that abuse was exacerbated around the time of Jewish festivals and holidays, when there can be increased family tensions and when there is a high domestic burden often placed on the woman. Conflict occurred over which rituals or traditions to follow, how to observe the festivals, which extended family to include in celebrations, and arguments around children, often used as pawns. One woman described a terrible conflict with her ex-husband about how to plan and pay for her son’s Bar Mitzvah, which was her ex-partner's continued abuse of her after

marriage, and which deprived her of the religious joy which typically accompanies this milestone. While this study facilitated a broad understanding and large data analysis, the use of clinical case files, sometimes filtered through clinicians and their interpretations, meant that the researchers were removed from the deeper phenomenological understanding which is inherent in interviews.

Conversely, Dehan and Levi (2009)'s PAR study was co-constructive in nature and provides readers with the definition of spiritual abuse which is so important to an understanding of the topic. The researchers found three levels of spiritual abuse which occurred for their participants and gave examples alongside each. Firstly, the belittlement of her spirituality is shown when an ex-husband mocked and criticised a woman while she was praying, saying that her prayer had no worth. This devalued her spiritual acts and damaged her spiritual experience. Secondly, a man prevented his wife from performing a spiritual deed by refusing to allow her to buy ingredients to bake Challah each week. Challah is the loaf of bread eaten on the Sabbath and baking, rather than buying, has spiritual meaning for women. By not allowing her to bake Challah, he denied her this spiritual enjoyment. Lastly, men in this study forced their wives to transgress spiritual acts, and the example given is unfortunately one which is common throughout the literature: A woman described how her (ex)husband forced her to have sexual intercourse during her menstruation, strictly forbidden under the laws of family purity. She described feeling intense shame and disconnected from God, causing immense spiritual pain to her. Women in other studies who experienced this also described feelings of self-hate, shame, and being disconnected from religious values (Cares & Cusick, 2012; Palant, 2004).

Dehan and Levi (2009) gave several other examples, such as a husband refusing to allow their wife to light candles on a Friday night, or mocking the way that she does it. They note the severity of this and the degree to which this would affect the women is understood better by those who have knowledge of the Charedi lifestyle and culture. This leads, then, to the conclusion that much of this could be missed by a clinician who is not looking out for signs of spiritual abuse, or who is not curious to understand the significance of such acts.

Another nuanced example is where a female survivor in an Orthodox shelter in Israel was humiliated and demeaned when her husband went to bed on Friday night without making the required blessing over wine at their meal. Therefore, his family were unable to eat dinner until he woke them at 2am (Palant, 2004). Palant's (2004) writing is based on a presentation at a Jewish Domestic Abuse event, and while not an empirical paper, much can be learnt from her personal experiences working in the shelter.

Freund and Band-Winterstein (2017) interviewed social workers in Israel who work within the Charedi community. The themes that they discovered support the idea that gender identities and the Torah-knowledge gap between men and women are a crucial element of intimate partner violence in the Charedi community. Social workers in this study described women who felt confused and didn't quite understand why their marriage was so frightening. They attributed this to the secrecy and shame surrounding 'bad' marriages which prevent women speaking out about it, and thus women aren't fully aware of what abuse looks like. Women who experience violence in their marriage are more likely to interpret it as being their own failures, for not being religious or submissive enough to their husbands. Further, this study acknowledges that male supremacy among Charedim rely on the manipulation of their Torah knowledge which is entrusted to them but not to women. The social workers in this study note the ethical dilemmas around Shalom Bayit and describe culturally sensitive interventions as crucial when working with this group.

Vass (2025) interviewed 15 women in a phenomenological study into how Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women experienced intimate partner violence and how their religious beliefs played a part in their experiences. Although not specifically a study on religious abuse, Vass (2025) found the theme: "IPV is a spiritual war: the abuser's goal is to inflict damage to her soul". Participants described how their husbands tried to destroy their connection with God, to break their spirit and make them lose their spiritual identity – by attacking their prayer, forcing sexual intercourse, or interfering with them visiting holy places or reading religious books.

Several other studies which are related, but not specifically about religious coercion, were also read. Shechory-Bitton (2014) ran a mixed-methods study on 88 women who

took refuge in a Charedi women's shelter in Israel and looked at the women's circumstances before and after the shelter, and how they related to their stay there. As part of this study, it was found that approximately half of the women had been forced to engage in sexual relations with their (ex)husbands during menstruation. Shechory-Bitton (2014) names this 'religion-related sexual abuse' and contends it as a topic for future research and study, but she herself did not include religious abuse as one of the types listed. Shechory-Bitton (2014) also briefly mentions that three of the women in her study experienced difficulties during the divorce proceedings. It is impossible to say whether her omission of the religious abuse category is purposeful or not – but given the research mentioned previously about religious abuse occurring often alongside other forms of abuse, it can be assumed that religious abuse likely did occur, and this study is therefore limited by excluding it as a topic.

1.7.3 Role of community and community leaders

When discussing abuse in a religious context, it is important to consider the role of community and community leaders. The studies below do not all speak of religious abuse specifically, but of the barriers and opportunities faced in seeking help with other forms of abuse in a religious setting, and one might assume that religious abuse would be similar.

Fear, shame and self-blame are common barriers to women seeking help in the UK (Heron et al., 2020), and communities and leaders contribute to pressures to remain married. Hassouneh-Phillip's (2001a) study of Muslim American women revealed the supreme importance of marriage; single or divorced women being undesired in Muslim social structures. In this study, 17 American Sunni women were interviewed either individually or in groups, allowing a greater individual understanding of abuse, and access to important group conversations around societal expectations and cultural norms. The same data was used again by Hassouneh-Phillips (2001b), observing that abused women face extreme worry in anticipating familial and communal reactions, with cultural expectations creating pressure to live the 'perfect' Muslim marriage.

Church leaders, too, sometimes display reluctance in acknowledging or condemning abuse (Nash, 2006); the happy Christian family essential to the longevity of the Church.

Some leaders were quick to fault the victim, causing ostracisation and social pressure to remain quiet (Knickmeyer et al., 2010). Five formerly abused women participated in a focus group in a Protestant Evangelical Church, women recruited from Church shelters (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000). Participants recounted the church's tendency to spiritualise their difficulties, telling them to count on faith, prayer and belief and thus ignoring the realities of the situation. In another study, women were recruited through newspapers and bulletin boards in Denver, most participants then unaffiliated with a church (Potter, 2007). This frames their views towards church and religious abuse, in contrast to the previous study. Results, however, showed similarities – participants shared that they were repeatedly turned away by pastors, leading to a mistrust of church and a barrier to support.

Lack of community leadership support is echoed in Ringel and Bina's (2007) grounded theory study of eight Orthodox Jewish survivors and eleven Orthodox community leaders (Rabbis, mental health professionals, Rabbis' wives and a community activist) in America. Survivors shared the societal shame in seeking support for abuse and the stigma attached, causing denial and secrecy. The social views and attitudes were a core barrier to seeking help, with the women survivors feeling too ashamed to admit that their marriages were so unhappy and not in line with the expected Shalom Bayit. Fear of divorce was another barrier as the image of family preservation is a priority in Charedi communities, and divorce can lead to the tarnishing of the wider family which makes sibling marriage matches harder to achieve.

Interestingly, there were divergent findings between the participants regarding the role of Rabbis – the survivors, female activist and the mental health professionals felt that the Rabbis involved were ineffective and had expressed a patriarchal view, 'siding' with the male perpetrator. Three of the survivors shared that the Rabbis who they approached were unsupportive in that they either blamed the woman or did not report the abuse – there was concern that the involvement of secular agencies would lead to shame in the community when its problems were shared. In contrast, the Rabbis viewed themselves as competent and felt that training on marital counselling or similar would be unnecessary because they are so well versed in Torah. All of the participants agreed

that Orthodox Rabbis should play a major role in helping to prevent abuse and to intervene if it comes to their attention. This finding is essential to the multidimensional understanding of abuse within communal contexts and speaks to the need for communal training. All the survivors in this sample were not born into the Orthodox community and thus had some experience of wider communal life and attitudes, potentially impacting its generalisability to Orthodox-born women.

Cares and Cusick (2012) also referred to the role of Jewish community and community leaders, finding that clients relied heavily on Jewish resources such as food, shelter, financial assistance and counselling. Rabbis also played an important role, with mixed results. Many women found Rabbis to be supportive, offering formal counselling, assisting women to receive their Gets or coming with them to the Bet Din. The Rabbis used affirmative and validating words and helped the women to realise that they could leave their husbands. However, in other cases, women perceived the Rabbis to be detrimental to their situation, often clearly taking their husbands' side, or offering generally unsupportive and invalidating words.

Devoe et al., (2001)'s participants again reported mixed responses from family and religious leaders. Many of the women in this study did not leave their abusive marriages until they had reached crisis point. Five of the twelve women did not go to the community or religious leaders for support at all, sharing that they were scared of the response they would receive. Of the women who did go speak to Rabbis, mostly they had positive reactions. It is important to note, however, that many of the women were not from Orthodox communities. An Orthodox survivor in the study who approached her Rabbi was told to push past the abuse and go home to her domestic duties, to try and work it out with her husband.

Finally, Ellis et al., (2022) conducted a systematic literature review of religious or spiritual abuse and trauma, across religions and both inside the home and community. Out of 25 studies, they highlighted four in particular which looked at the role of religious community during and after abuse. Their findings were that victim blaming and trivialisation of the events, alongside isolation, could lead to secondary trauma.

1.7.4 The meaning of faith to abuse survivors

Harris et al., (2013) explains that survivors of trauma seek to make meaning out of their experiences, and for some this manifests through spiritual or religious beliefs. Religious worldviews encompass values, principles and a social context in which one can find their identity and place. Studies on trauma and faith as meaning-making show that experiences are varied, with mostly equal numbers of survivors of trauma finding spirituality to be helpful, harmful or neutral. Following a literature review, these authors suggest that where a person loses their faith following a trauma, this can lead to worse mental health outcomes.

Ellis et al., (2022)'s review also nods to identity changes for some survivors. Many explained a stronger faith and stronger relationship with God, whereas others found a new identity in adopting a different religious framework, even atheism. These opposite experiences are reported also in Cares and Cusick's (2012) study. Some women found that their faith was a source of strength and a tool for coping, whereas others felt entirely disconnected and struggled with their spirituality.

The role of religion as a meaning-making framework for Charedi women survivors of interpersonal violence is explored by Vass (2025). Most of the women in this study described their experiences as coming from God and believed that God had sent them this challenge to overcome. Jewish tradition and theology creates this discourse in saying that everything is 'God's plan' - this can help the woman to accept her past and disengage from self-blame, but it can also lead a woman to stay trapped in the relationship with the belief that this is what is meant for her. Women in this study made sense of their experiences by holding onto the belief that the abuse was sent to them by God to make them stronger.

Szyfer Lipinsky et al., (2024) also examined the recovery trajectories of IPV survivors in the Orthodox Jewish community. It was discovered that Charedi women who are party to the patriarchal religious norms which emphasise the normative family unit and prioritise community and male interests over her wellbeing, thus infer a sense of shame, blame and social isolation. Meaning, where women engaged with religious norms which justify violence, they were more likely to develop negative trauma-related cognitions and

thus hinder their recovery. On the other hand, engaging in prayer as a recovery activity enhanced recovery and wellbeing. Tuito and Band-Winterstein (2021) too found the healing power of prayer. None of the women in this study spoke of lessened faith in God, and many actually found a strengthened faith helped them to cope and make decisions. Connecting to God through prayer created a sense of meaning, which comforted them through feelings such as loneliness, despair and helplessness. Religion provided a framework in which they were able to make meaning in their suffering, and establish order in their worlds.

As shown in the studies above, the role of religion and faith in the recovery of an abuse survivor is not consistent, with some finding it a source of strength and others finding it a source of pain. While the research above considers the recovery of Charedi survivors of interpersonal violence, none of them have expressly looked at the role of faith in survivors of religious abuse. One would expect that these are unique circumstances in which faith may play a different role.

1.8 Gaps and future directions

This literature review sought to conceptualise and give examples of religious coercive control through the lens of understanding the gendered and communal contexts in which it occurs.

Some papers read for the purpose of this review were not empirical or scientific articles, but rather conference presentations, religious literature, or essays written by people who work in shelters. Of the peer-reviewed studies read, many were for social work, sociology or nursing journals, pointing to a gap in the psychology field. Almost all were qualitative – often focus groups or interviews – with rich phenomenological detail about the lived experience of survivors. Some studies took place in religious women's shelters or places of worship, with religious leaders present. This speaks to the potential significance that faith still plays in the lives of many of these participants. Given the focus on non-psychological lenses, however, there is a significant need for psychology research in this area.

The literature on Jewish survivors primarily takes place in America or Israel. This is notable because of the impact and importance of society, culture and nationality on one's identity, and also the gap in UK data. As a case in point, research on Jewish women in Israel must be contextually different to other countries because Jews in that country form the demographic majority, and because trauma from abuse may intersect with other traumas which abound in Israel.

The vast majority of participants in these studies were female victims/survivors, rather than male perpetrators. This is understandable given significant recruitment and potential ethical barriers to the latter.

Many of the examples included in this review are more niche topics around general abuse, such as recovery trajectories or religious meaning-making for IPV survivors. Tuito and Band-Winterstein (2021)'s study explores the experiences of Charedi women survivors of abuse, however, examine intimate partner violence more broadly, without the focus on religious abuse specifically. This is an important distinction and one which shouldn't be overlooked, as it points to a gap in the literature on religious coercive control.

Overall, the internal and subjective experience of Modern Orthodox or Charedi women who are survivors of religious coercive control, is not yet studied. For example, a less-researched form of religious coercion is where a husband might be needlessly obsessive over religious laws, e.g. - a woman forced to stand for hours checking the vegetables for imaginary (unkosher) insects (Cares & Cusick, 2012). This constitutes religious abuse as he uses moral reasoning to account for his behaviours and she feels forced to comply (Tuito & Band-Winterstein, 2021). I also reached out to a local Jewish women's shelter and heard anecdotally that it is a common experience of women seeking help, and yet the literature does not reflect this. For the above reasons, I sought to conduct research on religious coercive control in an Orthodox setting. The lived experiences of abused women, deeply captured through interviews, is foundational to the therapeutic profession and relationship. Therefore, the research is phenomenological in nature.

1.9 Relevance to counselling psychology

A unifying theme throughout the literature is that spiritual abuse can cause significant harm. It is an attack on the core self, creating feelings of shame and self-blame, women's inner voices silent and their self-care abilities reduced (Starr, 2017). Unsurprisingly, research reports significant mental health difficulties for partner-abuse survivors, including depression, PTSD and suicidal tendencies (Kamo, 2009; Ellis et al., 2022). As counselling psychologists, one of our core values is to meet the psychological needs of our clients (BPS, n.d). Therefore, there is significant need for counselling psychologists to understand the psychological impact of religious abuse on women.

Counselling psychologists are well-practiced in working with abuse, however, face a unique challenge in distinguishing between religious and other forms of abuse, as secular psychologists are more likely to miss religious nuances in context (Starr, 2017). Some studies have shown that secular clinicians can inadvertently belittle acts which seem 'small' but are culturally and religiously significant or empowering (Band-Winterstein & Freund, 2016). Counsellors face a unique challenge in helping abused religious women as their religiosity is intricately connected to their personal and communal sense of identity and yet has been used against them (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000). Cashwell and Swindle (2018) also note that secular therapists might be too nervous to broach spirituality for fear that it will look like an imposition of values, and clients might struggle to raise it for fear of judgement. Therapists might also fear what they don't know and therefore hesitate to raise the topic, they might fear being perceived as antisemitic, or they may indeed hold antisemitic stereotypes. Thus, understanding the abuse through a cultural and religious lens is important as it contextualises the worldview which shapes victims' experiences (Tuito & Band-Winterstein, 2021). It is suggested, therefore, that strong therapist awareness of the intricacies which exist between religion and wellbeing, alongside the contextualisation of a survivor's experience, can contribute to increased cultural competency and use of culturally-sensitive interventions in the counselling psychology profession (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2002).

Research also suggests that there is a history of mistrust between secular psychologists and community leaders with regards to domestic abuse – the former is concerned about leaders' involvement in endangering women and the latter is worried that their faith will be undermined or belittled (Enger & Fortune, 2005) – a worry which is built on a history and continued existence of subtle antisemitism present even in the counselling field (Schlosser et al., 2009). Nason-Clark (2004) suggests that secular workers often blame religious ideology for violence and undermine individual client experiences, sometimes encouraging them to leave the community as a result. This perspective misses the potential for religion and spirituality to be a source of support and healing. Further, as the Ultra-Orthodox community is so insular and secluded in nature (Shaffir, 1993), it is very difficult for clinicians to know what is occurring behind closed doors, and thus abuse victims may go unnoticed. This research hopes to reinforce the need for dialogue between the two groups, working to tackle mistrust, encouraging secular clinicians to foster a more open and tolerant view towards this minority group, and reinforcing the need for community leaders to be trained, by psychologists, in acknowledging and dealing with RCC). This research has potential to contribute to bridging an existing gap of understanding between secular psychologists and Ultra-Orthodox community leaders.

Further to this, there is growing evidence that the counselling psychology field, which preaches diversity and multicultural approaches, has typically neglected to include Jewish people as minoritized or culturally distinct - and thus it is a largely understudied group (Schnall, 2006, Schnall et al., 2012). In a study looking at Counselling Psychology doctoral program training topics, it was discovered that only 8% covered Judaism as culturally or ethnically distinct (Priester et al., 2008). Schlosser et al., (2009) suggests that the exclusion of Jews from multicultural discourse is based on the false assumptions that Jews are assimilated, economically privileged and white. Counselling psychology research and practitioners should take care to understand not only the collectivist identity of the Jewish community but also the unique identity of each client beyond what is stereotyped or traditionally conceptualised.

When working with Jewish clients, secular psychologists must acknowledge environmental influences on community and individuals too, such as rising antisemitism. The Communal Security Trust annual report (CST, 2025) showed that 2023 and 2024 had the highest total of antisemitic incidents reported in the UK. The cultural mistrust between Jewish clients and secular clinicians is rooted in suspicion following centuries of antisemitism, and the inescapable presence of it today. Schnall (2006) discusses the growing mental health needs of the Orthodox community, with more of its members beginning to seek help outside of the community. Counselling psychologists should take care to be empathetic, curious and open to understanding the influence of Jewish culture and history, and the impact of issues facing the community today. Adding to the literature on the Orthodox Jewish community helps to bridge a knowledge gap and gives them a voice in a world in which they are often voiceless.

Lastly, there has been a move recently for survivors of IPV to change the word ‘victim’ to ‘survivor/advocate’. Culturally, there has been a shift over the last decade towards being more open in sharing stories of gender-based violence, most notably through the ‘Me too’ and ‘Everyone is Invited’ movements. Through sharing stories, survivors might feel that they are creating a new narrative for themselves, with Delker et al., (2020) arguing that ‘survivor’ is often considered the same as 'advocate’. Indeed, Perry (2024)’s study noted the importance of agency-restoring storytelling for survivors of RA/SA, considering its transformative power in rebuilding trust, processing trauma, and deriving meaning from their experiences. Much of the previous research has been exploring the experiences of social workers, community advocates or leaders, Rabbis, or even perpetrators. This research hopefully gives a voice to the survivors themselves, forming part of that narrative, fostering a space for redemptive storytelling and growth.

1.10 Research question

Given the research gaps on the lived experiences of Orthodox female survivors of religious coercion, and the importance of this topic to the counselling psychology academic and clinical worlds, we arrive at the following research question:

How is religious coercive control experienced by women within Orthodox Jewish marriage?

2. Methodology

This research examines religious coercive control within Orthodox Jewish marriage, through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology. The chapter below presents a methodological overview of the study, positioned within my chosen theoretical framework, with a description of the research process including data analysis. I consider the relevant ethical considerations of the research. This thesis is written in the first person, which reflects my desire to be 'close' to the research and share my reflections on researcher role and methodology, as befitting the IPA methodology.

2.1 Theoretical foundations

2.1.1 Rationale for a qualitative methodology

Quantitative studies view reality as universal, objective and quantifiable - reality is the same for all people and an individual's status is passive (Darlaston-Jones, 2007). Qualitative researchers, however, are concerned with meaning, and understanding the texture of experience (Willig, 2022). It is research which is concerned with 'how' and 'why' something happens, rather than the fact *that* it happens (Meyrick, 2006). There is certainly a place for quantitative research into religious coercive control, as much can be gained from data and numbers surrounding abuse, such as the potential to impact policy. However, the rich texture of the human experience of abuse is what gives meaning to distinct voices and separates people from numbers. As such, in seeking to explore, understand and interpret the meaningful experiences of the participants, a qualitative study is an appropriate framework from which to answer this research question.

2.1.2 Philosophical considerations

It is necessary for qualitative research to begin with defining one's theoretical position, as this informs methodology and thus method (Crotty, 1998). A theoretical position is the assumption brought to a chosen methodology and considers two key aspects;

ontology is the subject of being, or what exists in the world; epistemology is the nature of knowledge itself (Willig, 2022). Ontology and epistemology arise together and are often intertwined. However, Willig (2016) points out that a researcher's view about what exists (ontology) and our understanding of it (epistemology) are distinct and should not be blended into one - the epistemic fallacy. According to Slevitch (2011), ontological perspectives require exploration first, as the existence of entities should be determined before the process of knowing about them. As such, I attempt to consider both ontology and epistemology in relation to my own research philosophy, and how they influence the chosen methodology and research subject.

2.1.2.1 Ontology

Reflecting on my ontological stance, I pause to consider how I view the nature of being – do I see the world through a realist or a relativist lens? The realist position is one of implied objectivism, suggesting that realities exist outside the mind (Crotty, 1998). A realist will contend that the one true reality is identifiable and measurable (Ponteretto, 2005). By contrast, a relativist position suggests that there are multiple realities which are interpreted differently for each person, with an emphasis on the separation between reality and our understanding of it (Lauzier-Jobin et al., 2022). According to relativism, reality is subjective and created by context, experience, perceptions and social environment (Ponteretto, 2005). My study does not seek to know what is 'true' or 'real'. Simply, I do not seek definitions of religious coercive control, but rather how it is experienced subjectively by my participants. This relativist approach, however, leaves me with some concerns as I consider the impact of this perspective on naming religious abuse as a purely subjective experience, rather than a defined external reality. I feel, therefore, that a realist ontological stance should be given greater weight than originally intended, albeit through a critical lens.

2.1.2.2 Epistemology

Epistemology considers how we create and view knowledge: it is the relationship between the person who 'knows' (research participant) and the person who 'seeks to

know' (researcher) (Ponteretto, 2005). A positivist approach suggests that reality exists, whether we draw meaning from it or not, and it is linked to the paradigm of realism (Crotty, 1998). Ponteretto (2005) explains that positivism is concerned with systematic observation and description of phenomena, with the goal of prediction and control of that phenomena. It emphasises objectivism and independence between researcher, participant and subject. Positivism has been the favoured method in science and psychology research for the last few centuries.

Constructivism, meanwhile, suggests that there is no objective truth and that meaning is constructed entirely individually (Crotty, 1998), mediated by context, culture, history and language (Willig, 2022). Where positivism is linked to realism, constructionism takes a relativist approach, that multiple and equally valid realities exist, constructed in the mind (Ponteretto, 2005). Within a social constructionist model, realities are constructed by and between the people who experience it, meaning that the interaction between researcher and participant is central to capturing their experience.

This study does not align with either category as I seek knowledge of the experiences of the individual and meanings that they take from their external realities. I believe that my research is uniquely positioned to learn and improve our knowledge on the objective existence of religious abuse, with the understanding that participants share their subjective experiences through their own unique and varied lenses.

2.1.2.3 My position

As such, I ask how we investigate what needs to be known (Slevitch, 2011). Combining a realist ontology through a critical lens with an epistemological stance that gives weight to a subjective perspective on external knowledge, I arrive at a critical realist perspective.

Some researchers mistakenly view critical realism as merely the 'middle ground' between positivism and constructivism. However, critical realism is a unique approach with its own tools for research. It aids avoidance of an epistemic fallacy by showcasing the difference between what exists and our knowledge of it, as both positivism and

constructivism can confuse reality with what we know of it (Lauzier-Jobin, 2022). Within critical realism, reality exists and is independent of our knowledge: which is incomplete, but perfectible, poised to question (or indeed, criticise) whether positivist or realist scientific data can truly reflect the world (Howitt, 2016).

My research position is as such – I believe we can learn and improve our knowledge, but through multiple personal and subjective lenses. Critical realism allows this research to acknowledge the realities of religious coercion and its existence within the Jewish community, yet to open ourselves up to the rich and deep levels of knowledge gained from understanding its individual manifestations for survivors.

2.1.2.4 Reflexivity on philosophical position

According to Willig (2022), epistemological reflexivity engages with questions about how the research question is defined, limited, and constructive of the study's design, data and findings. Originally, in my first reflections, I named my theoretical position to be social constructionist as I considered the significance of intersubjective historical, social and cultural influences (Eatough & Smith, 2017) on religion and one's relationship with religion and community. I felt then, and indeed still acknowledge, that we cannot experience religion outside of its cultural framework. Religion is a fluid and ever-moving object, open to multiple interpretations and constructed within social norms. So too, I felt that religious coercion was experienced subjectively – what may feel like an abusive action to one person might be considered 'normal' and unharmful to others within the community. A social constructionist position therefore allowed for the flexibility to view both 'religion' and 'religious coercive control' as fluid and subjective.

I have since reflected on this idea and have attempted to consider the true objectives of my study and what I seek to discover, alongside the potential impact of my research. A critical realist stance occupies a space in which socially transformative ideas can exist. Indeed, Lauzier-Jobin (2022) submits that social constructionism is limited in addressing social change, as it inherently disbelieves the existence of social inequalities which can cause significant suffering. My research does not wish to interpret religion itself but the

abuse which uses religion as its tool. Further, the experiences of abuse survivors are not just constructions of a subjective reality (even though experiences differ), but the subjective perspective of an external reality. By naming it anything else, we risk trivializing the existence of religious coercion and causing harm to women who have suffered.

I need further reflect on my own position in the research as a Jewish Orthodox woman, and the personal, social context and interpretations which I undoubtedly bring to the study as an 'insider researcher'. Given the critical realist lens through which I view this topic, it is appropriate therefore to adopt an IPA methodology, which is inherently phenomenological and which seeks to understand the worlds of *both* participant and researcher, rather than surrounding structures (Willig, 2022).

2.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

In line with the critical realist theoretical underpinnings, and my research question, I use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in this research. IPA fosters a rich understanding of the experience of individuals through a reflexive and inward gaze, rooted in three core philosophical foundations – phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, 2011a).

2.2.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology was first addressed by philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century, seen as the father of the movement (Finlay, 2011), who argued that experience should be examined on its own terms. The study of phenomenology was continued by several other philosophers throughout the century, including Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean Paul Satre (Smith et al., 2022). Here we consider Husserl's foundational thoughts on phenomenology, and address Heidegger's thoughts later when discussing hermeneutics.

Husserl was concerned with the ways that one could study the essential qualities of an experience with enough depth and rigour that it would transcend those particular

circumstances and become something relatable to others. He suggested the adoption of a ‘phenomenological attitude’, which involves stepping away from everyday experiences to master a sense of consciousness in examining them with a reflexive and inward gaze. Husserl invokes the term ‘intentionality’ to describe the relationship between consciousness and the object of attention, explaining that phenomenology is about being conscious ‘of something’ (Smith et al., 2022). Simply put, Gallagher (2022) offers a traditional explanation of phenomenology - the study of consciousness itself, and what it discloses to the world. Namely, a reflection on a subject and the corresponding subjective experience of that subject.

As such, phenomenology concerns itself with ‘seeing’ - not how things are, but how they are experienced. There is a ‘closeness’ to the subject, a deep and rich insight into its meanings (Smith, 2011a). To approach something phenomenologically means to understand one’s perspective or orientation towards it, considering the meaning which an object has for the researcher. Husserl suggests that in achieving a phenomenological attitude, one should bracket, or put aside, their pre-existing orientations, or outside perceptions, towards an object - in order to concentrate on their inner perception of it. This does not mean that it should disappear, but rather that it should not distract from the essence of the experience which is being examined (Smith et al., 2022). Through this process, and in IPA methodology, this centres the participants’ experiences and suspends judgements emerging from one’s own experiences (Dorfler & Stierand, 2021).

2.2.2 Hermeneutics

Where phenomenology concerns itself with meanings, hermeneutics (interpretation) makes sense of them (Pringle et al., 2011): phenomenology is founded in interpretation which seeks to uncover what is hiding (Shinebourne, 2011). Leading philosopher Heidegger explains that phenomenology is split into two words: ‘phenomenon’, meaning show or appear, and ‘logos’, meaning discourse, reason or judgement. He further suggests that appearance (of an experience or object) has two meanings; that which is obvious and seen, and that which is hidden. Therefore, phenomenology is concerned

which examining that which is latent or hidden and is complemented by the action of analytical examination (Smith et al., 2022).

Heidegger's approach to interpretation is the opposite to Husserl's, in that he believed that interpretation is founded directly on one's fore-ception; we are never without existing ideas when presented with something. He suggests that our prior experiences, assumptions and pre-conceptions are essential to one's interpretation of new stimulus. However, he notes also that we should never allow this process to occur unknowingly, as they form part of the interpretation itself, and that bracketing should occur as a cyclical and dynamic process (Smith et al., 2022). As such, in IPA, the meaning-making of a subject is complicated further in that the researcher is also in search of meaning, and so interpretation is constructed by both parties. Therefore, IPA employs a double-hermeneutic (Smith, 2011a).

Heidegger's hermeneutic circle, is when one starts with a fore-understanding, moves to a new discovery, which then is met with resistance and challenge from original thoughts. In short, the hermeneutic circle moves between question and answer, parts and the whole, interpreted and interpreter (Finlay, 2011). Smith et al., (2022) offers a useful example to make sense of the hermeneutic circle and the dynamic movement between part and whole: a word's meaning is only clear in the context of a sentence, but the sentence meaning depends on the cumulative meaning of the words. So too, in IPA analysis, the process is circular as we move back and forth, shifting our relationship to the data and creating new meanings as we go. In IPA research, we consider the thoughts, feelings, actions and context of a person – their parts – alongside them as a whole.

2.2.3 Idiography

Finally, IPA is idiographic, in that the ‘particular’ and distinct voices within the experiences are what is important (Smith et al., 2022). Thus, complexities of human psychology are realised, as participants’ dialogue enable the contextualisation of meaning which is less obvious in other methodologies (Pringle et al., 2011). A good IPA study with multiple participants will listen to distinctive voices and draw shared themes which are represented for each person (Smith et al., 2022). Idiographic work does not reject generalisations which are inherent to nomothetic (large, group work) research, but rather seeks to establish and locate generalistions within the particular, and to develop them more cautiously. Although it would be a convenient explanation, idiography is not about the individual, but about how the individual can offer a unique perspective on their relationship with the phenomenon of interest (Smith et al., 2022).

2.3 Rational and reflections on IPA

Critical realism lends itself neatly to an IPA methodology, as I seek to gain a closeness to the experiences of the participants and to investigate their sense-making of it. A commonly-cited limitation, or criticism of IPA, is that it is merely a ‘descriptive’ method; however Larkin et al., (2006) posit that this overlooks the complexity of the meaningful delivery of an inner perspective. In fact, there is a tendency to simply collect and represent voices of the study, undermining IPA’s potential to be explorative and to communicate experiences at a truly idiographic and interpretative level. I have endeavoured to use these gifts of IPA in this work – I did not wish to simply represent the voices of the survivors who I have interviewed. Instead, I hoped to truly explore their experiences and to understand not only what unites them, but what makes each story distinct from the other. This is important from a critical realist perspective, as it gives potential to social transformation.

Finlay (2011) suggests that most phenomenological researchers sway towards either descriptive or interpretative analysis. Hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenologists say that description of lived experiences must be within the context of their life

situations, as this can completely change the analysis. Indeed, a person's description of religious abuse must be interpreted on a deeper level within the community to which they belong, and this is made possible through an IPA methodology.

IPA further enables me to bring my own perceptions, history, beliefs and predispositions into the research (Finlay, 2011). It affects how I constructed the language, questions and position of the interview, and how I filtered and interpreted resulting data (Berger, 2013). It is imperative that I acknowledge this inherent subjectivity. Finlay (2011) states that, "in the process of understanding another's world.... subjectivity is a tool for perception" - because it fosters empathy, curiosity and attentiveness to the other's inner world, which is now a shared world. According to Berger (2013), my researcher role affected the participants' comfort in sharing their experiences as they were more willing to do so, knowing that I am sympathetic to their situation and understanding of their context.

2.4 Other methodologies

As discussed, IPA was chosen for its suitability to my epistemological position, research question and for its phenomenological approach. As such, methodologies which are typically more realist (e.g quantitative methods), or which typically require a social constructionist lens (e.g discourse analysis or narrative approaches) were not suitable. The latter two methodologies focus on language and story structure, which are deemed ill-suited to my critical realist lens with which I undertook my research (Smith et al., 2022).

Within the phenomenological realm, there are other methodologies which may have suited this study, and which were considered before I reached my decision. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) similarly has a flexible epistemological application and appears to underscore many other qualitative methods which closely attend to interview transcripts and line-by-line coding (Willig, 2022). However, RTA's focus on themes rather than experience made it less attractive, as IPA rather directs its attention to what feels meaningful to participants and then makes sense of those choices (Smith et al., 2022). Grounded theory is like IPA in its search for meanings through categories which

emerge from the data. However, its aim is to provide an explanatory and descriptive framework to develop theory, and this goal did not suit my research question (Willig, 2022).

2.5. Research Design

2.5.1 Initial data gathering

Given the difficult recruitment procedures related to this topic, it was decided that a pilot study, or a formal conversation with service users, would not be prudent, as women involved with this should rather be given the opportunity to be in the study. However, I engaged in several informal conversations with people in the community to gain a better understanding of the topic and context.

One of the first people I spoke to was a social worker at Jewish Women's Aid, who offered insight into the women who engage with the charity and the types of abuse which they experience. This was done in the very early stages of this research and helped to narrow and decide my research question. This social worker was clear in the ways that religious coercion exists in the community, and she gave me examples of cases that she had worked on, which gave me a good understanding of what religious coercion looks like in this context.

I also spoke to a Rebbetzin (Rabbi's wife) who is a counselling psychologist in the community, who raised thoughtful points about the influence of religious beliefs on how women might speak about their situation – for example, Shalom Bayit. Other conversations were had with a Rabba (female Orthodox Rabbi), a lawyer at the charity Paperweight (Appendix C) which helps Jewish women going through divorce, and the co-founder of a community organisation dedicated to helping victims of Get abuse. Lastly, I spoke at great length to a survivor of religious coercion who did not wish to be in my study. My reflections on this conversation are written in more detail in the discussion chapter.

These conversations, while not a formal part of the research process, were incredibly insightful and informative in how they guided my approach to this research as they gave me pause to think about context, the wellbeing of my participants, and the absolute need for cultural sensitivity and curiosity.

2.5.2 Recruitment and procedure

IPA necessitates a small sample of participants (Smith et al., 2022), and this study has five. Participants were recruited through local Jewish charities (Appendix C), with charity workers sending an email to women who are previous or current users of their services (Appendix D). One woman was recruited through word-of-mouth. I also contacted synagogues and local religious establishments to ask if I could put the advertisement up on the back of women's toilet cubicles; I had this idea because Jewish Women's Aid often advertise their services in these places, given their accessibility and privacy.

Women who were interested in participating were invited to contact me by email or phone – I obtained a new dedicated phone number - after which I sent the participant information sheet with more details (Appendix E), and set up a pre-screening phone call. A sixth potential participant had to be turned away due to a conflict of interest, which is explored further in the Discussion section.

A pre-screening phone call was necessary to determine whether potential participants met the inclusion criteria for the study and to answer questions. Confidentiality, anonymity and dissemination plans were explained in more detail and thereafter, the participants signed a consent form (Appendix F), and we arranged an interview. During the phone call, I asked the potential participant to describe religious coercive control and, briefly, their experience of it – this allowed me to check that they met this particular criterion and that their understanding of the abuse which they experienced was aligned with how I had defined RCC. Between the five participants, their experiences appeared to be situated within different aspects of the four categories I had used to define RCC; for example, it was clear from then that the participant who had not received a Get

would be different to the women who had received a Get quickly but had experienced RCC more within their marriage. I knew, therefore, that experiences were not homogenous within this group and that this may impact the breadth of the findings; for example, it was possible that differences between experiences – and therefore my findings - might be more pronounced. All the women who I spoke to for a pre-screening phone call decided to proceed with participation.

I offered interviews in person (in hired rooms at City University), or on zoom. All of the interviews took place on zoom as this was more convenient for the participant and because they did not all live in London. Semi-structured interview questions (Appendix G) guided the facilitation of an open and comfortable interaction (Smith et al., 2022). Questions were carefully chosen to reflect a phenomenological approach, so that I could actively listen, minimising my dialogue to allow greater reflection from the participant (Smith et al., 2022). I told the participants that if they were to experience acute or unmanageable distress, the interview would stop and they would be asked if they wish to continue after a short break. Breathing or relaxation techniques would be offered. None of the women took me up on this offer, all were happy to proceed through the interview without stopping.

During the interview I ensured that I was dressed modestly so that participants would feel comfortable, as this is expected in a Charedi community (Schnall, 2006). Interviews were varied in their length. The shortest was 55 minutes and the longest was 1 hour and 45 minutes. The other three were around 1 hour, 30 minutes. They were recorded both on an encrypted recording device, and on Zoom video. Thereafter they were deleted from these servers and kept on City University One Drive alongside notes and data analysis. Participants were given several opportunities to withdraw from the study should they wish to, anytime up to 6 weeks post-interview. When the interview was concluded, participants were given a Debrief sheet (Appendix H) which outlined support services which they can access. They were also offered a debrief phone call in the following few days, which only one participant engaged with.

Confidentiality was, and is, maintained throughout all stages of the research. Charities were not told if any of their service users were involved in the study, and all personal data is kept on City University OneDrive, which is password protected. When the study has concluded, all data will be deleted, except for email addresses so that participants can receive the final written paper. Anonymity is protected by ensuring that there is no identifiable information in this write-up. Pseudonyms are used and all quotes or demographic information are anonymised, e.g. an age-range rather than age is given. All of the participants mention family members (e.g children) in the interview, they are included in the analysis and discussion only in very general terms. All ethical considerations are guided by the Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014).

2.5.3 Ethical considerations and inclusion criteria

I reflected carefully and gave significant thought to the various ethical aspects of this study, as it is essential to protect the participants, their families, and the wider community. Some of this is reflected in the inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion Criteria	**Exclusion Criteria**
- Experience of religious coercive control within marriage	- Not psychologically robust to participate in the interview.
- Identify as a female at the time of marriage	
- Over the age of 18	
- Engagement with psychological or psychosocial support since separation	
- Identify as Orthodox Jewish at the time of marriage	

- Live separately from their (ex)husband for a minimum of 12 months, having been either: ~ widowed ~ divorced ~ separated	

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Religious coercive control was defined in the study's advertisement and was discussed more thoroughly in the pre-screening phone call, to ensure that women met the criteria. Psychological or psychosocial support ensured that participants were psychologically robust to deal with interview questions of a sensitive nature. This is strengthened by the exclusion criteria and was discussed with participants in the pre-screening phone call. Women were also told that disclosures may need to be made if there is a safeguarding risk – although this did not happen. One participant had not received any psychological support since her experiences of abuse, however it was decided to include her regardless; given her temporal distance from the events (several decades) and the decade in which it occurred, during which time psychological support was less commonplace. My phone call with her reassured me that she was psychologically robust to participate, and my research supervisor was in agreement with this.

It was important to include a 12-month separation period from the participant's husband as another inclusion criterion, as this ensured the participant is no longer living in the abusive home and that there is temporal distance from the abuse. After much reflection, I decided not to insist that women are divorced – although this would allow even greater distance from the abuser, it would also limit the pool of participants significantly by excluding potential Agunot from the study. As such, I did not wish to exclude these women from my study but included careful safeguarding measures to ensure that such women are protected from potential identification which could (theoretically) impact divorce proceedings – including the separation criterion and by carefully anonymising participants to ensure they are not identifiable to others in the community.

I also reflected greatly on any potential risk of harm to participants which may occur if confidentiality were to be unwittingly breached. This would be in relation to the community's response to participation in my study, and whether there would be any social repercussions. In the Modern Orthodox community, the risk is very low, as abuse survivors are championed, their abusers are shamed, and support is forthcoming from community leaders, Rabbis, and the general community. In the Charedi community (or some parts of it), the risk is more acute as there is a stronger sense of religious dogma and different cultural expectations. However, I would still judge the risk to be low given that this would only occur if women could be identified in my study or if confidentiality were to be breached – and I have used robust safeguarding measures to address this. Secondly, women in my study have already been separated for (minimum) a year, and accordingly would have already decided that leaving their marriage or abusive home is more important than any potential harm which community stigma might cause – and if such stigma exists, they have unfortunately already faced it.

A personal concern, which required great reflexivity, is the effects of this research on the Orthodox Jewish community, with the possibility of inadvertently contributing to existing antisemitism by feeding into negative stereotypes about Judaism or the Jewish community. However, these tropes or views are based on images that Judaism, or 'all Jews' are associated with abusive or controlling behaviour. In fact, not only does this study seek to avoid perpetuating such myths, it additionally seeks to undermine such stereotyping by suggesting that Judaism itself is not abusive or controlling, but that it is important to acknowledge that, as in all communities, a small number of adherents can be abusive. Indeed, within Judaism, there is significant emphasis in Torah law and community/Rabbi leadership to prevent abuse and condemn it if it occurs – and the community has taken many significant steps to make this point heard (Appendix B). There are several dedicated charities within the community with focus on religious coercion in different forms, such as 'GetOut' (Appendix B) which helps Agunot, or 'Nachamu' (Appendix B) which addresses religious extremism in Charedi communities. This study is interested in gaining understanding of how religious laws, in this case

Jewish, can be misconstrued or misunderstood in a way that has the potential to lead to abuse, when manipulated by a perpetrator of abuse. As such, this study does not seek to 'demonise' the whole community, but, on the contrary, to explore the manifestation of domestic abuse in this particular religious context, and to raise awareness of the occurrence of this important issue, thus helping to prevent others from forming prejudicial views. Therefore, any potential prejudice towards the Orthodox communities which may be caused by a misunderstanding of the study, is outweighed by the substantial good which this study can do and is ameliorated by the ways that I speak about the community, as above. BPS ethical guidelines (BPS, 2021, 2.3) speak to the significance of research for the common good, and it is hoped that benefits to the community are outweighed by the risk.

In light of all of the above ethical points made, and that I am an "insider researcher", I am mindful of the challenges and benefits which this creates (Fleming, 2018). I come with pre-existing knowledge and understanding of the community, but similarly am mindful of researcher bias as my own views towards Judaism have potential to impact the research data. At the same time, I am also an "outsider researcher" as I have not personally experienced abuse or coercive control. I have therefore kept a reflexive diary so that I can gain insight into thoughts and feelings around the research, and to maintain a critical gaze at how being both 'insider' and 'outsider' can create conflict (Chavez, 2008). Further, both research supervision and personal therapy have been effective in guiding me through various hurdles which I faced.

2.5.4 Reflections on the process of gaining ethics approval

This study gained ethics approval from the Senate Research Ethics Committee of City University in March 2023. It had originally been submitted to the Psychology committee: medium risk in August 2022, but the committee had decided that the study should be escalated to high risk. The committee had concerns about the potential risks that the research might pose to the participants, their children, and others in the community, as well as potential risks to myself. Further, the committee questioned whether potential

benefits of the study would outweigh and justify the risks. They offered a list of suggested amendments to the study, which included not being able to advertise the study in public places, such as GP surgeries, as potential participants might be seen to look at the advertisement and this would place them in danger.

The decision by the ethics committee to escalate my research to the Senate committee, and the comments that they made on the application, left me feeling ‘distressed and helpless’ - according to my reflexive diary. I felt that the committee had unfairly characterised the community as antagonistic and adversarial, perhaps even violent and vindictive. I felt that they had taken agency away from women by assuming that they couldn‘t choose for themselves whether to look at an advertisement hung up somewhere. In my response to the committee I asked them to consider the numerous charities, campaigns, articles and outspoken leaders on the topic of religious coercion as discussed above and listed in Appendix (B), noting that this is not a topic which the community avoids and indeed this research would be an important addition to a growing conversation.

The ethics committee also made the following comment:

“The committee was concerned around the wording "The study will actively suggest that Judaism is not an abusive or controlling religion" - and was wondering whether the following formulation may be better: 'it will be emphasized that Judaism is no more a controlling religion than any belief system or religion, and that in any belief system or religion'.”

Here it felt that the committee was trying to be non-judgmental as between religions but inadvertently passed judgment on religion itself and as an institution. As discussed in other sections of this research, one of the hopes for this study is that it addresses a mistrust which exists between secular psychologists and the Charedi community. I ask, through this study, for secular psychologists and others working within the community, to be culturally sensitive and to understand that religion, spirituality, and its practice, is fundamental to their collective and personal identities. By insinuating that Judaism, like

other religions, may be controlling, this seeks only to isolate the community further. I hope that my response to the committee was sufficient in its explanation addressing this, and I note that ethics approval was gained after six months with little amendment to the nature of the study.

Another interesting point which was made by the committee was on one of my pre-screening phone questions, in which I planned to ask the potential participant which Rabbi and synagogue they were associated with. The committee preferred that I simply ask whether the participant identifies as Orthodox, finding this to be sufficient information. While I decided not to challenge this note, I found myself curious about why the additional information would have been relevant to me. I realised that knowing the Rabbi and synagogue of a person holds a lot of value in understanding the nuanced background and context of each participant, which would help me to place them in their very specific subgroup within the community. It is information which would mean very little to a layperson, but is very telling to me as an insider researcher. In hindsight, I wonder whether this knowledge would have been useful to my understanding of their background or would have unwittingly created a pre-conceived notion on my part as to the individual experiences of participants.

2.6 Participants

Demographic information about the participants is kept deliberately vague, to ensure confidentiality. Five women participated in the study – three women were in their 40s, one in her 50s, and another in her 70s. All of the participants had received their Get, and one was still waiting for her civil divorce at the time of this interview. For three of the women, their marriage had ended in the 5 years prior to the interview, and for two of them there were several decades passed. Three of the women would classify themselves as Charedi (to varying degrees) at the time of the abuse, and two as Modern Orthodox.

The following figure shows the way that participants' experiences of religious abuse fit into the aforementioned criteria. The names presented here are pseudonyms.

	Forced to transgress religious laws	Forced to obey religious laws against her wishes	Forced to obey religious laws to an extreme level	Mocked or humiliated for her religious practice
Adina		X	X	
Bracha	X	X	X	X
Clara	X			X
Diana		X	X	X
Eve		X	X	X

Table 2: Participants' experiences of religious abuse

2.7 Cost of resources

Participants opted into online zoom sessions for their interviews. An encrypted recording device was already obtained. Therefore, there were no direct costs related to resources for this research.

2.8 Data Analysis

IPA methodology necessitates a total immersion in the data, as the researcher attempts to explore the processes by which participants make sense of their experiences (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). A flexible set of guidelines is available, which broadly moves from descriptive to interpretative analysis. The process is not formulaic, and researchers are encouraged to think creatively through both a broad psychological lens and a personal lens (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The double hermeneutic should be excepted from the flexible approach, as the researcher's interpretation on the data through their own perspective should be done consciously and systematically, ensuring that themes are represented appropriately, rather than because of one's over-interpretation (Rodham, 2015).

2.8.1 Process and reflections on the process

The following steps, suggested by Smith et al., (2022), were followed in the data analysis. Alongside a description of the analysis, I offer some examples of the procedural and interpretative reflections I noted in my reflexive journal. More of these will be present in the analysis and discussion chapters below.

1. *Reading and rereading*

Recordings were first transcribed verbatim and closely read multiple times, with the goal of becoming totally immersed and actively engaged with the data. The narrative of the interview and the rapport built within the interview process helped to focus attention on the 'richer' parts. I took initial notes of striking observations, enabling reflexivity on how this might affect subsequent observations. In order to completely immerse myself in the data, I also listened and watched the interview at the same time as reading the transcript. This allowed me to pay attention to significant non-verbal moments, such as pauses and gestures.

During this stage I noticed that all of the participants used many Hebrew and Yiddish words, which form part of daily conversation in the community, and which I was able to understand and contextualise. I was mindful, however, that although we are both Jewish and might use the same word in similar ways, my background and practice is, to varying degrees, different to each of the women. Therefore, my interpretation of the words might be slightly different. For example, when a participant spoke about 'Yiddishkeit', I understood this through my own interpretation of the 'goodness' of the essence of Judaism. However, it is entirely possible that the word has additional, or different, layers of meaning for the participant who said it.

Due to my maternity leave, there was over a year between four of my interviews, and my analysis of them. I returned to the interviews with my sense of what they had been like somewhat distorted by time. My reflexive journal states the following:

I am finding the data from transcript [-] richer than I remembered. In getting closer to the text again, I am finding far greater depth and substance than originally remembered.

2. *Exploratory notes:*

Semantic content, conceptual comments and language choices (e.g. emotive words) were noted on a broad and explanatory level with a clear phenomenological focus in staying close to the participant's explicit meaning. Interpretative noting in parallel

engaged an added speculative layer with future analyses in mind. Dialogue was addressed in a systematic line-by-line format, as I asked questions of each word, phrase and sentence. I made these notes in the right-hand column of the page, sometimes highlighting or underlining words or sentences to note particular interest.

Some of the notes that I made were hypothetical, questions for me to return to or reflect on later. For example, one participant said several times, “I don’t care”, and I questioned whether this was apathy or defiance. I came to a stronger conclusion of defiance through broadening my lens and examining context and non-verbal cues, focusing again afterwards to explore why she was showing defiance in this particular moment. This process of narrowing and broadening my approach was helpful to gain a richer understanding of the data.

There were also moments when I struggled to make sense of what I was reading. With one participant, I read and re-read a paragraph, knowing that there was something meaningful in it but struggling to put my finger on what it was. I decided to take a break from it for a few days and come back to it with a fresher mind, which helped. I also noticed that this participant spoke a long time without pausing, very expressive in sharing her story. I wondered whether she had felt silenced for so long, that perhaps this opportunity to share her story was incredibly significant to her. I used this felt-sense of her to guide my interpretations.

3. *Constructing experiential statements:*

This step warranted the turning of notes into experiential statements - phrases which express the experiential core of the piece. It aimed to capture the particularities of specific text, while still being influenced by the whole text. I found this process difficult at first: there was a tendency to be too ‘descriptive’, or too similar to the exploratory notes made previously. I also noticed that I was writing many statements, perhaps too many, and wondered if I was missing the ‘bigger picture’ ideas, focusing too closely on smaller ideas. Having noticed these tendencies, I made a concerted effort to address them and focused on reducing the volume of the notes to become more reflective and less

descriptive. I made these notes in the left-hand column on the page, referring to the right side and to the text as appropriate.

With one participant, I noticed fatigue in myself when I was reading and analysing her story. I wondered if this was a countertransference and whether she felt fatigue in sharing her story so often, perhaps with no change as a consequence. Again, this guided my interpretations.

4. *Searching for connections across experiential statements:*

Here I looked to develop a map of how the statements fit together, by clustering those with conceptual similarities into groups with a descriptive label (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Smith et al., (2022) suggests a manual method of doing this by cutting out statements so that they are viewed equally and searching for potential interconnections and patterns. I used post-it notes to write out the experiential statements, then clustered them into groups, and did it again if it didn't feel quite right. It was a dynamic process with checking and re-checking, and moving groups or specific post-it notes around.

5. *Naming experiential themes, consolidating and organising:*

I then organised the chosen themes into a table, developing a conceptual analytic structure. I found naming the groups to be more challenging than expected, and often I felt that I veered into a more descriptive rather than reflective title. For example, when working with my first transcript, I named a group "The nature of the abuse" which was intended to capture the overall experience of the abuse – it's intensity, longevity etc. Reflecting on this, however, I noted that one of the first experiential statements within this group was the gem, her quote, "Marriage is jail" - she feels trapped. I realised that a better, more interpretative and reflective title for this group was, "Feeling trapped". After this, I made a greater effort to use my reflective tools to engage with the feelings of the experience, rather than to simply 'list'.

I noted several 'gems' in the language which the participants used. According to Smith, (2011b), gems are an utterance which may be small in size but large in power – a

valuable source of rich data in qualitative research. They have the potential to shine light on a phenomenon overall and demand greater attention from the researcher. The gem mentioned above ‘marriage is jail’, did just that, its strong language evoking a sense of the cruelty of her experience, and thus guiding me in my investigation. Another gem which appeared in the data included ‘my blood boiled’ and was the beginning of my interest into the story of emotions weaved through the participants’ experiences.

6. *Continue analysis of other cases:*

These steps were repeated for each case in the research.

I conducted the analysis of one transcript before I went on maternity leave, and completed the remaining analyses and cross-analysis between transcripts after I returned, a year later. I felt apprehensive about this, nervous that I had forgotten how to approach each script with nuance and a keen interpretative eye. I found that re-reading Smith et al., (2022)’s guide was helpful here in re-acquainting myself with the analytic process, and further that reading my already-completed analysis was helpful in getting me back into the reflective and interpretative mindset.

7. *Working with personal experiential themes to develop group experiential themes:*

Lastly, once all of the individual cases had been examined, I turned my mind to the cross-case analysis and searched for similarities and differences between them, highlighting the unique and shared experiences of the participants. Interpretation was then facilitated on a deeper level as I moved to a micro-analysis of the text, and connected this back to the ‘whole’.

2.8.2 Evaluation

Trustworthiness of qualitative work is important to establish scientific rigour. As IPA is a creative process; fluid and flexible, there is a need to establish that the data and analysis are worthy of the interpretations which are made (Rodham, 2015).

Meyrick (2006) suggests transparency and systematicity throughout all stages of the research, with sufficient information about steps taken along the way so that the reader

can judge whether decisions made were reasonable, and conclusions appropriate. It is important that each theme is actually present in the transcripts - a final re-read of the study ensured that interpretations are present and that researcher bias has been minimised. Quotes and extracts in the analysis section are used to show how interpretations are grounded in written examples (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Reliability (as it is known in quantitative research) is the acknowledgment that this interpretation is just one of multiple possible interpretations and recognises my dynamic influence on the data (Yardley, 2000). Brocki and Wearden, (2006) suggest that the quality of the final written work and analysis is dependent on the personal analytic work that is done at each stage above. Therefore, to become curious about the data we need to be continuously reflexive and be mindful of our role.

Yardley (2000)'s four principles are frequently used as a method of evaluating qualitative research, and are well suited to the IPA approach:

Sensitivity to context:

Yardley (2000) suggests that to achieve *sensitivity to context,* it is essential to consider the empirical literature and existing theoretical data on the topic, an awareness of the sociocultural setting, the social context of the relationship between researcher and participant, and the perspective of the participant.

An extensive literature review was undertaken, offering a solid grounding for the research question to develop. The findings of this study were firmly placed within this context, and points of deviation were noted. This is discussed both in the literature review and the discussion chapters of this research. Further, the 'language, social interaction and culture' (Yardley, 2000) of the participants has been addressed throughout this paper as central to the participants' meaning-making processes, and the social context of their community is acknowledged as paramount to their experience. The social context between us – researcher and participant – is also considered at great length as I offer many reflections on the similarities and differences between us, the familiarity of what we share, and my role as insider/outsider researcher. Lastly, the

perspective of the participant is at the forefront of this research as it is phenomenological at heart, seeking to understand the meaning of the participants' experiences. This is evident through the interview and our interactions, where power differences between research expert and experiential expert were negotiated (Smith et al., 2009) - through my counselling psychology skills of active listening and empathy, and through the semi-structured interview which gave the flexibility to the participant in sharing as they wished. The significance of the perspective of participants continued through the data analysis, in using their words to find meaning and to be the foundation for the findings as presented below.

Commitment and rigour:

Commitment is described by Yardley (2000) as prolonged engagement with the topic, immersion in the data, and development of competence in research skills. Rigour is the completeness and comprehensiveness of the analysis and results, paying particular attention to interpretation across all levels of the analysis.

I immersed myself in the topic and the data by reading widely; not only the empirical work which has been included here, but personal accounts, memoirs, and documentaries which have been created. My discussion with laypeople in the community also benefited my engagement with the topic as I heard anecdotally from social workers, charity workers and community leaders about the prevalence and nature of this topic in the community. I also work within a community organisation and am embedded within the Orthodox community both professionally and personally, giving me total immersion in the culture and a solid understanding of the context in which religious coercion can occur. My research skills were honed through extensive reading on qualitative research methods, attending lectures on IPA, and participating in seminar groups and workshops on IPA analytic skills. Rigour was achieved by being thorough and systematic in my analysis, by following the steps outlined in a dynamic way – returning to previous steps where needed and continuously questioning the data. I carefully chose the methodology, and designed and implemented the study with great

attention to detail. My reflexivity throughout the process further shows a commitment to rigour and to the complexity of analysis across the stages.

Transparency and coherence:

The third of Yardley's (2000) criteria for quality research is as such, relating to the clarity and cogency of the data and transparency in its presentation. Yardley (2000) explains that in qualitative research, an openness to the impact of the researcher's worldview is profoundly important, and the disclosure of this is known as reflexivity. Throughout the research and the write-up of the research I have remained dedicated to being reflexive, keeping a reflexive journal and sharing my reflections throughout this work. Further, I have shared each stage of the process: from recruitment, to interviews, to methodology, with openness and candour, with clear descriptions of each. I have also kept a paper trail of each draft of my work to facilitate an independent audit (Smith et al., 2022).

Impact and importance

Ultimately, research is judged on its impact and utility (Yardley, 2000). This may be practical or theoretical – providing either real-world suggestions, or challenging perspectives. Further, the socio-cultural impact of the work is inherent to qualitative research. This study achieved this impact through its continuous discussions of the ways in which its findings and perspective can inform counselling psychologists in practice. I have been committed to producing a good quality piece of work which can inform others working within the Orthodox community, and can be valued by the community itself for its dedication to a socially important conversation.

3. Analysis

3.1 Overview

The analysis chapter below presents four master themes and their sub-themes, as shown in Figure 1. Each of these themes are explored in depth, with quotes directly from the text and commentary alongside it. Where ellipses (...) are present, this is typically to account for my speech in asking questions or if the participant strayed from the topic briefly. The amount of data from each participant differs according to their meaning-making and emphasis on varied aspects of their experiences. Therefore, although there is overlap between the broad themes and ideas, the nuance and amount of data collected per theme is more diverse. Where, for example, a particular theme is one of great importance to one participant, there is a larger amount of data and commentary to share than perhaps there is for other participants. Overall, however, I have endeavoured to provide a clear and balanced examination of the relevance of the themes to participants.

The overlap between the themes is to be expected in an IPA study. The repetition of the hermeneutic process; one of examining and re-examining, which continued throughout the writing of this chapter, means that the final chosen themes are appropriate. Indeed, this overlap offers a reinforcement of experiences and a reminder that one's sense-making cannot be so easily 'boxed' in isolation from each other. It serves as a reminder that IPA's ideographic approach gives rise to both individuality and commonality.

I hope too, that my voice as an insider researcher is present throughout this analysis. Where appropriate and possible, I have attempted to insert my thoughts of the participants, their experiences, and my own sense-making of their stories.

The four themes below, displayed in Figure 1, represent both the commonalities and also dynamic and unique experiences shared by the participants related to religious coercive control. The first theme explores the ways in which the women experienced abuse, it being intense and relentless in nature and them feeling both "Trapped and broken", stuck in an endless and horrifying cycle. The second theme - "Painful and empowering reflections" - encompasses the ways that the participants reflected on their

understanding of their experiences; such as how they made sense of their (ex)husband's actions and their journeys of self-discovery both during and after the abuse. This theme considers the unfolding narrative of their feelings as the participants grapple with their changed selves over time. The third theme, "Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman", speaks to the gendered nature of RCC and the experiences that the participants had specifically within their intersectionality as Orthodox Jewish women – both within their marriage and within wider community. Lastly, the final theme captures the "Changed relationships" which the participants experienced with others around them, and also their changed relationship with religious practice and faith. These four findings are explored below in more detail.

Figure 1: Master themes and subthemes

3.2 Trapped and broken

It feels appropriate to begin with the master theme, *Trapped and Broken*, as it speaks to the crux of this research topic in its exploration of the nature of religious coercive control and its impact on the participants. The participants in the study described feelings of suffocation, using words like 'trapped', and the intensity of their experiences was palpable through their language, as explored below. This master theme is divided into

three subthemes: "*Rammed down my throat" – experiences of extreme abuse; Abuse was relentless;* and "*Gobsmackingly devastated" - shattering impact of the abuse.*

3.2.1 "Rammed down my throat" - experiences of extreme abuse

Each of the participants described how the abuse manifested in their marriage and the extreme nature of it, with ensuing emotions discussed further below.

The title of this subtheme comes from Eve, who describes the way religion was forced on her and the intensity of her sadness and frustration she felt consequently:

> *I just felt like the religion was being rammed down my throat every single day, every single Shabbat... (21, Eve)*
>
> *The other thing that used to happen every single year on Tisha B'Av [holy mourning and fast day], he wouldn't talk to me for 25 hours, he was like 'I can't talk to you because, you know, our marriage is just based on making jokes all the time. So we can't be like that on Tisha B'Av, you can't, can't... have to be sad'. And he literally did not talk to me for 25 hours... I literally spent 25 hours crying... (179-188, Eve)*

Eve's husband chose not to speak to her on Tisha B'Av because it is a sad day in the calendar, with a fast 25 hours in length intended as a mourning ritual. He felt that speaking to her would raise his mood, and so he applied himself to the sadness of this day with excessive intention. Eve's repeated use of 'literally' indicates that the hours moved slowly, evoking an understanding of the intensity of that time.

Intensity of religion is something Adina is also familiar with. She was born into an Ultra-Orthodox community, and yet her (ex)husband waited until the birth of their first child before he started to show the true level of his extremity, leaving her feeling trapped. She explained how he used community and Rabbinic pressure to force her to do his bidding, knowing that societal and cultural expectations were that she would follow their rulings. It was therefore a 'double' religious abuse in that he used religion as his tool of coercion both through forcing her to follow extreme interpretations of the rules, and by forcing her to do the bidding of the Rabbis.

I would say, starting with, when my ex-husband turned things around and became very, very extreme, Hassidic, and then forced a lot of things on me, not by necessarily saying, 'You have to do this' by getting Rabbis involved again, members of the community involved, putting a lot of pressure on me as a very young woman and saying, 'You know, if you don't do this that happens'. That's, there's a lot of those kind of rhetorics are being told to you all the time. (229-237, Adina)

Some examples of what Adina was forced to do include shaving her head, wearing a certain denier of tights, sending her children to a school she didn't like, and not allowing her to attend university. Here she notes also her young age, which points to the vulnerability of her situation and adds to our understanding that she felt trapped.

Bracha described her (ex)husband as a *chossid shoitah* (pious fool), as he interpreted religion in either extreme or foolish ways and expected her to do his bidding. For example, Bracha had a miscarriage during *chol hamoed* – a few days in the Jewish calendar during which housework is typically not done, such as washing linen. Although she knew that Jewish law makes an exception for someone who is sick, he still refused to allow her to wash her sheets:

There was an incident on Chol Hamoed – I was miscarrying, and I wanted to wash my bedding, and he, you know, got difficult about that and said, 'oh you can't do that. You have to ask a shaila [question to the Rabbi] for that'... I knew that was gonna...and I did, I hemorrhaged really badly. And I'm very like finnicky about clean things. It's not even a shaila, I was a choleh [sick person] ...It's not, you know. It was literally a case of like, you know, when I was brought up there was a term was 'chossid shoitah' [pious foolishness] and that was literally a classic, absolute classic. (318-327, Bracha)

Bracha rolled her eyes when sharing this incident, showing her frustration with him; she did this several times throughout the recounting of her stories. The example above is just one of those which she shared and shows how he changed or misinterpreted religious rules to inflict harm on her.

Clara's situation differed from the others in that religion was not forced on her but was something she loved and welcomed. As such, her (ex)husband used religion as a tool because he knew how important it was to her and that breaking the rules would be very painful. For example, he took their children to unkosher restaurants, he deliberately made joint financial transactions on holy days when it is forbidden, and he used her name and image on a couples 'cheating' website without her consent. His actions were extreme in that they permeated every aspect of their lives together, and the intensity of his betrayal was made worse because she believed she had been in a loving, intimate and religious marriage, with no idea that he was living a double life.

> *I think that he knew me inside out and back to front. He knew every aspect of my Achilles heels. And my Achilles heels is Hashem [God] and my kids and my Jewish values and family. And that's exactly what he used to create the ... manipulation and control with what I did and when I did it and how I did it... (655-661, Clara)*

> *...somebody that does the things that he's done...somebody that's done the level of abhorrent...we're talking...I can't even go into the depths of the details (1264-1267, Clara)*

Clara alludes to the abhorrent level of his actions, and her descriptions of his behaviour paint a picture of a man going to extreme lengths without any care for her, leaving her feeling devastated.

Diana, too, experienced religious coercion differently to the other participants as hers manifested entirely after marriage. It was, however, no less extreme, as his refusal to grant a divorce meant that she spent those years living in a state of limbo, unable to move forward with her life, which she describes below:

> *Well it was, it was... you know, it was in court, backwards and forwards. He was trying to get the kids, umm that I shouldn't have them at all. And it was just a very tough time. And obviously at that point I couldn't meet anybody or go out with anyone, or you know, have a life, and I was very young. I'll underline that as well. It's a big, big difference if you get divorced in your 50s say. Or like me in my 20s.*

You know I was young. I wanted to live. I wanted to enjoy my life, and it was very, very hard... (249-257, Diana)

So, all five participants experienced abuse in entirely different ways; yet for each of them it was an abuse that was 'rammed down their throats' in how it permeated their lives and through the extreme actions of their husbands.

3.2.2 Abuse was relentless

This subtheme speaks to the feeling described by all five of the participants, that the abuse was ongoing, without break, never-ending – each in different ways.

For example, as Eve described, it was:

... every single day, every single Shabbat (22, Eve)

Eve repeated the words 'every time', 'every', 'whole time' often throughout the interview, conveying the feeling that there was no break from the abuse, that her partner used every opportunity he could. Her tone and emphasis on the underlined words below show her frustration:

He used to take out the same sefer [holy book], every single week, and read through the whole sedra [weekly Torah reading] with me like I was his chavrusa [learning partner]... (252-253, Eve)

Several participants, including Eve, experienced continued coercion and control long after separating from their husband, through their children – causing great frustration and sometimes anger. As Eve said:

... there's still a lot of religious coerciveness from him. Still, a lot of it... even with the fact that he's not living in the same house as me. (595-599, Eve)

Similarly, Diana's (ex)husband exerted control after the divorce was finally granted as he made all the decisions about their children's upbringing, such as sending them to a more religious school than Diana wanted.

You know, and even after I got the Get *[religious divorce]... you know he, he was still, you know, calling the shots. You know, what the children were allowed to do,*

what they were not allowed to do. I was not free until they grew up. (130-134, Diana)

And uh... and it went on and on and on, and then they grew up (137, Diana)

Diana only felt truly released when her children had grown up and were able to make their own decisions. However, she acknowledges that the abuse has ramifications still to this day through how her children relate to religion.

Clara's (ex)husband also specifically uses their children as a means of hurting her after their divorce, as he no longer wields control in other areas:

So a good example would be that my son went to a treif [unkosher] chip shop to get some drink... oh we would never have done that before. But he doesn't care. He's trying to make a coercive... to get me agitated from a religious perspective... So they are little things that are religious aspects which is still after divorce and dealing with coercive control... you know, it's never ending.... it doesn't stop. Think until you have your children out, it probably doesn't stop. (1094-1104, Clara)

For Clara, the relentless nature of the abuse is again expressed through her immense pain at being misled for 18 years of their marriage, with him living a double life and pretending to be a certain way when he wasn't. This is incredibly painful for her, who held such faith in the sanctity of their marriage, only for this to be destroyed.

The reality was, none of that was true.. He's not a religious man per se. He portrayed to be that, but his ability to manipulate things and to create that world was what made me think that's the world that we lived. You know it, I now know it was going on for 18 years. (637-642, Clara)

Adina's experience of the relentless nature of the abuse was one in which she felt trapped in a world she didn't want to be part of, forced into marriage at a young age with the knowledge that community expectations would keep her in this world:

So that for me, that was like, I feel so utterly trapped in the community and in a way of life I don't agree with, I don't like, I don't, I don't like that fact that I wasn't allowed to drive. I wasn't allowed to work at points. I wasn't allowed to dress the way I

wanted to. Even I would still be wearing, you know, modest clothing it still wasn't, had to be certain colours, not with certain writing on it, or the length of the sleeves, and not wearing trousers. And just like so many rules. Just so many rules that I just felt like, it's just unfair. (213-222, Adina)

Adina repeated the words 'I had no choice' throughout the interview, deploring the fact that all decisions were made for her and that religious expectations were applied without exception and without compromise. It felt even more painful for her that others around her had willingly entered this world – her parents came from a less religious background and her (ex)husband was a convert. Meanwhile, Adina expressed feeling robbed of living the life that she wanted to, such as attending university and making her own decisions about when and whom to marry. The abuse was relentless in how it affected all decisions, all aspects of her life, leaving her feeling suffocated by it.

Slightly differently, but no less relenting, was the abuse directed towards Bracha, whose marriage was less than a year and without shared children. Bracha described how her (ex)husband would constantly and consistently gaslight and mock her, calling her irrational and threatening to leave if she disagreed with him. This rendered her terrified, with the relentless fear of what he might do and that he would go.

I was absolutely terrified. It was Friday night, I think, and I just sat there, and I was like...I was absolutely petrified. I was terrified. (382-384, Bracha)

Because if I dared say no then... "I'm leaving you." Oh yeah, it's always, "it has to be my way or it won't work." Those were his words. "It's got to be my way or it won't work." (472-474, Bracha)

For each of the participants, the ongoing nature of the abuse added to the intensity of it and furthered their feelings of being stuck.

3.2.3 "Gobsmackingly devastated" - shattering impact of the abuse

The gem "Gobsmackingly devastated" was said by Clara, an expression of how painful it was to endure and discover her (ex)husband's abuse. Indeed, all five of the participants were impacted in devastating ways, as explored in this subtheme.

Clara's devastation was felt through the shattered image of the beautiful, religious family unit she thought she had. Clara repeatedly used the words 'one unit' throughout the interview, recounting how she felt unified as a team in values, decisions and lifestyle with her (ex)husband. Upon discovering the level of manipulation and deception, she said:

> *I sought a loving, warm, religious, Orthodox, Jewish family married life. And that's what I thought I had. And when that was shattered it wasn't just shattered in one bit, it was totally shattered to pieces. (811-814, Clara)*

The powerful symbolism of her words evokes the image of a woman broken apart by the cruelty of someone she once trusted so deeply.

Bracha explained how she continues to feel the impact of the abuse today, viscerally and physically:

> *You know, so I have to, have to still keep reminding myself of, I don't know why, but so I look back and I think of those times that fear that he put in me and it's like [breathes deeply and touches her chest], you know, it's a trauma. It really is. It's like, you know... (599-603, Bracha)*

Her words *I have to keep reminding myself* speak to an inner conflict, which will be discussed further below and which hint at not only the devastating impact but also continued confusion and sense-making around the experience.

The impact of the abuse on Eve was palpable through the years that she experienced it and still today, and she describes a range of emotions, which will be explored in subtheme 3.3. Among many other feelings, both positive and negative, Eve describes how she still struggles with her mental health after years of being degraded:

> *Even now, even now, it's a work in progress. I really have to... I'm really going to have to work on myself to, you know, to see what I can achieve and to... I underestimate myself all the time (853-857, Eve)*

Diana speaks from a place of reflection; decades after the abuse with much time for processing and coming to terms with its impact. Still, she speaks of the difficulties she endured and the repercussions which continue until today:

> *You know his behaviour, his, his... it was horrendous. I went through a really really dreadful time (129, Diana)*

Adina spoke about the impact of the abuse to this day through the loss of community, family and religion, as she lives a life entirely separately to where she came from. She feels no lasting connection to her (ex)husband, but described feeling lonely and sad at the loss of her family:

> *It impacts me in the way that I don't have family, even though I have a lot of family. I just couldn't forgive them...So personally, I just, even though, like they all live in London as do I... I just have absolutely no idea like where [they] are up to in their lives. I wouldn't recognise their kids. It's been years now and I don't know any of them. And having 9 siblings like that, that's a little bit heartbreaking. But at the same time I couldn't be in touch with them again, because of what they've done. And they've never really apologised properly, so... (802-812, Adina)*

It is worth noting that both Adina and Diana have much greater distance from the abuse than Bracha, Clara and Eve, with several decades passed since they left. For both of them, the impact is more about family, rather than any lingering feelings towards or about their (ex)husbands. I hold curiosity about whether this is because of how much time has passed, or whether it is related to more specific nuances of their situations.

Regardless, their words show the lasting impact of the abuse, and all five participants have described the shattering ways in which they have been affected.

3.3 Painful and empowering reflections

Each of the participants look back on their experiences with a mix of emotions, both painful and empowering. This master theme aims to capture these reflections through the following subthemes: *A growing sense of him; Grappling with a sense of self:*

Reflecting on the person she was and is; Unfolding emotions over time; and *Weaving a story in making sense of the abuse.*

3.3.1 A growing sense of him

The women in this study each spoke about their realisation that the person they had married was abusive, and different to who they had originally thought. For some this was a slow and gradual process either during marriage or after it, and for others there was a sudden recognition.

Bracha had some inkling during dating and engagement that something wasn't right, but her concerns were alleviated by the way that he presented himself to others:

> *We went out. He seemed very charming, very easygoing. I was a bit concerned, like he seemed a bit cold in some ways... it was one point actually when we were engaged or getting engaged, I was concerned. He seemed like very like, um... He took something that was said the wrong way, or he seemed like very umm, emo... He seemed very distraught about something within himself... so he just. He seemed very, very nice and charming, and it sort of allayed those fears those concerns that I'd had. (285-289, Bracha)*

During her short marriage, Bracha's therapist and friends helped her to see that his actions were abusive, and when he left suddenly, her brother shared that he had been concerned as well:

> *And it was the same brother who convinced me to meet him who when he left, said to me, "You know he seems really really nice on the outside, but there's something about him that at home behind closed doors he could be very, very different." This is all in hindsight.. Comes across as a charming, upstanding, fine member of society. (942-950, Bracha)*

These two quotes next to each other, each including the word 'charming' highlights her changed understanding, an awareness with hindsight that his charm is a facade, perhaps one required by community expectations as she spoke of his charity and generosity, involvement in community causes.

Diana's husband also came across as charming and kind, and his subsequent behaviour was a shock to those around him. When I asked Diana whether she had held a sense of who he could be, she said:

> *I don't think so, because he can be very charming. (404, Diana)*

Diana's turning point came after several years of marriage, when she noted his unkind reaction to the cot death of their child:

> *And I thought, who the hell am I dealing with here, you know, and that's when it started. When I realised that I need to get out. You know, this is not who I want to be married to. (319-321, Diana)*

Her words, 'who the hell am I dealing with', evoke a sense of anger and surprise. Her desperation to 'get out' of the marriage is what he then used as a tool of control, keeping her trapped in for three more years.

Eve's sense-making around her (ex)husband's character was a more drawn-out process, over years of marriage. At the start she attended therapy to try and 'change' herself, believing him that their problems were her fault.

> *He didn't acknowledge that he had a problem. He wouldn't acknowledge, said, "it's not my like, not me. It's not me, it's not my fault"... He said to me, "if you go and get medication and you get therapy then... and you're a happier person then things will be better." So I used to think, "oh it's my fault like year, nothing wrong with him. It's me, like there's something wrong with me"... (538-553, Eve)*

It was only in the last few years of marriage, after her own therapy, that she started to see the situation for what it was, and at that point started to fight back.

> *So then I realised that, yeah, that it's not me. It's him. (560, Eve).*

In contrast, Clara's discovery of her (ex)husband's abuse was a sudden and awful shock.

To the outside world, they are this very fantastic, lovely, everybody knows them. They're really cool, really, you know... brilliant, lovely, and everybody sees them like that. I saw him like that as well... until... (373-377, Clara)

It literally, it was gobsmackingly devastating to find out these things that were going on in my marriage. It wasn't like I always suspected, or was... I had no idea, and as I say, the people that know him of my friends would say, they never had a clue (736-740, Clara)

Adina, who was in an arranged marriage, never felt any love or connection to her husband, but was bound instead by duty. Her sense of him was originally defined by others, such as the matchmaker, who tricked her into thinking she was marrying someone less extreme.

I was very specific about I didn't want anyone who was just gonna be too extreme, or somebody who was gonna be more Hassidic [Ultra Orthodox], more just, just, more Orthodox than I was.... I found out later that he was actually told to dress down and to change, because I had said those things. So he had changed his hat. He had changed his outer clothing and then about a year down the line after we'd got married and after my oldest son was born he turned up at the hospital with this, the big fur hat which we, my family, never wore. So it was just like, well... you've now had my kid and now I can do whatever the hell I want... and you've got to just suck it up and deal. So we literally went from being what I thought was a regular Orthodox couple to suddenly being extreme (120-135, Adina)

There were a few signs earlier that he was just sort of saying things, that he was starting to go to a different synagogue than he was saying he would go to. He's also decided he was no longer going to shave his beard anymore, started to grow it, and that really like I did not like that at all, just a few little things I just picked up on. And I just thought, you're going to be the convert who becomes really extreme. And that's not what I want. That's not where I'm... I didn't want that. (363-373, Adina)

It is worth noting here that the significance of changing synagogues and changing hats is not lost on me, as an insider researcher. Although it might seem insignificant to a

layperson, they are symbolic of a marked change in religious practice, and I understand how daunting it would have been for Adina to watch her husband make these decisions without her input.

For each of the five participants, the knowledge that their (ex)husbands were not who they had originally hoped them to be, was a moment of clarity accompanied by mixed emotions, which will be explored further below.

3.3.2 Grappling with a sense of self: reflecting on the person she was and is

This subtheme explores the women's changed sense of self after the abuse, with some reflecting on who they 'used to be' with a mixture of pride and pain.

Adina had grown up being told she was the 'problem kid' because she asked questions and was curious beyond what she was permitted to be. She saw herself as someone who was loud and unabashed. During the years of her marriage, however, she found herself shrinking smaller as it became easier not to fight back.

> *I felt I had no control, and I had no choice. And so then I had to do that [shave her head] and I was hugely ashamed of like that person I'd become, that I felt I had no option other than to do that, even though I hated it. And even though I knew that people who knew me as being quite strong and outspoken, and then all of a sudden... (257-262, Adina)*

> *I just, when I see myself back then I see a very different person. I'm very different to the person I am now. I had no voice. And I always think of myself as being like a show of a human. It wasn't me. I just did and said whatever I had to, to get through the days. (653-657, Adina)*

Throughout the interview, Adina repeated the words 'ashamed' several times, pained at being forced into being someone that she didn't want to be and embarrassed in front of old friends.

I also noted that Adina spoke for long periods without taking a pause, giving the sense that she was eager to tell her story. Simultaneously, she told me that she is often very quiet with others and listens rather than shares. I held a sense of curiosity about this;

having been silenced during her marriage, what was it like to have this opportunity to speak freely, and to have others be interested and ask questions? Adina seemed to be conflicted, oscillating between wanting to hide herself, ashamed of her past, and wanting to be loud and outspoken about her experiences – even starting a blog - which she then deleted when others started to read it. The complexity of her inner conflict is captured in the quotes below:

> *I mean, people I have known for a long time didn't even know that I was once married. So it's just, I just don't speak about it. But it's not nice like to have to hide. I feel like I have to hide it because there is part of me that is still ashamed of where I come from. (946-949, Adina)*

> *But in the beginning there was a lot of feelings of injustice... I represented a group of people who were treated appallingly, and I felt like I was able to speak...I've lost everything, anyway... So let me be that one to speak out. So I did a lot of talking initially, writing and talking, and was called every name under the sun, you can imagine... So...I don't mind, you know, saying speaking about myself on these things because there aren't many people who can. (977-994, Adina)*

Clara, too, had always been steadfast in herself; her values and her strength. She had turned down several marriage proposals in favour of being absolutely clear that she wanted a partner in life who would be her equal and not someone who she would dominate over. Reflecting on this, there is vast pain for Clara as she questions where and how everything went wrong. She repeats often, "How did I get here?" and her sense of self is shaken by the idea that she, as a smart, strong woman, hadn't seen this coming.

> *... so for me, there is an aspect of how the heck did I get to be where I was? I was independent, strong-willed and opinionated... (693-695, Clara)*

Clara repeats these ideas several times, ensuring that I know her strength, and she seemed to really want me to understand that it was not naivety which led her here. This determination that others know who she is, alongside the questions she asks herself,

seems to be part of how she weaves together the narrative and makes sense of the abuse, which will be explored further in a subtheme below.

Eve doesn't speak of herself before marriage, but of being so degraded and bullied throughout her marriage, and gaslit into believing it was her fault, that her sense of self was affected:

> *But that's how I felt about it because I felt like...can't be myself, I can't, you know, I'm not being treated like a normal human being. (227-228, Eve)*

> *It's impacted on my mental health. Yeah. It's very hard, very hard to feel... it was very hard to feel good about myself because I felt for 15 years I was just undermined the whole time. So you just think that you're a nothing that you're not capable of anything...(838-843, Eve)*

To this day, Eve bounces between painful and empowering reflections of what happened and who she is subsequently.

Both Diana and Bracha, when speaking about a changed sense of who they were, related this to their religious beliefs and practice. Therefore, I will explore this in greater detail in that master theme.

3.3.3 Unfolding emotions over time

Reflecting on their journeys as survivors of abuse, each of the women spoke about the varied emotions that they experienced at different stages. The intensity of the emotions was often accompanied by a change in circumstance – either they were fuelled by a change, or they were motivation for the participant to seek change.

Eve's unfolding emotions over time, from the beginning of marriage until now, is reflected through the scope and range of emotions which she described, and the experience of both positive and negative feelings. At the start of her marriage and for the first few years, Eve described feeling awful, unwanted, unhappy and dehumanised:

> *But it shouldn't be, you shouldn't feel so bad that yeah, that you feel like, almost like you're a nothing that... I'm not, I'm not anything... (206-207, Eve)*

So if someone is telling you, you don't look good. Then you're not gonna feel good. (883, Eve)

At first Eve didn't argue or fight back, which is reflective of how she felt in herself and in her relationship:

I just, dunno, felt too vulnerable to speak up. (300, Eve)

Later in the marriage this feeling of vulnerability and unhappiness unfolded into anger, and Eve described this in strong language, particularly when she saw how he was neglecting his family by putting religion first:

And how many times I'd get so angry when I saw all his seforim [holy books] out on the table, so I'd throw them on the floor cos I just got so mad that he would put his like... I think seeing all those books on the table just made me so angry, like, how dare you put your books before your wife? Yeh there were times where I just swished them all on the floor because I got so angry. (330-342, Eve)

It is interesting here to note that my interpretation of the data is guided also by my own religious (insider) knowledge. Seforim [holy books] are culturally and religiously considered to be of great importance and treated with utmost respect – certainly it would be considered unacceptable to throw them onto the floor. I therefore have a greater depth of understanding into the significance of Eve's actions and can better interpret the anger she would have felt in that moment.

In more recent years, and after her separation, Eve describes feeling conflicting emotions as she reflects on her experiences. At certain times, Eve has felt empowered and liberated, and at other times she experiences sadness and isolation, looking back on what she has lost:

Sometimes it's really painful, I think like, 'Oh my gosh! Like why did I have to go through that for 15 years?' And it's like really sad that at this point in my life I'm on my own... it feels really painful. And sometimes like reflecting is, in a way it's liberating. 'Oh I got away from that. And now I'm a bigger, better person as a result.'

So yeah, sometimes I feel really good about the situation and sometimes I feel really rubbish about it. (900-909, Eve)

These conflicting reflections said one after the other are perhaps an insight into her confusion and struggle with emotions as they have unfolded over time. In both reflections Eve talks to herself, as if trying to convince herself of her emotions, or understand them.

Adina, too, went through a range of emotions throughout her marriage and afterwards. There was an early sense of naivety, which then made way for defiance, which in turn was quickly squashed by her need to comply in order for her children to be accepted into a certain school – this came with enormous frustration and anger:

It's like you can never get it right. And even if you do what they tell you to do... if I did all these things and I'd be able to get my kids into my original [school]... and I did literally everything they said, things that I was really not happy with... and had to go according to all those rules for a certain number of months. They said, "Well, it's still not good enough"... But even though I had done everything they said they still wouldn't accept my kids. So it's just, it's just kind of you can't, you can't win, because once they've got it in for you, that's it.. (295-316, Adina)

I was livid. I was absolutely livid because it wasn't things I was, I was going to do. I wasn't okay with doing any of those things... (327-329, Adina)

Adina is livid not only because her children were not accepted, but because she needed to change so much of who she was, which was then undermined, evoking a sense of unfairness of what she had to endure 'for nothing'. Within the marriage too, there was fear and humiliation as she was forced to endure public shouting and name-calling, and she was constantly scared of him:

But I think for me, in those kind of scenarios with other people around it was more huge humiliation and shame. Huge. That was more to me that, that was the overriding emotion was humiliation. Like this is my husband, and this is how he's behaving. But the fear was, yeah, definitely all the time. Scared to do anything

wrong. Like literally one foot wrong and he would just lose his shit all the time. (507-514, Adina)

Alongside all the emotions which Adina experienced through her marriage, was an enduring sense of loneliness. This feeling spanned the entire time of her marriage and is a lingering feeling present to this day, still having no contact with family. During our conversation, I was struck by how prevalent this feeling was within Adina, both through spoken word and my felt-sense of her:

And not having anywhere, yeah, not having anyone to turn to, really, because nobody really understands ... (442-443, Adina)

And just my outrage is more, not even what he was saying, but the fact that no one said a word, and that was probably the first time I just thought I'm completely on my own, because I'm literally with my own family, and if my own family, my own parents and siblings and brothers in law and sisters in law, and all everybody is keeping quiet, then no one's going to stand up for me ever. Literally nobody. (468-475, Adina)

Diana's insights into her years of abuse have somewhat faded with decades of hindsight. Loneliness, however, is present too, as she considered being one of the only women in her generation and community to experience divorce, especially in such a public and vicious way. When Diana reflected on that period, she repeated the words "dreadful" and "horrible" several times, and her overwhelming sense is one of great difficulty.

But it was. It was a difficult time, and when I got my Get [religious divorce], I, we were in the Beis Din [religious court]. A friend came with me, and after the – which I think is the most horrendous of horrendous – umm, would you call this processes? Of how you get the Get? - I burst into tears. And my ex said to me, you know we can always remarry. [Reacts to my expression] - exactly, so you know, it's just.. He was a very... he still is a very strange man. (327-332, Diana)

Here too, we see the utter relief for Diana upon finally receiving the *Get* and being released from his control. There is also an anger towards him, for assuming that her

tears meant sadness at no longer being married, rather than a relief that the process was over. Diana at this point had reacted to my expression – unable to stop myself, I had pulled a [frustrated] face at his presumption. She says, “Exactly”, agreeing with what my expression suggested, and there is an implicit understanding shared between us, a validation of her feelings.

In keeping with the other participants, Clara also experienced a range of emotions, both positive and negative. Immediately upon discovering his lies and manipulation, she felt devastated, and then sickened, repeating these words several times:

> *... difficult to stomach... (334, 718, Clara)*

As more was uncovered, she began to feel humiliated that her name and reputation had been dragged along.

> *I was mortified. There is nothing about the depths of things that are so against everything, from a moral, religious, Jewish perspective that it’s beyond normality. I just I can’t like, when I talk about like when I think about like what it’s, it’s, it’s not fathomable. And I know that sounds like naive to say it’s surreal. (1286-1291, Clara)*

There is a sense here that she is still trying to come to terms with it, and disbelief was certainly present in the way that she shared her story with me. Like Eve, Clara appears to be trying to convince herself that it actually happened. There is also, however, some empowerment in the way that she shows gratitude for her health, her children and her faith, and that she has come to a place of acceptance:

> *But, as I say, sometimes or other times I can think it was meant to be. (722-723, Clara)*

> *Umm, once my trust and you know I still don’t know the truth, but I don’t, I have to let go and say I’m never gonna know the truth. Nothing I can do about it. I know enough to be able to deal with things. And that’s what it is... I’m a positive... I put my health in perspective, and you know, having healthy kids, and you know, dealing with things and moving forward. Umm, I can’t change the past. I can’t. (1321-1332, Clara)*

This place of acceptance is something which currently eludes Bracha, who struggles with the conflicting emotions of remembering how he treated her, and missing him:

> *Well, something hard for a lot of people to believe, but I really miss him... Because...this, I miss him terribly...(572-574, Bracha)*

> *I have to keep reminding myself that if I was with him I'll be living in this [laughs incredulously] awful condition, treated like a piece of dirt, treated like a cook and a housekeeper and a sex object. (597-599, Bracha)*

During her marriage to her (ex)husband, she lived in constant fear that he would leave, even though she knew that she wasn't being treated well:

> *I was absolutely terrified. It was Friday night, I think, and I just sat there like, '...married to you.' I was absolutely petrified. I was terrified. (382-383, Bracha)*

At other times, Bracha gives examples of the abuse by mimicking things that her (ex)husband said, and rolling her eyes to show her incredulity. There is an underlying anger which feels present, although I am aware that my interpretation here may be swayed by my own frustration hearing the stories of what he put her through.

> *'I would like you to check yourself' [puts on angry tone mimicking him], like woah, [rolls her eyes], you know literally like... you know... (340-342, Bracha)*

Each of the participants describe several emotions which were present at varying times of the abuse. These emotions unfolded over time as the women processed their experiences, either while it happened or as a reflection. Further, some of the women are left with lingering or enduring remnants of how they felt then, while others have come to a place of true acceptance.

3.3.4 Weaving a story in making sense of the abuse

The participants' journeys in making sense of the abuse, in trying to understand it and to create an explanatory narrative or story, is reflected in this subtheme. Similarly to other subthemes, some of the participants experienced a gradual recognition of the abusive behaviour alongside a desire to make sense of his actions, while others reflect, hoping to understand it in hindsight.

For Clara, there was a late realisation that his actions were abusive as she uncovered his web of lies; and subsequently a gradual realisation of what coercive control is and how she was affected:

> *So it's funny actually, if you'd have asked me this 3 years ago – I think I said this to you the other day – I wouldn't have really understood the term coercive control. And because I think part of being coercively controlled is the cleverness of the person on the other side sometimes cannot make you realise it, or to make you think that's your decision, or to do it in such a way that it feels less controlling. And it's only with hindsight when you're on the other side of it that you can see those things... (269-277, Clara)*

> *...that it's only when someone takes away the sort of you know, like, takes the sunglasses away that you see how bright the sunshine is.. (566-567, Clara)*

Clara's metaphor conveys how strongly she felt the pain when the 'sunglasses came off' and her eyes were opened. Clara had believed she was in a loving relationship and equally compromising relationship, not realising her that he was manipulating her into doing what he wanted every time. She finds it difficult now to wrap her head around what happened and to make sense of why he did it, finding explanation in his poor character:

> *Do you know what I mean, he's very highly functioning narcissist, and he's a very highly functioning coercive co.... And that's why people don't even notice I didn't notice it. (1247-1249, Clara)*

> *Umm, I don't think I'll ever make sense of them. I really don't, because to me a normal, healthy like... a normal human being would do that. But somebody that does the things that he's done, you would never do those things for that reason. Somebody that's done the level of abhorrent... (1253-1266, Clara)*

Like Clara, Bracha considers that her (ex)husband is of poor character, someone who was deliberately nasty and manipulative because he is a 'bad' person.

> *There's absolutely <u>nothing</u> to do with devotion to the religion, very much to do with wanting to control things in the way that suits, manipulate and control things the way that suits him. (620-623, Bracha)*

Bracha raises her voice here, stressing the underlined words – she is emphatic that he was not pushing religion on her because he truly believed what he was doing was religiously correct. Here she offers an alternative explanation:

> *I think there's two things, I think he's a bully. I think he's very cold. I think he's also very much black or white, black and white. Umm. You know he could be, you know what they call, you know, very high functioning on the spectrum. Maybe. Possibly. Definitely I do see that there's something with his wiring. I don't know if it's something from his childhood, or just the way he is. I do think there is something there, umm. You know. (607-613, Bracha)*

Like Bracha, Eve describes her (ex)husband's abusive behaviour as linked to autism:

> *He's just... I tell myself that he's just, he's just not a well person, and he's, he's not in control of his actions. Umm, yeah. I have, I've got a kid who's got a diagnosis of autism and he behaves the same way. So it's not his fault. (492-496, Eve)*

During the analytic process, in the initial temptation to stay close to the words and first layer of meaning, I felt some discomfort as I could not connect with the idea of using his potential neurodiversity as an excuse for abusive behaviour. However, in widening my lens, I was able to consider Eve and Bracha's processes of blaming neurodiversity as their experiences of sense-making around the abuse. For Eve and Bracha, in giving such explanations and descriptions, this was their attempt to make sense of the narrative and story, to find their own meaning in it. Actually, this was a significant component of their experiences and one which I would have been remiss to ignore.

Eve also shared the uncomfortable realisation that her (ex)husband did not realise himself what he was doing, which she met with frustration at his excuses and his trivialisation:

I think he's got such an extreme mind. I don't think he realises religiously how extreme he is. He just thinks it's normal and his head is normal... (828-830, Eve)

Yeah and he would just make a joke out of it.. And like, so he would make a whole joke about it. He was just like it was funny. But it's not funny... (668-678, Eve)

Diana's thoughts around her (ex)husband's actions offer another glimpse into making sense of who he was, as she explains that he wasn't willing to grant the divorce because he couldn't deal with the rejection:

Well, I know this is probably gonna sound weird, but I think he loved me in his own way. He certainly loved being part of my family... And my parents were very special people and he couldn't deal with that. And also the rejection. He could not deal with being rejected. He just could not. And I think to this day he's like that, you know. He, he needs to for everybody to kiss his toes, and you know that he's such a special person. (414-425, Diana)

Just like the other participants, Diana's reasons are linked to his character traits and flaws, rather than blaming the religion itself. Adina however was different, as she sought to make sense of the abuse occurring not only through his actions, but through the community's misinterpretation of religion and expectations placed on its members:

And if you, if you're fortunate enough to have a man who is decent and kind, and caring and compassionate and empathetic, then yeh, there'll be good. But if you're, if you're not, then they will use the opportunity to become an abuser, because they can, because they get away with it because it it's like, it's okay, it's acceptable. (659-665, Adina)

Definitely because a lot of things are, there are not nothing to do with the religion. They're just making things up that are just not true. No, it doesn't say anywhere that a woman can't drive, or that she has to have her skirt length has to be a... that's just nonsense. You're just trying to control people. (1239-1244, Adina)

While analysing this particular sub-theme, I experienced a slight wobble in my interpretation as I wondered whether my participants were only reflecting and sense-

making because I had asked them to, because one of my interview questions was, "*How do you make sense of what he did?"* I debated whether I had attributed a meaning to their words which was perhaps not reflective of their experiences. Here, I returned to the data and narrowed my lens again, noting several moments where participants used language such as:

I just tell myself... (492, 503, Eve)

It was quite interesting, really. (147, Diana)

Yeah, it was interesting, because... (455, 465, 503, Bracha)

I always say... (151, 655, 988, Adina)

And I always remember... (395, Clara)

These words offer validity to my interpretation as they affirm the reflective and sense-making processes which took place before the interviews. There is a feeling that the participants are still puzzled by their experiences, still making sense of it, regardless of my question.

3.4 Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman

This master theme endeavours to capture the experience of intersectionality between being Orthodox Jewish and being a woman. All of the participants raised issues and concerns in relation to this, each with nuances. The subthemes here are: *Frustration at being treated differently to men; Men use religion as a tool to abuse;* and *"Women like you".*

3.4.1 Frustration at being treated differently to men

Perhaps the most pertinent examples of this master theme and subtheme are related to Adina, whose abuse occurred in the more Ultra-Orthodox world with its heavily prescribed gender roles. Adina's role as a woman, wife and mother meant that she was expected to follow the decisions of the men around her, rendering her voiceless. Adina described feeling robbed of 'normal' experiences, as decisions about who to marry, how to dress, what to study and where to send her children to school were all decided by

others with the expectation that she would adhere to certain rules and behave in a certain way because she is a woman. This left her with a strong sense of unfairness and injustice.

> *... that's how everyone, even the women, agree with it. They'll also say, well, you know he's your husband. You've got to listen to your husband... (408-410, Adina)*

> *But yeah again, we're here. We're back here again. Once again we're being told what to do by another man. (566-567, Adina)*

Her repetition of 'we're here again/once again' shows her frustration, and she appears fed up.

> *'This is the way we go' and the mindset is that the man makes the decisions at home, and you just have to go along with it, and whether or not you agree with it, it's irrelevant. And you would be told that straight out, and there's no one you could complain to, because they would have exactly the same mindset. Well he's the man, he makes the decisions, go ahead with it, like... And it's just it's not good enough. (380-387, Adina)*

Adina's frustration at being treated differently as a woman was one of the core reasons she eventually left her husband and the community, finding a place elsewhere.

Bracha similarly holds feelings of unfairness and injustice as she explores what it means to be a woman in the Ultra-Orthodox world, which she describes as old-fashioned:

> *... Just a general attitude towards women. How there seems to be a leniency within the Orthodox world. The men can do something dreadful like raping your wife, etc, etc. But you know. But a woman, you know, in the Ultra-Orthodox community wears a sheitel [wig] that's a bit longer or G-d forbid wears a bandfall [other type of wig], and you know it's like I just felt that level of control towards women, and it was just totally unacceptable... it all comes down to the same thing of the treatment of women within the frum [religious], the frum community, which is umm.. It's just old fashioned in the 1950s. That's all. (113-132, Bracha)*

Much of Bracha's frustration is directed towards the Bet Din [religious courts – also known as Beis Din] which must be attended for the religious divorce to proceed. There is a common feeling among all the participants that the Bet Din is heavily male-dominated and male-focused, with undue leniencies granted towards men and not to women:

> *Yeah, you know, they'll be unduly lenient on things that affect men. But when it comes to women they'll suddenly be more particular and stringent. (181-183, Bracha)*

> *I know a lot of people say that Beis Din is the man's club... You want these Rabbis to turn around and say, like, you know, you just want them to, to sympathise, to say, look... I don't know like, just agree with me, you know. To say, 'there's something very wrong with your ex-husband, but you know there's nothing we can do' or whatever, but don't completely disregard it and say, 'Oh, he can do what he likes. He's not your babysitter. He's not, you know. He's a single man he can.... if he wants to go out the country he can'. Like, yeah. (906-1028, Eve)*

Eve's quote above exposes her frustrations with her ordeal in the religious courts, who downplayed his role as abuser, his role as a father and entirely disregarded her feelings. She felt that as a woman, they were far less likely to listen and believe her, and she was upset by the dishonesty of this. Eve was greatly supported in her divorce application by her local community Rabbi, who offered great comfort. However she recognised that it was unfair that he was listened to over her in the courts, when it was her story to share.

Diana's experience of abuse was directly linked to the Bet Din as her (ex)husband refused to grant the divorce for several years. She remains strongly incensed by the injustice of how women are treated and that this is an ongoing problem:

> *I was very angry... I mean, I have very strong views today. All those years later. I think this whole business with the* Get *needs to be changed drastically. It's just not on. That there are women who cannot remarry, they lose, I mean, I know somebody who didn't get a* Get *for years – lost her entire youth, you know. Couldn't marry,*

couldn't have children, more children. It's not on. It's just not on, you know. Something's wrong, it's archaic. It's wrong. (110-122, Diana)

Clara also feels angered by this, although she was lucky to be supported by a Rabbi who managed to have her *Get* processed quickly. Still, she says, women are treated differently in the Bet Din:

I know, for a fact when the husband says in the closed meetings, I don't want to. Then they'll go back to the wife... Well, he's not ready. Give him time. Da da da da. But the Rav [Rabbi] that had been in to see them before, had explained the things that were going on and why this get needed to go away ahead straightaway. So Baruch Hashem [Thank God] I was very lucky. (1370-1375, Clara)

Overall, there seems to be a feeling amongst participants that women are treated systemically differently in the religious courts. Frustration and anger are overwhelmingly present as the women reflect on the unfairness of this.

3.4.2 Men use religion as a tool to abuse

This subtheme wishes to explore the subtleties of religious coercive control when in the hands of religious men, paying attention to gender roles as a significant part of how this can occur. Diana's words are reflective of the general feeling among the participants:

Well I definitely think we have a religion where the men rule... (161, Diana)

Diana goes on to explain that although Judaism is not meant to be interpreted this way, it creates an environment in which it can be:

Why put all these impediments in place? It's, it's not right... and the woman has absolutely no say in the matter. So, depending on where you're living, you know you, you've got civil divorces. And whatever have you. But this is men, abusing control. I mean, there's nothing more to be said... [Gender imbalance in religion has] fostered it. I'm not saying it created it, because, as I said, I think it was meant to be different, but certainly it has allowed it. Yeah, it has allowed it. (464-491, Diana)

Clara and Bracha share similar thoughts, about men being more powerful within the community which creates an environment for the power imbalance to lead to unwanted control.

> *The ability for men... the person with more... strength in the Jewish community to marginalise or to limit is way too much...The man goes to shul [synagogue], the man carries on, the man does everything, and holds his head up high and can coercively control the woman to pretty much accept and do whatever. (856-864, Clara)*

> *Do you know what I mean, that it all comes onto that coercive control, that abuse that is his, his perspective of what women are... also that they get away with that behaviour. Yeah, because women are controlled but the men aren't so, it's all that, you know that behaviour is allowed. (1083-1091, Bracha)*

Bracha gives a more specific example; here she describes a situation in which, because of typical gender roles, she is expected to do the shopping and cooking for Sabbath meals. When she couldn't get the specific dips that he wanted for his Sabbath meal on a Friday, he expected her to give up work on a Thursday just so that she could do her Sabbath shopping then instead:

> *...he would insist on what food I bought to work on Thursday, because then I did the Shabbos shopping on Friday, and I couldn't get all the dips that he wanted. So I didn't work on Thursday, so I could shop on Thursday. (525-528, Bracha)*

This is an example of religious coercion, specific to Orthodox Judaism, which has worked because of gender roles. For Bracha, not working on a Thursday impacted her income and thus her autonomy – all for the sake of specific dips which he wanted for a Sabbath meal.

Adina also gave several examples of times in which control was exerted over women through misinterpreting or making up entirely new rules in the name of religion:

> *...also didn't let me drive because they said, women, you know, if we get into cars, who knows what we're going to get up to? And it's just so... it's laughable. Because*

what we doing? Do you know what I mean? We do the same as the guys are doing. We're just doing our errands. I mean, looking after our kids. Would you want me to do it? You know, 25 with 3 kids. Where am I going? Well, and even if I do go anywhere, why do I have to justify it to anybody? I don't need to. But it's yeah, again, another way of controlling people within that religion that you don't have, that you can't go far because you haven't got any option any way of travel, of getting out of the community. (337-348, Adina)

Eve's (ex)husband used gender norms and expectations to 'sell' himself as the more learned and wiser of the pair, with better knowledge of Torah. He used this to mock and degrade her religious practice:

I guess when a person behaves like that, then you start guessing yourself, 'Am I doing it? Am I right? Am I doing it right? Am I? Am I living a proper Jewish life?' Umm. You start.. You do start questioning yourself. 'Maybe he's right, you know. Maybe you know, if you don't behave like this, if I don't behave like a good Jew, then I'm going to burn in hell.' You know. You start thinking, you know, they, the way they behave is they, they make you look like you're wrong, and they're right. And then you start thinking that there's something wrong with you when in fact, it's really them that's where the problem is. (414-427, Eve)

3.4.3 "Women like you"

This subtheme, as a follow-on from the previous two, aims to give voice to the women's experiences of humiliation and degradation, in relation to the religious coercion. The title of the subtheme is a quote from Adina, who used it to explain how she was mocked by community leaders because of her unwillingness to meet their expectations:

They said, "Well, it's still not good enough, because we don't want, quote, 'Women or mothers like you in our school,'" which I still don't understand what they meant by it. But even though I had done everything they said they still wouldn't accept my kids. (310-315, Adina)

It could be interpreted that Adina's quote implies an ongoing internal struggle to accept the way that she was treated and suggests that she is still very pained by it.

The other four participants each inhabited worlds which are more modern, and as such any presence of degradation of women is experienced at a more personal level. There are still, however, expected gender roles – although less prescriptive – they are considered the 'norm'. Bracha's (ex)husband thus expected her to adopt all domestic duties, and she felt that this degraded her in his eyes.

> *If I was with him I'll be living in this awful condition, treated like a piece of dirt, treated like a cook and a housekeeper and a sex object. (597-599, Bracha)*

> *He just sort of sees women as literally he, he literally sees women as a car. He doesn't see them any differently. (1069-1070, Bracha)*

Eve's (ex)husband used religious laws around her menstruation each month to make her feel impure, dirty and unwanted. During this time, intentional touching or intimacy is forbidden – and this time often fosters increased desire - however it is the way that he reacted to accidental touching which caused a significant impact on her mental health.

> *You know the time when you have your period, so a woman is in Niddah [ritual time of period] and it was like, if he by accident touched me then he would like... he needs to wash it off, because it's a terrible thing that you know [we] by mistake touched... And that made me feel like... it made me impure... but it shouldn't be, you shouldn't feel so bad that yeah, that you feel like, almost like you're a nothing that... I was, I felt so depressed about it like for two weeks you... you know its horrible, really horrible. And religion is supposed to be beautiful... you're not supposed to dread it. You're not supposed to hate it. But that's how I felt about it because I felt like... can't be myself... I'm not treated like a normal human being. (143-227, Eve)*

Diana feels a particularly strong sense of injustice for religious Jewish women and other religious women who are treated terribly:

> *It's not only in the Jewish thing, but there are men out there who, who think they're in control. You know, it's not an equal relationship. It's not only in the Jewish religion, it's the world over. Unfortunately. You know. So yeah, I you know, when I hear that I think of many examples where women are trodden on. And it's horrendous. (175-180, Diana)*

Diana's feelings on the matter are less personal, as she is somewhat removed given the decades that have passed since her experiences. However, it could be that her experiences have made her more aligned with and sensitive to women suffering elsewhere. The participants presented above demonstrate the ways that they were degraded and humiliated because of their supposed 'lesser status' as a woman, these feelings derived from their abusive (ex)husbands.

3.5 Changed relationships

This master theme explores the ways that the participants experienced a change in their relationships both with others around them, and with their personal connection to religion. The two subthemes are: *Met and unmet expectations in relationships with others,* and *Complexity of religious connection.*

3.5.1 Met and unmet expectations in relationships with others

This subtheme captures the exploration of being both supported and let down by those surrounding the women. Originally, I had separated this subtheme into two relating to family and community. However, during the analytic process I decided that this was too descriptive rather than interpretative in their nature. It is not about recognising *who* the changed relationships are with, but rather it is about their internal experiences related to the changed relationships. As such, this remains one subtheme.

As discussed in subtheme 3.4.1, participants expressed an overwhelming frustration with the support given by the religious courts, possibly best summed up by Eve, who explained her upset that the courts 'sided' with her (ex)husband and afforded him leniencies as a single father.

> *I don't know what it is, but to side with someone who's abusive and let them get away with stuff and say, 'oh it's okay, He's a single father. He can kind of do what he likes'... (949-950, Eve)*

> *I just feel like they're siding with him and I don't think they really fully understand the extent of the abuse. (976, Eve)*

Eve expressed her desire for the community and Rabbis to be more cognisant of the abuse occurring, for the abusers to be recognised and villified, and her frustration at feeling so unheard. She was, however, supported by family and friends who recognised and called out the abuse.

> *... no, they told me this is not, it's not normal to behave like that, ummm... yeh just sympathising and supporting me as best as they could. (375-376, Eve)*

Clara was very lucky to have the support of her community Rabbi in helping to process her *Get* quickly and aiding her to get out of the entanglement of the abuse. Still, she recognised that there is a systemic problem in the community which needs to be addressed.

> *I'm being perfectly honest – the last thing I think you're gonna get Rabbonim [Rabbis] doing is telling everybody about the ways in which people are coercively controlled so perhaps damage more marriages. (1001-1004, Clara)*

Clara also spoke of feeling lonely in the community as she felt divorced women are often overlooked – she was quick to add that this wasn't an intentional ostracisation but rather a forgetfulness.

> *I don't think it's necessarily purposeful isolation. If that makes sense. I don't think they're trying to ostracise. I think there's a lack of empathy and thoughtful... (941-943, Clara)*

Adina's feeling of loneliness, as mentioned in other themes, is one that is core to her experience. She felt that no one was on her side and was going to help – not family, friends, nor community – and this continued even after she left altogether. The community's involvement in the abuse throughout her relationship was an enabling factor in a way which isn't present for other participants, and the totality of it being everyone she knew gives a sense of how overwhelming it seemed to be for her.

> *But then, like, when he got Rabbis involved, and they got involved, and they got their wives involved in and got in touch with me, and they got in touch with my parents, and it starts to become like a whole community issue... (248-251, Adina)*

Adina felt especially hurt by her family not standing up for her or speaking out when they witnessed the abuse. Many hurtful things were said between them, and contribute to Adina's loneliness and pain which lingers today.

> *And even when I do, I just remind myself, like you know, when I think or maybe I should, you know, go back and try and have a conversation, and I'm like no like the last conversation I had with my mum she called me a whore, like, how do you, how do you come to terms with that? And I asked her to say, to say sorry, to apologise. And she said, 'No, I still believe you are, because you're not living the same life,' and I'm like, 'Oh, bye then,' like the hurt! (886-894, Adina)*

Contrastingly, although largely supported by family and friends, Bracha still felt an innate sense of shame, particularly after she was encouraged by her brother not to speak out about her experiences lest it damage future marriage prospects. This is a more understandable in context of the Charedi, rather than Modern Orthodox, Jewish community.

> *But they, even though they knew that he had done that [raped her], the response was... 'well don't tell anyone about that because then it'll be very hard for you to get married again... (laughs incredulously). You know no one's gonna want to marry you if you tell them that.' And it was also like, 'Okay, so you know, we'll move on,' like... move on?! What are you going to do about this, like what can we do as a community to protect women from this sort of behaviour? So my anger was more towards certain people. Do you know what I mean? (79-89, Bracha)*

This left Bracha with a broken trust in others, disappointed in how she is treated as an abuse survivor as even her brother appears to be ashamed of her situation. It also seems to have left her with a sense of defiance, a desire to speak out and help others, and she offered to come with me to present this research to the Chief Rabbi and the Bet Din.

Finally, Diana had supportive family and friends, but not wider community.

> *No, I really at that point me personally, I had nothing to do with the Rabbis. No, it was all him. So no, I didn't, I didn't talk to anyone. I didn't have any support from*

any of them, you know, nobody called me and said, Look, you know what's going on. You're going through a hard time. And the whole community, I say community, I was in a different community then. Everybody knew what was flying, you know. No, not one phone call, nothing. And, thank God, I had amazing friends, really really amazing friends. (378-385, Diana)

It is worth noting here that Diana's abuse occurred in the 1970s, at which time cultural norms and expectations around divorce were different in both the Jewish and secular communities. Nevertheless, her words also imply a feeling of loneliness.

The participants' experiences within family and community speak to both feelings of support and loneliness. Generally, there was a sense that the overall community and certainly community leaders could be doing more, and this is important to consider in the dissemination of this research.

3.5.2 Complexity of religious connection

This final subtheme is named as such to acknowledge the complexity that participants have faced in their relationships with religion, both during and after their experiences of religious coercive control. The experiences of the women each hold such nuance in their position that is reflective of the deeply, uniquely personal nature of religious connection.

Eve's experiences have led her to a sense of loss and sadness, alongside some lingering yearning for how things used to be. Several times during the interview, Eve noted that the religion which her (ex)husband forced on herself and her children was not the religion that she remembered from a happy childhood. For example, her (ex)husband would make Sabbath meals unnecessarily unpleasant by singing a long and drawn-out blessing over the wine, knowing that she and her children were hungry and tired and just wanted to sit down to eat.

That's not how Shabbat [Sabbath] is supposed to be. (87, Eve)

... I just felt so rubbish about it when it's not supposed to be like that. (156, Eve)

In this data I interpreted Eve's sadness as she laments the religion she once enjoyed and the loss of what it used to be for her. There is also confusion and complexity in Eve's desire to stay connected, particularly for the sake of her children, and yet her difficulty in doing so.

> *I just don't want to keep Shabbat this week, I'm not interested in it... but I've got kids and young kids... it's such a pressure to give them that beauty of religion when you've not had that. And they've also, they've been subjected to it as well. (512-517, Eve)*

> *I'm probably taking like, less and baby steps to try and, you know, build myself up again. But it's hard. It's very hard. (65-67, Eve)*

This theme represents the innate difficulty she seems to experience, the internal conflict – a distaste for what religion became and represented in the marriage, and yet a muted desire to reconnect.

In contrast, Diana holds a very deep love and respect for Judaism, and she practices it today with faith in God and a sentiment that Judaism is beautiful. However, she also feels frustrated with Orthodox interpretations of the Torah which foster a rigidity of thinking and thus a space for abuse to occur.

> *When I got divorced, I redid my life. I decided that you know it wasn't for me. The religion is for me, but the interpretations of the religion were not for me. So I changed. (32-33, Diana)*

> *Religion has a lot to answer for. It isn't ideal ideal ideal. It has wonderful things, which I love, but there are things that are not good. There's not two ways about it, in my opinion. (150-151, Diana)*

Bracha appears similar to Diana in that her strength of faith in God and religion hasn't changed, yet she finds herself more critical of interpretations of religion and the people who interpret it so. This causes her to sometimes struggle with her practice of the faith, just like Eve. She appears eager to explain all of this to me, repeating herself several

times and coming back to the topic in an effort to ensure my understanding – it seemed important to her that I know she still loves Judaism.

> *It definitely umm turns you off. Makes you feel like you don't want to do it, umm... But I remind myself that it's not a rejection. I guess I don't know what the word is, it's not, that's not... that's not what God is like, and that's not what religion our religion is about. That was this person's behaviour or other people who behave like him, their behaviour and that's nothing to do with the religion. And it's very sad that they've done that, because... it's a chillul hashem [desecration of God's name]. That's what they've done. So I just have to remind myself of that which isn't always easy, umm you know. But there's definitely many, many times I thought, you know, why should I do it? Throw it off? Look at this! What's happened to me! (26-38, Bracha)*

Clara's Jewishness, strength of faith in God and dedication to religious practice are all core to her identity and central to her healing. That is, in fact, why her abuser used it to cause maximum pain. When I asked Clara questions which isolated religious abuse from other forms of abuse which she experienced, she couldn't.

> *So it's like... I know you can't, like the... it's like it's so intertwined that I can't always pick it all apart as religious and not religious. A lot of it is so like woven together. (1089-1092, Clara)*

Clara appears to feel deeply that her faith has not been impacted by the abuse and she remains dedicated to a religious lifestyle, However, she mourns the impact on cultural practices and experiences as expectations are different for a single mother. She shares how she misses the joy of Shabbats spent together as a family and she struggles to do Shabbat by herself when her children are with their father. This loss of joy is yet another way that religious abuse has impacted her, as she has lost the ability to practice her spirituality in the way she wishes to.

> *I mean.. I don't think it's impacted on my faith in Hashem [God], I think it impacted on how emotionally difficult sometimes things can be. When you, when you're living in a happy, rich, what I would say a valued religious environment, then, to have that*

kicked and broken and shattered in some ways sometimes can make it, so, for example, Rosh Hashana [Jewish New Year] is a very beautiful family time. Rosh Hashana's got that, but it's also got the sadness that comes with it as going to shul [synagogue] and not having [your family with you]... so just to mean that that so it's not, it's not a fake thing, it's more, it becomes more rather than something that's got ruach [energy] and joy and whatever it, it's taken away. If that makes sense. (184-195, Clara)

Where Clara remains steadfastly dedicated to Judaism, Adina presents as the complete opposite, having completely let go of all faith and practice. Adina explains that she finds no safety in Judaism at all, even seeking help in a church rather than synagogue when she needed refuge.

And I did try when I was kind of exiting to try different, different kinds of Judaism, including reform and other places. That just wasn't, it just felt.... to me it was all much the same. It was like different hats, different places, but it was all the same. I didn't want anything to do with any of it. (47-51, Adina)

It is somewhat telling that each participant has such nuanced approach to their relationship with religion, even within Orthodox practice which is so heavily proscribed, and the ways that they have re-storied this connection. For these participants, their religious connection appears to be part of their changing narrative, the ways that their stories are weaved through the experiences of abuse to where they are today. The next section explores this in more depth.

4. Discussion

This section aims to situate the findings of this research within the existing literature, and to engage with the discovered themes in light of what is already known. Many of the studies which were read for the literature review are re-examined, and as new and unexpected ideas emerged, new literature is examined also. This is typical of an IPA study.

Four themes were discovered in the analysis:

1. Trapped and broken
2. Painful and empowering reflections
3. Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman
4. Changed relationships

Overall, the analysis presented the participants' narrative of change: within themselves, in their relationships with others, and within their religious beliefs or practice. The participants share their reflections and the ways that they seek to create new meaning. The findings highlight several important points: that although Orthodox women's experiences of religious coercive control share many similarities with coercive control outside of a faith-based context, there are unique factors – such as community expectations - which change the experiences of the women. The findings also capture the devastating impact of the abuse on the women, and explore the complexities of this, such as the inner conflicts that they face as they battle their changed paths and identities. This is considered within the context of community. The ways that the women make sense of their experiences and attribute blame is another important point, with the findings showing that there is complexity in this too. This paper deviates from what is well-known in the literature about the relationship between coercive control and familial gender roles, as participants did not reflect on this as part of their understanding of the abuse they endured. Lastly, the ways that the women have grasped the role of women in the community, and the impact of this on the abuse they experienced, is considered. These ideas will be explored and discussed further below.

This section will also address the strengths and limitations of the present study, recommendations for future research, and implications for counselling psychologists. Lastly, I return to reflexivity, closing the hermeneutic circle in considering the impact of the research on me, and me on the research.

4.1 Discussion of findings

4.1.1 The unique nature of religious coercive control

The present study provides crucial insight into the ways in which participants experienced religious coercion in their marriages, and the impact that this had on them. In the first theme, participants described the intensity of the abuse and the way that it permeated their daily lives, with spiritual deeds – or the transgression of them – forced 'down their throat', leaving them with the feeling of being trapped or suffocated. Stark's (2023) literature is compelling here as he compares victims of coercive control to hostages or prisoners of war – so too he claims that the abusive home feels inescapable and that the victims enter an alternate reality in which they have no means of escape. The abusive acts, intense in both their pervasiveness and their chronicity, gave a sense of being controlled and microregulated, with participants describing the feeling of being choiceless. Hamberger et al. (2017) suggest that coercive control is an imbalance of power, with one being subservient to the other. This is evident, as each participant was forced into, or out of, unwanted or extreme religious acts, subjected to the power of the abuser. Many of the examples given by the participants above were similar to those described across the literature, showing consistency in the manifestation of religious abuse and the extreme nature of it.

According to Hamberger et al. (2017), for coercive control to be effective there must be a threat made, and it must be felt negatively by the victim. Indeed, each of the participants experienced this: the ongoing threat of the marriage ending, the threat of being ostracised by community and family, spiritual threats, or threats involving the children. For some, it was a lingering threat of the loss of love and respect as an underlying theme to their marriage. As such, abusers played into the vulnerabilities of each of the participants, which is a common technique of coercion explained by Dutton and Goodman (2005).

Mulvihill et al. (2022) note that coercive control in faith-based contexts is enhanced or made worse by the complicity of family, friends and community – either knowingly or through subtle expectations and pressures. So too, we see here that social and communal threats are used advantageously by the abusers to control their wives and to keep them in their marriages. For Adina in particular, this form of threat was overt and extreme, as her family, friends and community all supported her (ex)husband in the name of Shalom Bayit, and 'suffocated' her with the added threat of social exclusion for herself and her children. Unsurprisingly perhaps, Adina was the furthest along the 'Ultra' side of the Ultra-Orthodoxy spectrum, and it is clear from her story that community pressures were greater for her than the other participants. Indeed, Cashwell and Swindle (2018) found that victims of religious abuse often experience a sense of rage and betrayal which is directed not only at the perpetrator, but also at the people in the community who might have enabled the abuse. This is certainly true of Adina, who speaks despairingly of her community's complicity. In fact, her community's use of victim blaming and trivialisation of her experiences, alongside the isolation she felt, could be considered as a secondary trauma for her, as suggested by the findings in Ellis et al. (2022)'s study. For the other women, the threat experienced was more subtle, as social and communal expectations place added (yet often unspoken) pressure on them to remain in their marriages or follow certain rules. These threats are uniquely placed within the context of religious coercive control.

Mixed experiences within community are often reported across the literature, which leaders and community members found to be both or either supportive or problematic (Cares & Cusick, 2012; Devoe et al., 2001). This is consistent with the experiences of these participants, who found both support and opposition from their Rabbis. Wider community, however, were unsupportive to some of the participants, and they reported feeling excluded and lonely. This is a unique point within this study; some wider literature (e.g. Mulvihill et al., 2022) examines the complicity of religious community in abusive experiences, and others (Ringel & Bina, 2007) explore the barriers to seeking help within community such as shame and fear of divorce. They do not, however, delve into the emotional impact of community expectations or lack of support on the experience of its victims, nor specifically on Charedi Jewish women.

As mentioned, an added layer within the Charedi community is the stigma attached to abuse, divorce, and the airing of one's 'dirty laundry'. For example, Bracha's brother told her that if she was too public and open about her story, she would never again find someone else to marry. This adds to the sense of shame which Bracha felt and described, similarly to other participants. It is interesting that none of the participants specifically mentioned Shalom Bayit - when the literature shows this to be a core component of abuse within Orthodox communities - but the stories they shared, such as this from Bracha, imply that those underlying concerns remain present.

What also separates religious coercion from other forms of coercive control is its nuance: what constitutes abuse for one person is simply everyday life for another. In the more extreme Charedi communities (such as Adina's), interpretations of Halakha which might be considered extreme by others, are normal and expected for many wormen, whereas for Adina it was forced on her against her wishes, constituting religious abuse. Across the literature we see examples of forced sexual contact on the night of one's immersion in the mikvah – for many this is described as religion-related sexual abuse, or religious abuse, or sexual abuse (Schechory-Bitton, 2014). However, given Orthodox Judaism's emphasis on rule following and conformity (Gabbay et al., 2017), one might speculate that this happens regularly between couples because intimacy on this night is expected on a social, cultural and religious level – and for many couples it would be not be considered abusive even if undesired, just a way of life. This leads to further questions about community expectations, education, conformity, and the impact of these – which might be explored in future research.

4.1.2 Impact of the abuse on the participants

Vass (2025) described the spiritual war of a religious abuser as one with the goal of inflicting damage to their target's soul. Indeed, the impact of religious coercion is shattering for women who hold religion so integral to their identities. The participants in this study describe the impact of the abuse; including Eve's mental health challenges, Bracha's description of feeling the trauma in her chest, and Clara's intense shock at the realisation that her husband's betrayal was done with the very intention of breaking her spirit. Where, for example, religious transgression was disguised as compromise, or

beliefs were belittled and mocked, the twisting of religious acts for these participants into something abusive within the context of a supposedly healthy, loving marriage became difficult to spot and incredibly painful. Clara was exceptionally hurt by her (ex)husband's specific use of religion to harm her, knowing that her love of Judaism would make this more painful. She found it difficult to separate her religious and non-religious identity as they are so deeply intertwined, which means that she also found it difficult to separate religious abuse she experienced from other forms of abuse. Dehan and Levi (2009) and Bent-Goodley and Fowler (2006) explain that spiritual abuse is so harmful because of its damage to a person's essence, as religious identity is so integral to a person's sense of self. Indeed, for women such as Clara, who passionately engages with her religious identity, an attack on the religion was felt as an attack on who she is – causing immense spiritual and personal pain. Clara's and the other participants' experiences are consistent with Ellis et al. (2022)'s suggestion that the intertwining of religious abuse with other forms, and the misuse of religion in a religious household can cause significant spiritual and psychological harm. This is another way in which religious coercive control is so unique.

The second theme found also captures the participants' sense of loss and grief as they look back on their experiences, reflecting on where they are now with a mix of emotions; both pride and pain. There are many agonising reflections, as participants spoke about the hurt and pain of their marriages; yet there are also empowering reflections with a look at what they have overcome. This is described by one participant as a constant battle between painful, self-berating thoughts and liberating, empowering recognition of her achievements. This is an inner conflict, present also for the women who saw themselves as strong and intelligent, and had this image shattered as they look back in disbelief. Alongside these feelings is a sense of shame, and the feeling of being degraded as a person. For some of the participants, this shame is deeply ingrained and stops them from speaking out about the abuse, becoming a survivor/advocate as described by Delker et al. (2020). This battle between the desire to speak out and the desire to hide their experiences reflects an inner, painful conflict.

The diminished sense of self is evident as accompanying religious abuse throughout the literature on this topic (Ellis et al., 2022). A reduced sense of self can also come from the internalising of emotional abuse (Novsak et al., 2012) or the silencing of inner voices which affects one's ability to enact self-care (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a). In this latter study, women recognised this self-negation retrospectively, realising that they had tolerated the intolerable. So too, in this present study, the participants reflect on that time with shame and disbelief, recognising their struggle. Both Starr (2017) and Harris et al. (2013) speak of the potential impact of trauma on one's sense-making, shattering and disrupting assumptions of the world being a good place and with victims suffering a significant inner injury, leading to a loss of trust in oneself and others. This is evident in the battles that the participants face: there is the painful view that the world is harmful, based on previous experiences of being deliberately and maliciously targeted, and there is the struggle to rebuild a meaningful system that allows joy.

It is interesting to note that the studies mentioned here consider the diminished and reduced sense of self as a result of the abuse, however, do not engage with the inner conflict and empowerment which women in the present study have experienced and indeed express. The idea of religiously abused women, whose identities have been so shaken by the abuse endured, grappling with the consequences of becoming an outspoken advocate and recognising their inner strength, is unique to this study.

4.1.3 Sense-making

The growing or sudden realisation that their (ex)husbands were abusive was a turning point in the life stories of the participants, and a painful memory to recall. Participants described how their (ex)husbands had hidden their true nature behind a charming and lovely persona. The exception to this was Adina, whose (ex)husband did not need to hide his flaws as community expectations of marriage meant that he held the power regardless. Literature explains that the stereotypical Orthodox Jewish man is someone caring, kind and considerate (Starr, 2017; Devoe et al., 2001; Goldberg & Yassour-Borochowitz, 2009) - which fits the portrayed image of these men. The participants described their (ex)husbands as community-minded and charming: a facade for the abusive person underneath. For Eve, there was a process of discovering that he was in

fact to blame for their marital problems, not her, only after she sought therapy. Enander (2010) examined the process of women's conceptualisations of their abusive partner from 'Dr Jekyll to Mr Hyde' - from good to bad – a process which emerges from increased cognitive and emotive dissonance to violence. Women in this study also described their partners as considerate, charming and empathetic at first, with the abusive side emerging later. The participants in both Enander (2010)'s and this present study embarked on a journey of discovery and meaning-making, an emotional and difficult process. Participants looked back on this with anger, frustration and sadness.

Enander (2010) explains the process of being in, and then leaving, an abusive situation – it begins with cognition, which then shapes emotion, which then leads to action. So too for the women in this study, there was a recognition of their (ex)husbands' true nature, then an emotional response, and then a desire to leave. All of the participants spoke of the emotions which unfurled over time – a narrative which was weaved and was the catalyst for many of them to seek change. The unhappiness and vulnerability which accompanied the feelings of shame discussed previously, eventually made way for anger and outrage. Loneliness was present also, and humiliation. Some of the participants speak of varying levels of acceptance which they experience presently. Working through these feelings was an important step in making a change, as shown also by Senter and Caldwell (2002). Anger was expressed at oneself, their (ex)husbands, men in general, the overarching system, and religion.

A feminist lens is undoubtedly relevant when examining the stories of the participants, as there is an understanding of the powerful man who abuses his wife (Enander, 2010). The participants in this study referred to this idea and used it to make sense of their experiences, alongside their understanding of the abuse through a psychopathological lens. We are also informed by the sociocultural idea of the shaping of Orthodox men into their stereotypical role as spiritual authority (Goldberg & Yassour-Borochowitz, 2009).

Participants were asked the question, "How do you make sense of the abuse?" Their meaning-making narratives return us to the question asked by Dehan and Levi (2009), about whether abuse is fostered through psychopathologies or through the ecological

feminist power struggle. Both are present in the answers – participants described their husbands as cold, manipulative, selfish, narcissistic and a bully, and also they described the communal context of gender norms in which the abuse occurred. Two of the participants blamed the actions of their (ex)husbands on neurodiversity. This attributed blame formed part of their sense-making and narrative-weaving, contributing to the way that they viewed their experiences. Cashwell and Swindle (2018) suggest that when working therapeutically with clients who have been victims of religious abuse, it is essential to consider where the abused attribute their blame and the meaning of their experiences – whether it is to God, religion or the perpetrator themselves. Therefore the attributed meaning is of utmost importance here to the story telling and recovery processes for the participants in this study. Attributions to psychopathology or neurodiversity are not unusual and Senter and Caldwell (2002) also found that their participants concluded that their exes were ‘emotionally ill'. These conclusion form part of the healing process and the rediscovery of themselves with a new perspective.

It is also interesting to consider, given the ways that the participants described their husbands’ characters, and also given their sense-making of the abuse, how religion might play a role. Davis and Renzetti (2021) contend that where religion is performed for extrinsic reasons, such as desire for approval or to avoid communal shame, this is more highly correlated with IPV than when religion is performed with intrinsic motivations, such as personal values and faith. Also, there is the pressure for families to conform to the ideals of Shalom Bayit and the ‘perfect’ family life, as described by Devoe et al. (2001) and Vass (2025). Several of the participants were adamant that their (ex)husbands were not controlling for the sake of best religious practice, and some were confusing in which laws they chose to follow, or not. There is a question therefore about how the ideas fit together – a man who is not intrinsically religious and has extrinsic motivations to conform to community ideals, combined with the psychopathologies mentioned above, create a perfect breeding ground for religious abuse to occur.

4.1.4 Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman

The third theme captured in the findings shows a similar sentiment from each of the participants: that women are generally treated differently (and badly) compared to men, and that there are particular leniencies granted to men which are not to women. This is perhaps most obvious in the Bet Din experiences, where women were left feeling unsupported and disregarded. This experience is both echoed in other studies (Cares & Cusick, 2012), and is repeated unofficially within communities; an international website and survey has been established over the last few years called 'www.ratemybeidin.com' (Chochmat Nashim, n.d.) with the mission of increasing transparency, reducing suffering, increasing professionalism and empathy in Batei Din, and flagging where improvements should be made. As such, the experiences of the participants in this study were not wholly surprising given what is already colloquially and empirically known, yet they highlight a key issue within the community which must be addressed.

Further, Boyle (2022) suggests that social inequalities are the link between social context and distress. Indeed, researchers of the Power and Control Wheel have suggested that the intersection with religion/spirituality can multiply the barriers to leaving abusive relationships, as community expectations may isolate the victim further (Chavis & Hill, 2008). Participants expressed feelings of anger and disappointment towards the Batei Din and also towards the Orthodox world more generally which has fostered gender norms, creating space for religious coercion to occur. Some women blamed the Rabbis involved, further echoing Ringel and Bina (2007)'s finding of Rabbis to be ineffective and sometimes making things worse - finding that Rabbis either supported male perpetrators through expressing a patriarchal perspective or feeling helpless to confront them. All five participants spoke of the general mindset in the community and courts of the man being 'in charge' with immense frustration at women being silenced – this was acknowledged as being part of why the abuse occurred.

As such, the gender roles were seen to be a contributing factor to the religious coercion enacted by the (ex)husbands of the participants. Stark (2009) argues that coercive control involves the policing of gender stereotypes and Cwik (1995) explains that role differentiation has clear value assignment, which is why women might be treated poorly.

Also, ‘using male privilege’ is a category in the PCW which suggests that men are able to exert power when they define gender roles and use this to their advantage (Chavis & Hill, 2008). Adina, in particular, was subject to this in the stricter Charedi world, as she was expected to relent on her dreams of tertiary education and to conform to the expectations of housewife and mother. Clara and Bracha were also told to give up work and adopt domestic duties instead. This falls under the ’Using economic abuse’ category of the PCW, as their (ex)husbands created a financial reliance on themselves as another method of control – made possible through community gender expectations. These traditional patriarchal structures are the ecological context which should be examined alongside the psychopathological explanations offered by participants, as shared above.

Some participants also referred to their (ex)husbands’ use of spiritual authority to control them. The Duluth Model/PCW suggests that abusers assert power and control because they believe they have a right and entitlement to (Bohall et al., 2016). Eve, Bracha and Adina spoke of being less learned than their (ex)husbands, which gave the latter the tools as the spiritual authority of the house to control them, mocking when they were questioned. This took a particularly heavy toll on Eve, as she started to second guess herself and to ask herself whether she was a ‘good Jew’. Band-Winterstein and Freund (2013) found this too: that when Charedi men are demanding or controlling, using spiritual force, the woman is unsure if the demands are simply what is expected of her as a Jewish woman, which leads to her feeling ‘not good enough’. This consequence of spiritual abuse is consistent also with research by Cares and Cusick (2012) and Dehan and Levi (2009). Davis (2015) too, showed that abusers quote scriptures to instill shame, guilt and fear – this is certainly true for Eve.

The use of religion as a tool, by men in this context, is consistent with literature on coercive control, which suggests that it operates through sexual inequalities in the home (Myhill & Hohl, 2019). For example, Bracha described being treated as ‘cook, housekeeper and sex object’. However, despite the examples given above, women in this study mostly expressed frustration with sexual inequalities within the community rather than within the family home. The participants did not question their domestic role

differentiation, preferring instead to direct their ire towards the way that women are treated within community organisations and communal role differentiation. Perhaps the familial roles are so ingrained within the Orthodox way of life that they are not so easily questioned. Or, perhaps, the role of the Orthodox Jewish woman as homemaker and child caretaker is such a core part of one's identity that questioning this would have been too painful. Still, it is interesting to note this nuance in sense-making and attribution of blame, combined with what the literature tells us about the manifestation of coercive control.

4.1.5 Changed relationships with religion

All of the participants reported a changed relationship with religion – either religious identity, practice, faith, or relationship with the religious community. Literature on recovery trajectories for survivors of IPV speak often of faith being important to the meaning-making and recovery process (Senter & Caldwell, 2002). Piggott and Anderson (2023) also found that religious change after traumatic experiences is expected, and more likely to occur after a trauma such as rape rather than other traumas like car accidents, because of the existing and sometimes fraught relationship between sex and religion. As such, it would be expected that women who have suffered the twisting of religion to justify control, would experience a religious change.

The different experiences of each participant is also expected, as faith and religion are so personal and hold a unique place in each person's identity. Indeed, this is reflected in Harris et al. (2013)'s literature review which posits that spirituality after religious abuse can be helpful, harmful or neutral, with individual experiences shaped by the varied ways that individuals apply religious principles and meaning. Cares and Cusick (2012) also found opposite reactions from women in their study, with some embracing their faith and others feeling entirely disconnected. As such, each of the participants experienced religious change in unique ways. For some, this was a complete removal of oneself from any Jewish or religious connection. For others, faith and love of Judaism remains a central part of their lives. Eve felt pulled towards connection and the desire to give her children good religious experiences, yet herself wanting to let go of religious practice. For Eve and others, there was a huge sense of loss and grief; yearning for the

beauty of religion which was present in her childhood and yet simultaneously holding anger and distaste for how religion was distorted in her marriage. Overall for the participants, there is complexity - a love of Judaism which is accompanied by an inner battle with certain Halakhot and a frustration with rigid interpretations of Torah, especially those which favour men. This inner conflict is explained by Starr (2017), who posits that survivors of religious abuse may feel angry and disillusions with elements of Jewish law, yet remain passionately connected and hold a desire to stay close to faith.

4.2 Strengths and limitations

This research sought to advance and expand our understanding of religious coercive control in Orthodox Jewish communities, by giving voice to the experiences of women survivors. As discussed several times throughout this study, this is a community which sometimes struggles to speak about abuse, with worries about stigma, Shalom Bayit, and concerns about airing the 'dirty laundry' to secular clinicians. It was essential that my participants knew my own religious identity in order to create a sense of trust between us. Being an insider researcher helped me to understand the values, social cues, cultural subtext, context and 'language' - both literally and metaphorically - of my participants (Bernal & Saez-Santiago, 2006; Saidin & Yaacob, 2016).

Chavez (2008) notes that insider researchers create expediency of rapport building and a nuanced perspective for observation and interpretation. As discussed in the Methodology section, I disclosed my position to participants during the screening call, with the intention of fostering this feeling of safety and being honest about our cultural match. Being a culturally informed interviewer noticeably put them at ease and established a rapport, with one participant even expressing her gratitude at the end of the interview. Participants spoke using Hebrew and Jewish words without feeling the need to explain them to me, and I noted that several participants would say "you know..." at the end of sentences, implying that they understood and appreciated a shared knowledge. Also, participants and I would share knowing looks or supportive non-verbal gestures, such as nodding profusely to show my understanding at specific points. Given what we know about a lack of trust between the Charedi community and

secular clinicians, my insider status was a strength in this study as it allowed participants to be more open and trusting.

On the other hand, being an insider researcher also means that I am invested in the topic and the way that it is read and disseminated. My own position would have undoubtedly influenced the choices that I made through my questions, my data analysis and my findings – sometimes not even consciously (Ross, 2017). I have needed to work hard to bracket any preconceptions I have about the community and to address any feelings of wishing to hide uncomfortable data.

A notable limitation of this research is the small sample size. Smith et al., (2022) suggests that an IPA study include 6-10 participants. There were significant recruitment barriers in this study, as women were hard to reach and then difficult to engage. This may be due to the cultural and social stigmas involved with talking about abuse. Also, the recruitment method was largely restricted to charities, who sent out emails once but could not send out more – this third-party involvement meant that I had less control over who my advertisement was reaching. Lastly, the events of October 7th occurred towards the end of my recruitment phase and just before I had planned to advertise again. This had an impact on the whole community, most of us with family and friends affected, and most of us feeling shaken and distressed. This likely would have affected recruitment as well, as potential participants might have felt too overwhelmed by world events to participate in a conversation about an existing trauma.

Another potential limitation of this research is the participants' range of ages and temporal distance from their experiences. For example, three of the women were only a few years out of their marriages, whereas another has been divorced for 17 years and another for over 50. There is a possibility that for these latter two participants, recall bias might be present (Hassan, 2006). There were some moments during one of these interviews in which Diana struggled to remember specifics, saying "It was a long time ago, you know...". Luchetti and Sutin (2018) discuss the effects of age and temporal distance on autobiographical memory, finding that older adults rate their memories of specific events of their lifetime as vivid, coherent and emotionally intense. This might be because older adults have had more opportunity to think about that significant life

experience, creating a stronger memory phenomenology. It is difficult to know whether this is true for this participant. It is prudent to remember, however, that phenomenological research is not about what the true reality, or story, is, but rather what the person perceives it to be and how it is experienced (Willig, 2013). This is in line also with critical realist thinking, which posits that we recognise the reality of the experience, but understand it through one's imperfect knowledge (Cromby, 2020). Her memories may or may not be exact, but it is her experience as she relays it now, which matters.

Lastly, this study was strengthened by its rigorous use of the IPA methodology and deemed a quality piece of research according to Yardley's (2000) quality indicators of excellence, as discussed in the Methodology chapter.

4.3 Recommendations for future research

Of the qualitative research on Jewish religious coercive control, none has previously addressed the phenomenological experiences of the women survivors of it. Previous research has either had a more nuanced focus, such as faith in recovery trajectories, or has used other methods such as the examination of clinical case files, or has interviewed related people such as social workers, but not the survivors themselves. This study fills the research gap in giving a voice to women who wish to share their stories, and in examining the common themes present between survivors. There are, however, limitations of this study which offer opportunities for new research.

There is homogeneity between the participants as they are all Orthodox women who adhere, or adhered, to Orthodox Jewish law strictly, and who experienced religious coercion in their marriage. Simultaneously, this study was broad in its research question and inclusion criteria, including participants who had experienced any of the four criteria of religious coercion as set out in earlier sections. Diana's experience of Get Abuse falls under these categories too, as shown throughout this piece. However, the story of an Agunah – a 'chained woman' - may be different to other forms of religious coercion as the abuse occurs after separation, and much more publicly. Future research might choose to focus on Agunot specifically, as this is an area of qualitative psychological research which is strangely lacking. Relatedly, and a prominent theme in this research,

is the experience of women in dealing with Batei Din, the religious courts. Again, this is an area with research done by non-psychologists, or quantitative survey work, and yet is not addressed in a qualitative phenomenological way.

This study was also broad in how it included women from across the spectrum of Orthodoxy. This was intentional, as it allowed greater engagement from willing participants and gave voice to diverse experiences. However, it should be noted that different communities across Orthodox Judaism engage in varied ways with their adherence to religious laws. For example, Adina belonged to an extreme Charedi group, more rigorous in their application of Jewish law, and with greater societal expectations to conform. This is different to the other participants, some of whom are Modern Orthodox, and others who are Charedi but in a less-strict community. As such, part of Adina's story is the complicity of the community. Also, Adina didn't know her (ex)husband before she married him, as she followed a strict set of rules around arranged marriage. This is different to the other participants who would have dated their (ex)husbands first. Future research might wish to expand on these ideas and to examine the relationship between extreme Charedi communities, their societal rules around dating, and domestic religious abuse.

4.4 Implications for counselling psychology

The findings of this study offer useful clinical insights for psychologists and other mental health professionals who may encounter Jewish women who have been religious abused. Crotty (1998) warns that qualitative researchers run the risk of being abstract intellectualisers, disengaged from the realities of application and practice. It is essential therefore to address these clinical insights, with the hope of expanding counselling psychologists' lens through which they might meet religious abuse survivors, and members of the Orthodox Jewish community.

Participants in this study were asked the question: What would you like to see happen differently in the community, based on your experiences? Participants largely spoke of increased knowledge and awareness, with a view to tackling gendered treatment in the Bet Din. Some participants explained further that, because abuse is so stigmatised, many women are not even aware that what they are going through is not 'normal' or

‘right’. Jewish Women’s Aid UK noted in their 2025 Summer report that often in stories of abuse, the perpetrator is focused on, and the victim somehow disappears (JWA, 2025). To counter this, counselling psychologists, as social justice agents, can enact the principle of giving voice to our clients and turn this into creating tools for social change (Goodman et al., 2004). The ability to tell one’s own story, and to have access to collective stories, is a powerful resource. Counselling psychologists can facilitate this through individual or community work and can encourage the redemptive voice for a victim on their journey to becoming survivor/advocate (Delker et al., 2020). Along the way, greater awareness and advocacy can also be facilitated.

Practitioners working with women in the Orthodox Jewish community should show cultural sensitivity and attention to religious nuance (Starr, 2017). This is significant in contextualising the worldview which shapes their experiences and forms part of their stories (Tuito & Band-Winterstein, 2021). The present study shows just how important this is, as the participants’ experiences are so specific to Jewish laws, that they could easily be dismissed and not recognised as religious abuse. For example, Clara’s son was taken by her (ex)husband to buy coffee from an unknown cafe – without openness and curiosity to the impact of this, an unknowing clinician might belittle this act to something insignificant, not realising the resulting spiritual pain inflicted on Clara. Further, counselling psychologists should be careful not to assume that a client is disconnected from their faith as a result of their experiences, and where appropriate, should encourage them to draw on spiritual resources (Senter and Caldwell, 2002).

Acknowledgement of the religious coercion and abuse can in itself be an empowering and important tool for clinicians (Perry, 2024). Cunradi et al., (2002) notes that where practitioners can help women to make sense of faith in this context, they affirm that there wasn’t an issue with spirituality itself, but it’s exploitation: this gives women permission to question their judgement and to attribute blame away from themselves. The Power Threat Meaning Framework is a useful tool for working with survivors, as it offers the opportunity to ask: “What happened *to you?”* placing the onus away from the victim/survivor and on the abuser, acknowledging that their experiences are the result of someone else’s choices, structural inequality, or difficult circumstances (Collins, 2019).

It is known that where others take the side of the perpetrator, or trivialise a woman's experience, this can lead to a re-traumatisation (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018). There is a difficult balance, however, as social workers in Band-Winterstein and Freund (2013)'s study explained that 'over-empowering Charedi women in therapy' leads to a change of power in the marriage and thus divorce. While this would usually be seen as the ideal outcome of intervention in an abusive marriage, where sometimes Charedi women face significantly more trauma and stigma from divorce itself, this leaves clinicians with a difficult situation. Cultural sensitivity, therefore, means guiding women to best care for her wellbeing and giving her coping tools: working with both partners and sometimes with the help of Rabbis. Practitioners therefore should be careful in addressing a woman's concerns in a culturally knowledgeable and sensitive way, and to work through her experiences of abuse, alongside a potential change in belief systems, grief, and issues of community support.

Both in the literature review, and in my interviews with the participants, I posed the question of how women make sense of the abuse they experienced, and their (ex)husband's actions. There is some debate here about whether to answer this through a feminist (men have power and control), socioecological (the influence of Charedi norms) or psychopathological (abusers are mentally ill) lens. This research did not provide an answer but sought to remain curious to the question and open to where participants attribute blame: in phenomenological research their lived realities and perceptions are what matter above all else. Counselling psychologists should approach work with survivors in a similar vein, by being curious to where blame is attributed, rather than bringing in one's own assumptions. This is especially true when working with women who have a strong religious or faith identity, and counsellors should take especial care not to isolate a client by blaming religion (Starr, 2017). Instead, counselling psychologists could note potential spiritual trauma or spiritual confusion, and create safety around discussions of spirituality (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018).

4.5 A return to reflexivity

Reflexivity has been present throughout this research and throughout these chapters, forming part of the hermeneutic circle expected in an IPA study. My role as interviewer

and researcher is laden with layers of identity: Jewish, Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, a woman, a mother, and a trainee counselling psychologist. My interactions with the participants and my relationship with the research were influenced by these identities, and by our ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’. Sometimes the influence would be known and recognised, and other times it is more subconscious. Goodman et al., (2004) suggest that counselling psychologists as social justice agents are required to engage in a repeated self-examination, and to remain in constant vigilance regarding underlying assumptions and values when working with the community I am aiming to support. As such, I have needed to examine the different selves which I bring to this work, and to harness the opportunities which my subjectivity brings both implicitly and explicitly. A reflexive journal has been a useful tool to me during this process, and I share some excerpts below.

Several challenges emerged during this research related to boundaries within the Orthodox community. My workplace currently and throughout the undertaking of this research is in an Orthodox Jewish mental health charity, working with adolescent girls in the community. Given the small size and close-knit nature of the London Orthodox community, it was not a surprise when a clash occurred: firstly, a client’s mother applied to be a participant in my study during the recruitment phase, and secondly, an existing participant’s daughter was allocated to me for therapy during the analysis phase. The first scenario posed a significant ethical dilemma, as I needed to consider the wellbeing of my client, her confidentiality, and the confidentiality of the potential participant who had applied. Working with the clinical lead and my supervisor, I was able to navigate the situation carefully, and I necessarily needed to exclude the potential participant from being in my study. This was immensely frustrating for me, as I was struggling to recruit and my reflexive journal shows the excerpt: "I know that I need to protect [my client], but I feel immensely discouraged and frustrated to have to turn away a willing participant”. Franklin et al., (2025)’s research into working and living in the Orthodox Jewish community shows that it can be very difficult to maintain separation, and that there is a discomfort in the blurred boundaries which sometimes exist. To the best of my ability, I sought to maintain that separation between my researcher and psychologist identities in

this context, which is why I excluded the participant in the first instance from my study, and referred the client in the second instance to a different therapist.

In July of 2023, during my recruitment phase, I received an email from a potential participant who had seen my study advertised through a community charity. Following her email, I asked to speak on the phone, and we had a (close to) two-hour conversation about the contents of her email, her concerns about the study, and the community. The woman shared with me that she fit the criteria of my study but did not feel ready to engage in sharing her story, as she was still processing her experience and trauma. However, she offered incredibly useful insights into the topic, which gave me pause to reflect. Firstly, she highlighted to me the incredible emotional toll that religious abuse has on its victims, with the need to safeguard participants who are triggered by questions in this study. This fostered a greater awareness into needing to place my counselling psychology 'hat' on during all of my interactions with the participants, using my felt sense of them and a risk assessment to determine their safety. Where before I sought to separate my psychologist identity, here it was important to integrate it. Secondly, the woman shared her concerns about my position, agenda, and attitude towards the research. She felt concerned that I would be approaching the research with a "feminist, or Charedi-bashing agenda", which she had seen before. In order to feel safe to share and promote my study with other survivors who she knew, she needed the endorsement of a prominent Rabbi who would vouch for my position and well-meaning intentions. Loewenthal and Rogers (2004), in their paper on culturally-sensitive psychotherapy, suggest that having Rabbinic endorsement is essential to create trust. I struggled with this idea; part of me felt that it would be betraying the ideals of empowering women to make decisions away from the influence of religious leaders, and men. However, the feeling of safety among my participants was of paramount importance to carry out this research effectively, and I needed to bracket my preconceived notions. I needed to meet the women where they are at, to foster cultural sensitivity and to acknowledge the significance of this endorsement in the context of the Charedi world. Through my workplace, I was able to secure the endorsement of a prominent community Rabbi who specialises in mental health questions.

Much has been written already about my position as an Orthodox Jewish woman, my fears of antisemitism and my hopes for the way that this research will be received. It is important also to reflect on the impact of this research on these aspects of my identity, after my analysis. I was raised to believe in, and practice, equality for women inside and outside the home. I also have a strong sense of Jewish, Modern Orthodox identity. At times during this study I found myself very uncomfortable at some of the stories shared in the literature and by my participants, finding it painful to hear of the way religion is misinterpreted specifically with the goal of controlling women. As difficult as this topic is, it reaffirms for me the importance of this research and conversation. My love for religion and community is what drives my hope for a better future for it, and I acknowledge that this may have some sway on how I interpret and present the stories shared – both with a sense of embarrassment and also a specific interest in ensuring a better future for Jewish women.

Lastly, I conducted and wrote the majority of this paper in the wake of October 7th, which had a profound and very distressing impact on me as a person and as a psychologist. In the months following the events of that day, I struggled to focus and to reflect, as my mind was constantly elsewhere. My last interview with a participant took place just a few short weeks later, and I held concern for her wellbeing also – the potential intersection of traumas and concern for her capacity to process my questions while she too was likely struggling. This necessitated a conversation with the participant, a check-in and check-out, and an acknowledgement of how she might be feeling. This was the only participant to take me up on a debrief phone call a few days after our interview, and I ensured that she was receiving mental health support elsewhere too. For myself, self-care and personal therapy were essential at this time.

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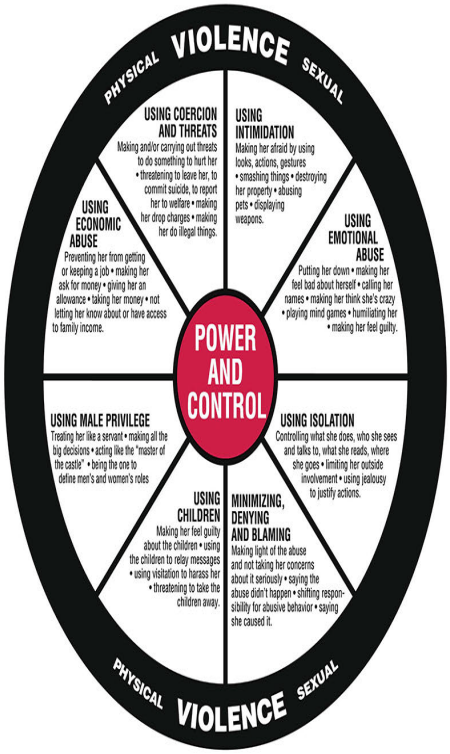
Appendices

Appendix A: Power and Control Wheel, The Duluth Model:



Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs: The Duluth Model (n.d.). *Understanding the Power and Control Wheel.* https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/faqs-about-the-wheels/

Appendix B: Charities and social media campaigns in the UK:

https://www.thejc.com/news/news/chief-rabbi-we-must-wipe-out-domestic-violence-1.448922 - the Chief Rabbi speaking in the national Jewish newspaper about domestic abuse.

https://www.jwa.org.uk/message-from-chief-rabbi-ephraim-mirvis

https://www.jwa.org.uk/jewish-womens-aid-shabbat - this is an annual devoted day to talking about abuse in the community. On this day (Sabbath), synagogues across the UK invite speakers from JWA to talk about the importance of this work, or the community Rabbi will speak from their pulpit about domestic abuse and condemn it.

https://bod.org.uk/bod-news/jewish-womens-aid-board-of-deputies-and-synagogue-movements-mark-international-day-for-the-elimination-of-violence-against-women/ - The Jewish Board of Deputies is the community leadership board which liaises with media, government leadership and other groups who wish to understand the Jewish community. Here the JBOD marks International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women by promoting JWA's initiative across the community.

https://www.gettoutuk.org/who-we-ve-helped - This charity's webpage lists the names of women who are waiting for a religious divorce. The women are supported publicly, not silenced.

https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/get-refusal-clarified-as-a-criminal-offence/ - this form of abuse is being spoken about in the national Jewish newspaper.

https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/shameful-denial-and-defence-of-marital-rape-must-end/ - an article on sexual abuse in relation to religious coercive control within marriages, by a local activist. Marital rape, manifested through feeling an intense obligation to honour the 'mitzvah' that sexual intercourse need happen on the wedding night, is common and is an example of religious abuse.

http://nahamu.org/what-is-nahamu/ - this charity was established with the objective to: "fight for the right of every Jewish person to live a life that is guided by their religion, without sacrificing personal autonomy or welfare". This is a charity set up by largely Modern Orthodox people who wish to challenge religious extremism that may be present in the Ultra-Orthodox communities.

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-60957813 - an article on BBC about a man who was convicted of coercive control for not giving his wife a 'gett'.

Appendix C: Charities approached during recruitment:

1. Jewish Women's Aid - which supports Jewish women and children (of any stream of Judaism) who have experienced any kind of domestic abuse.

2. Gesher - which is a charity supporting people to leave Ultra-Orthodox communities. Gesher is run by people who have left the community themselves.

3. Mavar - similar to Gesher, it helps people to leave the Ultra-Orthodox community and find housing or other practical support.

4. Nachamu – a community organisation which is devoted to helping people who have been harmed by extreme religious views.

5. Gettout – a charity which helps women who have not been given a Jewish divorce by their husbands. One of the ways it does this is by applying social pressure to the husband and launching public campaigns to aid the women.

6. Paperweight – a community charity which supports Jewish women of any denomination, who are struggling with practical tasks following a stressful situation, such as divorce or abuse.

Appendix D: Recruitment email and flyer:

Recruitment Email and Flyer

Department of Counselling Psychology. City, University of London

Participants needed for research into Jewish Orthodox women's experiences of religious coercive control in marriage

Research looking for separated, divorced or widowed women who have experienced religious coercive control (abuse in the name of, or caused by, religion) from their (ex)husbands.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to participate in a ten-minute phone conversation followed by a 60-90 minute in-person or online interview. The interview will be confidential and the data will be anonymous.

Participants must be women over the age of 18, who have been living separately from their husband for at least 12 months.

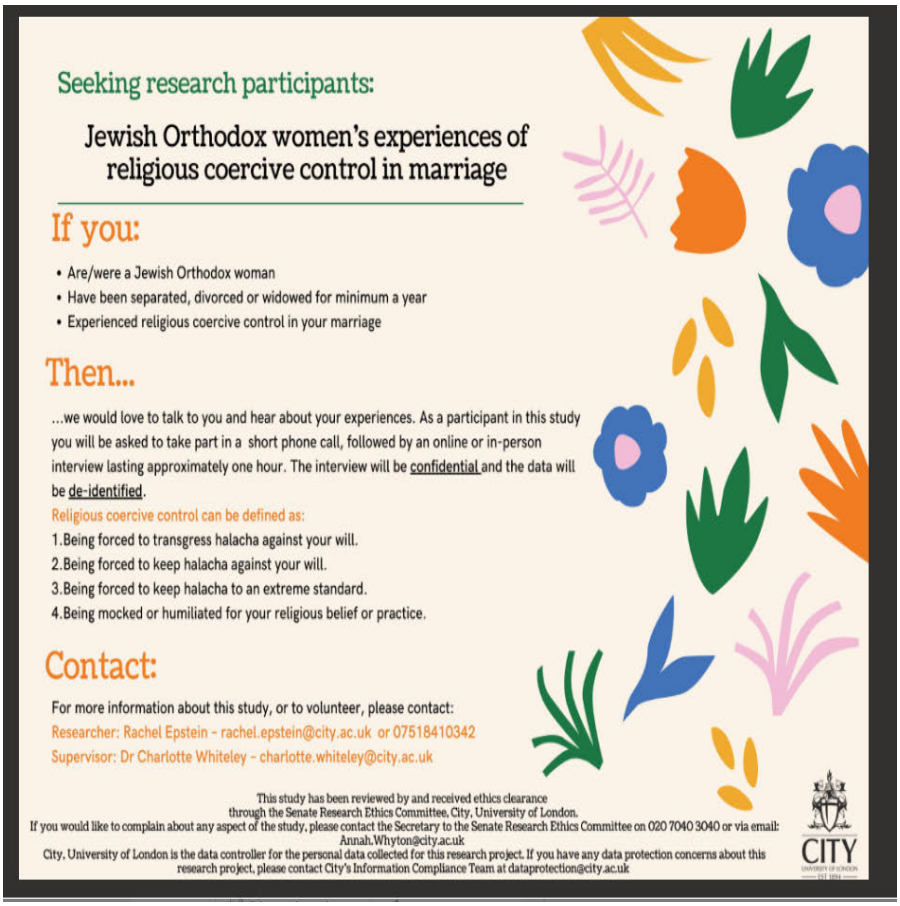
Religious abuse can be defined as:

1. Being forced to transgress halacha against your will.
2. Being forced to keep halacha against your will.
3. Being forced to keep halacha to an extreme or unnecessary standard.
4. Being mocked or humiliated for your religious belief or practice.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer, please contact:
Researcher: Rachel Epstein – [redacted]@city.ac.uk
Supervisor: Dr Charlotte Whiteley – [redacted]@city.ac.uk
Counselling Psychology Department

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the SREC, City, University of London.
If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the Senate Research Ethics Committee on 020 7040 3040 or via email: [redacted]@city.ac.uk

City, University of London is the data controller for the personal data collected for this research project. If you have any data protection concerns about this research project, please contact City's Information Compliance Team at dataprotection@city.ac.uk


Seeking research participants:
Jewish Orthodox women's experiences of religious coercive control in marriage
If you:
• Are/were a Jewish Orthodox woman
• Have been separated, divorced or widowed for minimum a year
• Experienced religious coercive control in your marriage
Then...
...we would love to talk to you and hear about your experiences. As a participant in this study you will be asked to take part in a short phone call, followed by an online or in-person interview lasting approximately one hour. The interview will be confidential and the data will be de-identified.
Religious coercive control can be defined as:
1.Being forced to transgress halacha against your will.
2.Being forced to keep halacha against your will.
3.Being forced to keep halacha to an extreme standard.
4.Being mocked or humiliated for your religious belief or practice.
Contact:
For more information about this study, or to volunteer, please contact:
Researcher: Rachel Epstein - rachel.epstein@city.ac.uk or 07518410342
Supervisor: Dr Charlotte Whiteley - charlotte.whiteley@city.ac.uk
This study has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance through the Senate Research Ethics Committee, City, University of London.
If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the Senate Research Ethics Committee on 020 7040 3040 or via email: Annah.Whyton@city.ac.uk
City, University of London is the data controller for the personal data collected for this research project. If you have any data protection concerns about this research project, please contact City's Information Compliance Team at dataprotection@city.ac.uk
CITY

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet:

Title of study: Religious coercive control within Orthodox Jewish marriage: Exploring the lived experience of women survivors.

Name of principle investigator:
Project supervisor:

Ethics approval code: ETH2223-0068

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. You will be emailed a copy of this information sheet to keep.

What is the purpose of the study?
This study aims to explore the experiences of Jewish women who have been religiously abused or who have experienced religious coercive control by their (ex)husbands. It will explore the impact of this abuse on women's wellbeing and how they make sense of the abuse, as well as how they make sense of their faith. The study is being conducted as part of a Doctorate of Counselling Psychology research and is intended to continue until September 2024.

Why have I been invited to take part?
This study will include a single interview, in person or on zoom, between you and the researcher. You will be asked some questions about this research topic and will be asked to explore your experiences. You will have access to the final study once it has been published, and you can request access to your transcript 12 weeks after your interview.

This study will recruit between 6 – 10 participants and is about your unique and subjective experiences. You will need to fit the following criteria:

- You must be a woman over the age of 18.
- You must have engaged with psychological or psychosocial support since becoming separated or divorced (e.g. therapy, counselling, support through a charity, social work support). If you are unsure if you have received adequate support to be able to participate in this study, please contact us.
- You must have identified as Orthodox Jewish, at least during the time of the abuse.
- You must have been separated and living apart from your husband for at least 12 months.
- You must have experienced religious abuse from your husband while you were married to him.

Religious abuse can be defined in several ways and is where your spouse uses religion as a *tool* of abuse. This may take the form of forced halachic transgressions, forced obsession with halachot, forced keeping of halachot, or humiliation/mockery or subjugation around keeping halachot. If you are unsure whether your experiences match this profile, please be in touch with the researcher.

Do I have to take part?
Participation in the project is voluntary and it is up to you whether you decide to take part or not. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You can choose not to answer any questions which may make you feel uncomfortable or may feel too intrusive. You can withdraw from the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way, up until 6 weeks after the interview. If you withdraw following the interview, your data will be destroyed and will not be included in the final published study.

What will happen if I take part?

If you decide to take part, this is the process:

- You will have a telephone conversation (approximately fifteen minutes) prior to the interview to confirm eligibility and to answer any questions you may have.
- You will be invited to be interviewed on zoom or in a private room at City University. Your travel expenses will be paid.
- The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. You will be asked to sign a consent form and you will be given a debrief form to read following the interview.
- Your data will be collected through semi-structured interviews and will be transcribed, coded and interpreted through a qualitative research technique which explores your insights into how you make sense of your experiences.
- All data will be kept confidential and anonymised throughout all stages of the research.
- The research is expected to take 3 years to complete.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?
As this research topic can be sensitive, it is possible that recounting your experiences may cause some emotional upset. If this occurs, we will be able to take a break from the interview. You can also withdraw your participation at any time during the interview and up to 6 weeks after the interview.

What are the potential advantages of taking part?
This is an opportunity to share your story and to feel heard in your experiences of abuse. You will be contributing to research on an important issue which will ultimately serve to benefit the wellbeing of Orthodox Jewish women and abused religious women generally.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

- Only the researcher will have access to your data before it is anonymised.

- Our interview will be kept on a password-protected and encrypted device, to which only the researcher has access. Your personal details will also be kept safe on a password-protected computer. Data will not be shared with any third parties.
- Following transcription of the recordings, the recordings will be deleted from the recording device.
- Your personal information and contact details will only be kept so that the researcher can share the published study with you if you wish to receive it.
- None of your details or data will be shared with other individuals, unless the researcher is concerned about the possibility of risk of harm to you or to others. In such a case, the researcher will first inform her university supervisor, who will be able to advise on the appropriate way to deal with this disclosure.
- All data files will be deleted ten years after the research is published. If the research is abandoned, the data will be destroyed from all devices.

Data privacy statement

City, University of London is the sponsor and the data controller of this study based in the United Kingdom. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The legal basis under which your data will be processed is City's public task.

Your right to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in a specific way in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal-identifiable information possible (for further information please see https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/public-task/.

City will use your name and contact details to contact you about the research study as necessary. If you wish to receive the results of the study, your contact details will also be kept for this purpose. The only person at City who will have access to your identifiable information will be the researcher, Rachel Epstein. City will keep identifiable information about you from this study for 1 year after the study has finished.

You can find out more about how City handles data by visiting https://www.city.ac.uk/about/governance/legal. If you are concerned about how we have processed your personal data, you can contact the Information Commissioner's Office (IOC) https://ico.org.uk/.

What will happen to the research results?

Upon completion of this study, the thesis will be printed and stored in City University of London's library and will also be accessible on the City Research Online catalogue. This research may be published in mental health or psychology journals. All identifying information about participants will be removed, redacted, or anonymised. Participants will

be informed of publication and can choose to receive an electronic copy of the study if they wish.

Who has reviewed the study?
This study has been approved by City, University of London Research Ethics Committee.

What if there is a problem?
If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you can phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: *Religious coercive control within Orthodox Jewish marriage: Exploring the lived experience of women survivors.*

You can also write to the Secretary at:
Annah Whyton
Research Integrity Manager
City, University of London, Northampton Square
London, EC1V 0HB
Email: [redacted]@city.ac.uk

Further information and contact details
Researcher: Rachel Epstein –[redacted]@city.ac.uk
Research Supervisor: Dr Charlotte Whiteley –[redacted]@city.ac.uk

Appendix F: Participant Consent Form:

Participant Consent Form

Title of study: Religious coercive control within Orthodox Jewish marriage: Exploring the lived experience of women survivors.

Ethics approval code: ETH2223-0068

Name of principal researcher: Rachel Epstein

		Please initial box
1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above-named study. I have had the opportunity to consider this information and to ask questions about what is involved. I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep for my records.	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate or to withdraw at any stage without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.	
3.	I agree to the interview being audio recorded. I understand that any information I provide is confidential and that no identifiable personal information will be published or shared with third parties. I understand that the original recordings will accessible only the researcher, will be stored securely and destroyed following the completion of the research project. I understand information I provide will be used as part of the researcher's doctoral thesis in counselling psychology and a pseudonym will be used when referring to this information, including direct quotations, as a way of maintaining anonymity.	
4.	I understand that confidentiality may be broken if the researcher is concerned that there is a risk of harm to the participant or to others.	
5.	I agree to City University London recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) explained in the participant information and my consent is conditional on university complying with its duties and obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (1998).	
6.	I would like to be informed of the results of this study once it has been completed and understand that my contact details will be retained for this purpose.	
7.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

Name of Participant	Signature	Date
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

Appendix G: Interview Questions:

Pre-screening phone questions:

1. Which Jewish denomination did you identify with at the time of your marriage?
2. Are you over the age of 18?
3. What is your marital status – are you civilly divorced or separated, and for how long? Have you received the Get and when?
4. How long have you been living apart from your ex-partner?
5. Have you engaged with any psychological or psychosocial support since your marriage ended? This could be therapy, receiving support from a charity, synagogue, or other community initiative?
6. Do you currently have a mental health diagnosis, or are you under a mental health service currently?
7. This study may elicit some painful or distressing memories for you. How do you think you will cope with that?
8. What is your understanding of religious coercive control?
9. Can you give an example of this in your marriage?

Interview Agenda

Interview questions (with some prompts)

1. Can you tell me about your relationship with faith or religion?

- What do you practice and what do you believe?

2. I've used the term 'religious coercive control' - I wonder if you can tell me your understanding of what this is?

3. Can you tell me about a time when you experienced religious coercive control in your marriage?

- When did you first notice or realise it was happening?

- How did it feel? How was this for you?

- Is there a specific experience you can recall?

4. What was it like for you at the time?

5. What is it like for you now?

- How do you look back on that period?
- How does it affect you today?

6. What impact, if any, did these experiences have on your faith?
7. What are your hopes for the future in relation to abuse of this nature in the community?

- Is there anything you would like to see happen differently?
- How would you like the community/Rabbis/leaders to respond?
- How would you like charities or support services to respond?

Appendix H: Participant Debrief Form:

Participant Debrief Form

Title of study: Religious coercive control within Orthodox Jewish marriage: Exploring the lived experience of women survivors.

Ethics approval code: ETH2223-0068

Name of principal researcher: Rachel Epstein

Thank you for being part of this research study. Your contribution has been valuable in understanding the experiences of religious abuse within Orthodox Jewish marriages. This study aims to better understand these experiences so that future women in this position can be better supported by psychologists and community leaders.

If you have experienced any discomfort or emotional upset as part of your participation, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher. You can also find support in the following places:

- Jewish Women's Aid – 0808 801 0500
- JAMI – jamiuk.org
- Raphael – Jewish Counselling service - https://www.raphaeljewishcounselling.org/
- National Domestic Violence Hotline – 1800 799 7233
- The Samaritans - 116 123

We hope you found this study interesting; if you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher at:

Researcher: Rachel Epstein - [redacted]@city.ac.uk
Research supervisor: Dr Charlotte Whiteley – [redacted]@city.ac.uk

Part B: Combined Case Study and Process Report - REDACTED

Part C: Journal Article

Abstract

This thesis aimed to explore the experiences of Orthodox Jewish women who are survivors of Religious Coercive Control in their (ex)marriage. This is a largely understudied area, particularly through a psychological lens. This study sought to address the literature gap and offer insight into the unique experiences of this phenomenon. Five women were recruited and participated in semi-structured interviews, which were then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Four themes were found: “Trapped and broken” explored the impact of the abuse on the participants; “Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman” captured their sense-making within the intersection of being a Jewish woman; “Painful and empowering reflections” sought to understand how they looked back on their experiences; and “Changed relationships” considered the impact of the abuse on their relationships with religion, and with others. The findings, their meanings and clinical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Religious coercive control, Orthodox Judaism, phenomenological

Introduction

Coercive control is the manipulation and micro-regulations used by abusers in their quest for power (Blyth, 2021). Where a victim or survivor is a member of a faith community, the perversion and assault of their beliefs offer additional abusive opportunities - 'emotional abuse wrapped and justified in the cloth of religion' (Simonic et al., 2013). The Domestic Abuse Statutory Guidance UK (2022) defines 'abuse relating to faith' using ten different examples, many of which are present in the literature discussed below, and in this piece of research.

The terms religious abuse (RA), spiritual abuse (SA) and religious coercive control (RCC) are used somewhat interchangeably across the literature. Dehan and Levi (2009) define SA conceptually as an attack on the victim's spiritual self – her very sense of self – through mockery of her practice, forced transgressions of religious practice, or belittlement of her beliefs. Sharp (2014)'s definition of RA offers clarity: a partner who specifically and intentionally exploits religious beliefs, scriptures or doctrines as a means of control, effective because of the significance of these values to a woman's self-concept. Simonic et al., (2013) take this further to explain that it is not only the exploitation of religion, but the use of religion to justify behaviour.

Consolidating examples from across the literature, RCC within the Jewish context can be synthesised into the following four categories:

1. Being forced to transgress religious laws that are important and meaningful to the person (Dehan & Levi, 2009; Tuito & Band-Winterstein, 2021; Palant, 2004).
2. Being forced to obey religious laws against one's wishes (Cares & Cusick, 2012).
3. Being forced to obey religious laws to an extreme or unnecessary level (Cares & Cusick, 2012, Palant, 2004).
4. Being mocked or humiliated for one's religious practice (Dehan & Levi, 2009, Palant, 2004).

These categories were used as a basis for criteria during recruitment and analysis in this research study.

Orthodox Judaism

This study intentionally chooses to focus on Orthodox Judaism, which includes several subgroups with different interpretations of religious law. Although most Jewish groups share monotheistic beliefs, respect for Torah, and the generational scars of persecution, particular Jewish practices vary widely between them. What sets Orthodox Judaism apart from Reform, Conservative, or cultural Judaism is a strong adherence to Jewish law, which in turn establishes an important context for religious abuse to occur. Although Orthodoxy itself exists across a wide spectrum, there are two main subgroups; Modern Orthodox Judaism, firmly placed within both secular and religious worlds (Fishman, 1995), and Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, typically more insular and cautious around associating or communicating with secular groups (Shaffir, 1993). Orthodox Jews see spirituality as an integral and all-encompassing part of life, with everything 'mundane' - e.g eating, cooking, dressing – being performed in a spiritual way to make it more holy. Any deviance from this would be considered spiritually vexing and could be harmful or belittling to one's spiritual life, self and worth. It is important to note that all contemporary groups in Judaism, including Orthodoxy, have unequivocally condemned any form of abuse (Devoe et al., 2001).

Gender roles

Overwhelmingly, the common pattern of domestic abuse in intimate partner relationships is men towards women (WHO, 2012). Stark (2009) argues that coercive control specifically is a highly gendered form of abuse, as the policing of gender stereotypes is its aim and derogation of femininity is its means.

The Orthodox community, especially the Ultra-Orthodox subgroup, is unmistakably patriarchal in its segregation of gender roles and in the clear division between sexes. Where man's main role is to devote himself to Torah study, a woman's role is to be keeper of the house; she is 'released' from Torah obligations and rules to devote more time to childcare and homemaking (Arowojolu, 2016; Abu-Hassan Nabwani, 2022). Social norms form the basis for women's compliance with traditional patriarchal structures (Szyfer Lipinsky et al., 2024).

Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz (2009) explain that secular men who are violent are more likely to encompass a 'macho' masculine identity. However, this image does not quite fit the stereotypical Orthodox man, who is seen as quiet, unassuming and calm (Steinmetz & Haj-Yahia, 2006). The 'ideal' Jewish man is one who is engaged in Torah study, fervent in his learning and prayer, and with religious intellectualism as his vocation – whereas physicality and being 'macho' are a vice (Goldberg & Yassour-Borochowitz, 2009).

So, there are several factors which can foster an environment in which RA might occur – that the man is seen as the educational and spiritual authority in the home, and that the woman is released from Torah-duties to be homemaker. As such, the patriarchal power structure with traditional gendered spousal roles, and a pronounced religious-knowledge gender gap, facilitates a context in which men can use religious laws or texts as a means of establishing control (Arowojolu, 2016; Levitt et al., 2015).

Orthodox Jewish Marriage and Divorce

Jewish texts teach that marriage should be a spiritual and wonderful union, a reflection of holiness and love (Devoe et al., 2001). Alongside gender roles and expectations as just discussed, there are several other central ideas which are pertinent to this study and form a backdrop to potential abuse.

Observation of the laws of family purity are adhered to very strictly by Orthodox Jewish couples (Schnall, 2006). These are rituals related to a woman's menstrual cycle and sexual intimacy, specifically times when a couple should be ritually and physically separate from each other and sexual intimacy is forbidden until she has immersed herself in the Mikvah (ritual bath) (Frydman, 2022). These laws provide structure to the sexual life of the married couple and there are clear expectations of each partner.

Shalom Bayit – literally meaning 'peaceful home' - is core to Orthodox Jewish marriage and is central to perceptions of the harmonious Jewish family ideal (Devoe et al., 2001, Vass, 2025). A peaceful home is one which, for example, excludes physical harm, shaming a person, speaking badly about others, and forced sexual contact (Devoe et al., 2001). However, in a perverse sense, Shalom Bayit can be a roadblock to peace as

abuse might be covered up and/or women might be pressured to remain in abusive marriages, too ashamed to seek help because of her perceived failure at not meeting the cultural standards of a happy marriage (Enger & Fortune, 2005). Here too there is danger of religion being twisted, as any marital issues can be minimised or denied in the name of maintaining Shalom Bayit.

Despite pressures of Shalom Bayit, Judaism has always permitted divorce in the case of troubled marriages, with divorce proceedings taking place in the Bet Din (religious court). To be divorced in Orthodox courts, a man and woman must present a Get – a religious decree of divorce. This is a male-centric process as the husband must initiate proceedings and grant the Get, which the wife then accepts (Murugan, 2023, Devoe et al., 2001).

There are, unfortunately, cases where the man refuses to grant his wife a Get and then she becomes an 'Agunah' - a chained woman. Although no longer married in anything but legalities, the woman is unable to be remarried and any future relationship is considered adulterous (Devoe et al., 2001). For an abusive man, withholding the Get is a tactic of abuse and is sometimes done out of pure malice or spite, and sometimes as leverage to force his wife to agree to harsher custody or financial demands in the civil courts (Arowojolu, 2016). In the wrong hands, it is a readily available, legal and religious means of establishing power and control after a marriage has ended (Starr, 2017).

Categorising Get abuse as SA, rather than emotional or psychological abuse, is of utmost importance, as it recognises the damage inflicted on an Agunah's sense of self, world and community through a spiritual lens. It is the twisting of a religious act into an abusive one, belittling her beliefs by challenging her view of Judaism, and preventing her from performing spiritual acts by keeping her separate from a marital and potentially motherhood identity, central to an Orthodox woman (Starr, 2017).

Previous research

There are several key research studies into RCC in Orthodox Jewish marriage, although it should be noted that none of them are individual interviews with the women themselves on their experiences of RCC specifically. Some of the examples of coercion

found in the literature include: a man refusing to pay his wife's synagogue membership fee, taking children to sports games instead of family dinner on the Jewish New Year, and conflicts over planning a son's Bat Mitzvah (Cares & Cusick, 2012). Dehan and Levi (2009) found that men would mock their wives while she was praying, prevent her from baking Challah (a spiritually significant bread loaf), or refusing to allow her to light Friday night Shabbat candles. A common example found in several studies was when a woman was forced to have sexual intercourse during or just after her menstruation, strictly forbidden under the laws of family purity (Schechory-Bitton, 2014; Cares & Cusick, 2012, Palant, 2004). Participants who reported this described intense shame and disconnection from God, as well as immense spiritual pain.

These examples show a purposeful interference with spiritual or religious practice, which the participants found to be upsetting, shameful and embarrassing. Women throughout the studies consistently reported feelings of self-hate and a disconnect from religious values (Cares & Cusick, 2012, Dehan & Levi, 2009, Palant, 2004). Vass (2025)'s interviews with Ultra-Orthodox abuse survivors found that women described their husbands' motivations as an attempt to break their spirit and attack their spiritual identity, and for many this was achieved.

Band-Winterstein and Freund (2016) considered the role of gender identities and the Totah-knowledge gap between men and women as a crucial element of intimate partner violence in the Orthodox community. Women who experience violence in their marriage are more likely to interpret it as being their own failures, for not being religious or submissive enough to their husbands. Further, this study acknowledges that male supremacy among Ultra-Orthodox Jews relies on the manipulation of their Torah knowledge which is entrusted to them but not to women.

Relationships with community leadership is discussed by Ringel and Bina's (2007) study of eight Orthodox survivors and eleven Orthodox community leaders (Rabbis, mental health professionals, Rabbis' wives and a community activist). Survivors shared the societal shame in seeking support for abuse and the stigma attached, causing denial and secrecy. The social views and attitudes were a core barrier to seeking help,

with the women feeling too ashamed to admit that their marriages were so unhappy and not in-line with the expected Shalom Bayit.

In Cares and Cusick's (2012) study, some women perceived Rabbis to be detrimental to their situation, often clearly taking their husbands' side, or offering generally unsupportive and invalidating words. Other women, however, relied heavily on Rabbis for support: formal counselling, assisting with the Get, or advocacy within the Bet Din. Devoe et al., (2001) also found mixed responses – those who went to Rabbis for support had positive experiences, however others were afraid to do so. Crucially, Ellis et al., (2022)'s systematic literature review of RA found that religious community leaders who did not react well to abuse disclosures were harmful to her recovery – with victim blaming and trivialisation of the events, alongside isolation, often leading to secondary trauma.

Ellis et al., (2022)'s review also nods to identity changes for survivors. Many discovered a stronger faith and stronger relationship with God or religious practice, whereas others found a new identity in their adoption of a different religious framework, sometimes atheism. These opposite experiences were reported also in Cares and Cusick's (2012) study: some women found faith to be a source of strength and a tool for coping, whereas others felt entirely disconnected and struggled with their spirituality.

Gaps and research question:

Existing literature on this subject is comprised of conference presentations, religious literature, and empirical studies. Of the peer-reviewed empirical studies read, many were through social work, sociology or nursing lenses, pointing to a gap in the psychology field. Almost all were qualitative – either focus groups or interviews. The literature on Jewish survivors primarily takes place in Israel or America. This is notable because of the impact of society, culture and nationality on one's identity, and also the gap in UK data. For example, research on Jewish women in Israel must be contextually different to other countries because Jews in Israel form the demographic majority, and because trauma from abuse may intersect with other traumas which abound in Israel.

Previous qualitative, peer-reviewed, empirical psychology studies on this topic ask a more specific question for a broader group, such as about recovery trajectories or religious meaning-making for domestic abuse survivors. However, the internal and subjective experience of Modern or Ultra-Orthodox women who are survivors of RCC, is not yet studied. For example, a less-researched form of religious coercion is where a husband might be needlessly excessive over religious laws – e.g. a woman forced to stand for hours checking vegetables for imaginary (unkosher) insects (Cares & Cusick, 2012). This constitutes religious abuse as he uses moral reasoning to account for his behaviours and she feels forced to comply (Tuito & Band-Winterstein, 2021). This author reached out to a local Jewish women's shelter and heard anecdotally that it is a common experience of women seeking help, and yet the literature does not reflect this. For the above reasons, this author sought to conduct research on religious coercive control in a UK population. The internal experience of abused women, deeply captured through interviews, is foundational to the therapeutic profession and relationship. Therefore, the research is phenomenological in nature.

As such, this study aimed to answer the following research question:

How is religious coercive control experienced by women within Orthodox Jewish marriage?

Method

In line with the critical realist theoretical underpinnings, and the research question, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is used in this research. IPA fosters a rich understanding of the experiences of individuals through a reflexive and inward gaze, rooted in three core philosophical foundations – phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, 2011).

It is essential in IPA work to establish the researcher's own position as an Orthodox Jewish woman. This created opportunities as an insider researcher and means that interpretation of the data was likely impacted by her own understanding of the world which the participants occupy. The double hermeneutic of IPA acknowledges this and creates space for the insider researcher to be an essential component of the research,

while ensuring that an appropriate level of bracketing of personal thoughts is also present.

Participants and data collection

IPA necessitates a small number of participants to encourage a deeper phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2022). Inclusion criteria were that women needed to: a) have experience of RCC within marriage, b) identify as Orthodox Jewish at the time of marriage, c) live separately from their (ex)husband for a minimum of 12 months, d) have engaged with psychological or psychosocial support since separation. It was decided that women needed to be separated but not divorced, to both ensure temporal distance and thus safety from the abuse, but also to ensure not to exclude Agunot from the study.

This study has five participants: four were recruited through local Jewish charities who sent emails to previous or current service users, and one was recruited through word-of-mouth. An additional participant needed to be excluded due to a conflict of interest with the researcher. There were significant recruitment barriers in this study, as women were hard to reach and then difficult to engage. This may be due to the cultural and social stigmas involved with talking about abuse, the recruitment method being largely restricted to charities and the reliance on third-party involvement, and the impact of the events of October 7th on the community. Information about the women is kept deliberately vague to ensure confidentiality: three women were in their 40s, one in her 50s, and one in her 70s. The interviews took place online, and included semi-structured interview questions which guided the facilitation of an open and comfortable interaction (Smith et al., 2022). Confidentiality was, and is, maintained to a high standard throughout all stages of the research.

The figure below shows how participants (with pseudonyms) met the definition of RCC discussed previously:

Participants:	Forced to transgress religious laws	Forced to obey religious laws against her wishes	Forced to obey religious laws to an extreme level	Mocked or humiliated for her religious practice
Adina		X	X	
Bracha	X	X	X	X
Clara	X			X
Diana		X	X	X
Eve		X	X	X

Table 1: Participants' experiences of religious abuse

Data analysis followed Smith et al., (2022)'s IPA guidelines, involving rereading the interview transcripts, making exploratory notes, constructing experiential statements, searching for connections across the statements, naming and organising themes, and then repeating for the next case. Group themes were found after all of the interviews had been individually analysed.

Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by the researcher's university. Participants were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time up to six weeks following the interview. A pre-screening phone call offered the opportunity for a risk assessment to determine that women were psychologically robust to participate. A significant concern for the researcher, which required great reflexivity, was a concern about inadvertently contributing to existing antisemitism by feeding into negative tropes about Judaism or the Orthodox community. The study does not seek to 'demonise' the whole community, but on the contrary, to explore the manifestation of domestic abuse in this particular religious context and to raise awareness of this important issue – noting that Judaism itself is not abusive or controlling, but just like in all communities, there are a small number of adherents who can be abusive.

Findings

Four master themes were found, with several subthemes, as presented below in the table:

Figure 1: Master themes and subthemes

Trapped and Broken:

This first theme captures the participants' experiences of the abuse, with religious interpretations, religious practices, or transgression of religion, "rammed down" their throats. Participants described feeling trapped and voiceless, with abusive acts thrown at them constantly and feeling suffocated by the pressure to conform.

> *I just felt like the religion was being rammed down my throat every single day, every single Shabbat... (Eve)*

Participants spoke about how the intensity of these experiences left them feeling sad and frustrated. This was made worse by the relentless nature of the abuse, sometimes continuing even after the marriage had ended through the children:

You know, and even after I got the Get*... you know he, he was still, you know, calling the shots. You know, what the children were allowed to do, what they were not allowed to do. I was not free until they grew up. (Diana)*

The devastating impact of the abuse was further described by the participants, with some acknowledging the feeling of betrayal, as the abusers twisted their beloved religion specifically to hurt them.

So that for me, that was like, I feel so utterly trapped in the community and in a way of life I don't agree with... (Adina)

I sought a loving, warm, religious, Orthodox, Jewish family married life. And that's what I thought I had. And when that was shattered it wasn't just shattered in one bit, it was totally shattered to pieces. (Clara)

For Clara, the relentless nature of the abuse is expressed through her immense pain at being misled for 18 years of their marriage, with him living a double life and pretending to be a certain way when he wasn't. This is incredibly painful for her, who held such faith in the sanctity of their marriage, only for this to be destroyed.

Painful and empowering reflections

Each of the participants looked back on their experiences with a mix of emotions, both painful and empowering. This included a growing sense of their abusers and how they made sense of his actions. Participants described how their husbands presented to others as charming and lovely, and yet became increasingly abusive towards them.

To the outside world, they are this very fantastic, lovely, everybody knows them. They're really cool, really, you know... brilliant, lovely, and everybody sees them like that. I saw him like that as well... until... (Clara)

Several reasons were given for their husbands' abusive behaviours, with participants attempting to make sense of it and to find meaning in their experiences – this process a crucial component of their stories. Reasons given were most closely linked to their husbands' psychopathology, with participants blaming his cold and manipulative character, extreme mind, or narcissism.

There's absolutely nothing to do with devotion to the religion, very much to do with wanting to control things in the way that suits, manipulate and control things the way that suits him. (Bracha)

Participants did not only have to reckon with their understanding of their abusers and the abuse, but also a changed sense of themselves as they grew through their experiences and looked back with a mixture of pain and pride.

...so for me, there is an aspect of how the heck did I get to be where I was? I was independent, strong-willed and opinionated... (Clara)

It's impacted on my mental health. Yeah. It's very hard, very hard to feel... it was very hard to feel good about myself because I felt for 15 years I was just undermined the whole time. So you just think that you're a nothing that you're not capable of anything... (Eve)

Eve's words throughout the interview were powerful, evoking a sense of being so degraded and bullied throughout her marriage, and gaslit into believing it was her fault, that her sense of self was so deeply impacted.

Participants described a range of emotions which appeared to unfold over time, the intensity of them often accompanied by a change in circumstances. Participants described feeling vulnerable, unwanted, and deeply unhappy. At some point, this became anger, and later, some described humiliation, shame, disbelief or relief. An overwhelming sense of loneliness was present for Adina:

And not having anywhere, yeah, not having anyone to turn to, really, because nobody really understands... (Adina)

The unfolding of emotions over time formed a crucial element of the participants' experiences and helped them to make sense of their stories.

So it's funny actually, if you'd have asked me this 3 years ago... I wouldn't have really understood the term coercive control... And it's only with hindsight when you're on the other side of it that you can see those things... (Clara)

He's just... I tell myself that he's just, he's just not a well person, and he's, he's not in control of his actions.... (Eve)

Eve used the words 'I tell myself', and other participants used similar terminology. This is significant as it speaks to the attribution of meaning and the sense-making journey of the women. There was a feeling that the participants are still puzzled by their experiences, still making sense of it, and still processing it.

Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman:

This theme endeavours to capture the experience of intersectionality between being Orthodox Jewish and being a woman. All of the participants raised issues and concerns, with thoughts shared around the woman's role within the community and religion, feeling that she is treated differently and sometimes that she is degraded and looked down on. Much of the frustration was also directed towards the Bet Din, which one participant described as a 'man's club'.

But yeah again, we're here. We're back here again. Once again we're being told what to do by another man. (Adina)

Yeah, you know, they'll be unduly lenient on things that affect men. But when it comes to women they'll suddenly be more particular and stringent. (Bracha)

If I was with him I'll be living in this awful condition, treated like a piece of dirt, treated like a cook and a housekeeper and a sex object. (Bracha)

Well I definitely think we have a religion where the men rule... (Diana)

Men also appeared to use their religious knowledge and position as a spiritual authority in the home to dictate and direct their wives' spiritual or religious experiences, essentially using religion as a tool to abuse:

...he would insist on what food I bought to work on Thursday, because then I did the Shabbos shopping on Friday, and I couldn't get all the dips that he wanted. So I didn't work on Thursday, so I could shop on Thursday. (Bracha)

This is an example of religious coercion, specific to Orthodox Judaism, which has worked because of gender roles. For Bracha, not working on a Thursday impacted her income and thus her autonomy – all for the sake of specific kosher dips which he wanted for a meal.

Changed relationships:

This master theme refers to both the participants' changed relationships with religion, religious connection, beliefs and practices, and their changed relationships with others around them.

Changed religious connection acknowledges the complexity that participants have faced in their relationships with religion, both during and after their experiences of RCC. The participants were varied in how they approach religion now, often with an innate sense of difficulty and some sadness as to how it has changed. One participant left her Jewish practice and belief entirely, whereas others held their faith steadfastly, using it as a tool of recovery and a source of support. Other participants found a middle ground somewhere in between, finding their sense of religion to be a comfort, but also questioning the Torah interpretations which played a part in their experiences.

> *Religion has a lot to answer for. It isn't ideal ideal ideal. It has wonderful things, which I love, but there are things that are not good. There's not two ways about it, in my opinion. (Diana)*

> *I just don't want to keep Shabbat this week, I'm not interested in it... but I've got kids and young kids... it's such a pressure to give them that beauty of religion when you've not had that. And they've also, they've been subjected to it as well. (Eve)*

> *And I did try when I was kind of exiting to try different, different kinds of Judaism, including reform and other places. That just wasn't, it just felt.... to me it was all much the same. It was like different hats, different places, but it was all the same. I didn't want anything to do with any of it. (Adina)*

Relationships with others was also varied, as some found support through family, friends, Rabbis and community leaders, while others felt let-down and lonely.

I don't think it's necessarily purposeful isolation. If that makes sense. I don't think they're trying to ostracise. I think there's a lack of empathy and thoughtful... (Clara)

Some of the participants also described a deep frustration with the Bet Din, who they felt were more sympathetic to their husbands and did not offer support to the women.

I just feel like they're siding with him and I don't think they really fully understand the extent of the abuse. (Eve)

Overall, there is a feeling amongst participants that women are treated systemically differently in the religious courts. Frustration and anger are overwhelmingly present as the women reflect on the unfairness of this.

Discussion

The present study provides crucial insight into the ways in which participants experienced RCC in their marriages, the impact that this had on them, and the ways that they seek to create meaning.

Trapped and Broken

Participants described the intensity of the abuse that they experienced and the permeation into their daily lives, with spiritual deeds, or their transgression, forced onto them, leaving the feeling of being trapped or suffocated. Three participants explained this as needlessly excessive acts, which one described as 'pious foolery', used as a means of control. Some examples include: a husband who refused to speak to her for a whole day, convinced she would ruin his sad mood on what is meant to be a mourning day in the Jewish calendar, forcing her to read Torah texts with him every Shabbat, and reciting a long, drawn-out blessing over wine every Friday night, ignoring his hungry and tired family. Adina was forced into shaving her head and wearing a specific denier of tights, for reasons of modesty. These are extreme interpretations of Jewish law which are common in *some* Ultra-Orthodox communities; as they were against her wishes, this constitutes religious abuse. Bracha's (ex)husband exerted control by not allowing her to clean her linen after a miscarriage, explaining that Judaism prevents washing linen as 'work' on Chol Hamoed – a holy day. Here he manipulated his knowledge of Jewish law

and twisted it (Band-Winterstein & Freund, 2016), leaving her feeling frustrated and angry. She was also forced into sexual intimacy during forbidden times according to laws of family purity. This example, and the ones before it, are similar to those described across the literature, showing consistency in the manifestation of RCC and the forceful and suffocating nature of it (Cares & Cusick, 2012; Dehan & Levi, 2009; Palant, 2005).

Clara's (ex)husband was manipulative in how he exploited her vulnerabilities, wore down her resistance, and fostered her increased dependency on him – these are key criteria to coercive control as described by Bent-Goodley and Fowler (2006). She was convinced to transgress religious laws unwillingly under the guise of compromise and in the context of what appeared to be a loving, healthy marriage. Diana's coercion occurred through her divorce and was no less pervasive; it was the belittling of her religious beliefs and practice through mockery of how it should be interpreted, through the twisting of a religious act into abuse (Starr, 2017). The abusive acts, intense in both pervasiveness and chronicity, gave a sense of being controlled and microregulated – trapped and choiceless. Hamberger et al., (2017) suggest that coercive control is an imbalance of power, with one being subservient to the other – this is evident here for each of the participants forced into, or out of, unwanted or extreme religious acts.

The relentless nature of the abuse presented for these participants in similar ways to examples given by Cares and Cusick (2012) - through their daily exercise or going beyond marriage. Abusers played into the vulnerabilities of each of the participants, with threats made about the marriage ending, being ostracised by the community, spiritual threats, or using the children both during and after marriage in upsetting ways (either making unilateral decisions about their education or goading them into spiritual transgressions).

The pervasiveness and ceaseless nature of the abuse was shattering to the participants. There is a sense of loss and grief: loss of a relationship, a family unit once so treasured, family and friends, and the sense of self. Where participants described the actions being done with an intention of breaking their spirit, this is similar to the previous literature describing the spiritual war of the abuser with the goal of inflicting damage to

their target's soul (Vass, 2025). Certainly, participants described mental health difficulties and impact on their self-worth.

Painful and empowering reflections

All of the participants reflected on their experiences with a mix of emotions – some painful, feeling hurt at how they were treated, and some empowering, with a look at what they have overcome.

The realisation that their (ex)husbands were abusive was a turning point in the life stories of the participants, and a painful memory to recall. Participants described how their (ex)husbands had hidden their true nature behind a charming, lovely and community-minded facade, typical of the kind and unassuming Orthodox Jewish man described by Goldberg and Yassour-Borochowitz (2009). Adina, living in the more 'Ultra' of the Orthodox groups, held an initial image of her husband formed by her matchmaker, with him only 'changing' after the birth of her first child, which she interpreted as trapping her. Eve only realised that he was to blame for their marital problems, not her, after she went to the therapy. For all of the participants, the emotional and difficult process of discovery is similar to Enander (2010)'s conceptualisation of the abuser going from 'Dr Jekyll to Mr Hyde', from good to bad – fostered by an increased cognitive and emotional awareness of their situations.

Alongside this growing understanding of their husbands was a shift in their sense of self. Participants reflected on this with a mixture of p ride and pain. There was shame, disbelief and a diminished sense of self, which accompanies RA across the literature on this topic (Ellis et al., 2022). Research shows that RA is so harmful because of its damage to a person's essence, as religious identity is so integral to a person's sense of self (Dehan & Levi, 2009; Bent-Goodley and Fowler, 2006) - indeed this appears to be true in this present study too.

Participants described internal conflicts of varying types, and unfolding emotions alongside it. For example, Adina had conflicting thoughts about the desire to become an advocate for others, alongside feeling intense shame and wanting to hide her experiences. Eve described the struggle with her mental health and the constant battle

between painful, self-berating thoughts, and liberating, empowering recognition of how far she has come. Clara experienced the internal conflict in viewing herself as a strong, intelligent woman, and yet also feeling incredible disbelief in how she has ended up where she is. Both Starr (2017) and Harris et al., (2013) speak of trauma's impact on sense-making: shattering and disrupting assumptions of the 'good world' and victims suffering a significant inner injury, leading to a loss of trust in oneself and others. This is evident in the battles which participants face: the painful view of the world being harmful, based on previous malicious experiences, and the struggle to rebuild a meaningful system which allows joy.

All of the participants spoke of the emotions which unfurled over time – a narrative that was weaved and which was the catalyst for many of them to seek change. The unhappiness and vulnerability which accompanied the feelings of shame discussed previously, eventually made way for anger and outrage. Loneliness was present also, and humiliation. Some of the participants speak of varying levels of acceptance which they experience presently. Working through these feelings was an important step in making a change, as shown also by Senter and Caldwell (2002). Anger was expressed at oneself, their (ex)husbands, men in general, the overarching system, and religion.

Both a feminist lens (powerful man abuses his wife) and a sociocultural lens (Orthodox man as spiritual authority) are relevant in this study and were used by participants to make sense of their experiences. A psychopathological lens was also applied, as participants described their husbands as cold, manipulative, selfish, a bully, or unable to cope with rejection. Cashwell and Swindle (2018) suggests that therapeutic work with survivors of RA must consider where the abused attribute blame and the meaning of their experiences - whether it is to God, religion, or the perpetrator himself. Therefore, their attributed meaning is of utmost importance to the story telling and recovery processes for the participants. Attributions to psychopathology are not unusual, and Senter and Caldwell (2002) also found that their participants described their exes as 'emotionally ill'. These conclusions form part of the healing and recovery process.

Frustrating experiences as a Jewish woman:

This theme captures a similar sentiment from each of the participants: that women are generally treated differently (and badly) compared to men in the community, and that there are particular leniencies granted to men which are not to women. This is perhaps most obvious in the Bet Din, where women were left feeling unsupported and disregarded. These experiences are not wholly unsurprising given what is already known in the literature (Ringel & Bina, 2007; Cares & Cusick, 2012).

Participants expressed feelings of anger and disappointment towards the Bet Din and also towards the Orthodox world more generally which has fostered gender norms, creating space for RCC to occur. There was immense frustration towards the general community mindset that the man is 'in charge' and the women sometimes silenced. These gender roles were seen to be a contributing factor to the religious coercion enacted by the (ex)husbands of the participants. Stark (2009) argues that coercive control involves the policing of gender stereotypes, and Cwik (1995) explain that role differentiation has clear value assignment, which is why women might be treated poorly. Adina, in particular, was subject to this in the stricter Ultra-Orthodox world, as she was expected to relent on her tertiary education dreams and to conform to the expectations of housewife and mother. Other participants were also told to give up work and adopt domestic duties. Some participants also referred to their (ex)husbands' use of spiritual authority as a means of control. Three participants felt less learned than their (ex)husbands, which gave the latter the tools to control, mocking their wives when she questioned things. This took a particularly heavy toll on Eve, as she started to second-guess herself and question whether she was a 'good Jew'. Band-Winterstein and Freund (2013) also found that when Ultra-Orthodox men are demanding with spiritual force, a woman is sometimes left unsure if the demands are simply what is expected of her as a Jewish woman, leading her to feel 'not good enough'. As such, the abusers used Jewish laws and scriptures to instill shame, guilt and fear: consistent with research by Cares and Cusick (2012), and Dehan and Levi, (2009).

Lastly, the degradations of the participants as women was apparent in their experiences, such as being treated as 'cook, housekeeper, sex object', or being spoken

to and treated in terrible ways by members of the community for not conforming to their standards. This was explained by the participants as an attitude towards them created by the gender imbalance present socially and culturally and is reflected in other literature on coercive control also (Baig, 2016).

Changed relationships

All of the participants reported a changed relationship with religion – either religious identity, practice, faith or relationship with the religious community. This manifested differently for each participant, which can be expected, as faith and religion are so personal and hold a unique place in each person's identity. Indeed, this is reflected also in Harris et al., (2013)'s literature review, which posits that spirituality after RA can be helpful, harmful or neutral, with individual experiences shaped by the varied ways that individuals apply religious principles and meaning.

As such, each participant experienced religious change in unique ways. Eve described a sense of loss, yearning for the beauty of religion which was present in childhood, and yet simultaneously holding anger and distaste for how it was distorted in her marriage. Adina took a different approach by completely removing herself from any religious connection, identity, practice or faith. On leaving her marriage, she found solace nowhere within Judaism, even within the other denominations or charities; this speaks to the level of hurt and betrayal she feels towards religion itself. Syzfer Lipinsky et al., (2024) offer a related explanation – where religious norms are used to justify violence, women are more likely to develop negative trauma-related cognitions which hinder recovery. In contrast, the remaining three participants kept their love of faith and Judaism, although there is complexity here too as they each described a battle with certain Jewish laws, remaining frustrated with rigid interpretations of Torah, especially those which favour men. This inner conflict is explained by Starr (2017), who posits that survivors of religious abuse may feel angry and disillusioned with elements of Jewish law yet remain passionately connected and a hold a desire to stay close to the faith. Clara in particular was exceptionally hurt by her (ex)husband's specific use of religion to harm her, knowing that her love of Judaism would make this more painful. She found it difficult to separate her religious and non-religious identity as they are so deeply

intertwined, which means that she also found it difficult to separate RA and other forms of abuse. Her experiences are consistent with Ellis et al., (2022)'s suggestion that the intertwining of religious abuse with other forms, and the misuse of religion in a religious household can cause significant spiritual and psychological harm.

Changed relationships with others – family, friends, community and community leaders or institutions – were also present in this theme, as participants spoke about expectations met or unmet by others, often alongside a broken sense of trust. Mixed experiences within the community are reported across the literature, with leaders and community members found to be both supportive and problematic at times (Cares & Cusick, 2012; Devoe et al., 2001). Two participants had opposite experiences to each other with their Rabbis: one found them extraordinarily helpful, the other felt betrayed and unheard. Still, both felt supported by family and friends, and were surrounded by sympathy and love. Bent-Goodley and Fowler (2006) found that some women don't share their experiences with others because they feel ashamed. This is present in this study too as participants felt conflicted between wishing to speak out about the abuse and to advocate, juxtaposed with the shame imbued on them either inwardly by themselves, or by others. Loneliness is overwhelmingly present for Adina, who lost her entire friends and family when she left her husband and the community. Cashwell and Swindle (2018) found that victims of RA often experience rage and betrayal directed not only at the perpetrator, but at others in the community who enabled the abuse. This is certainly true of this participant, who spoke despairingly of her community's complicity; the victim blaming and trivialisation which she experienced, alongside the intense isolation, could be considered as a secondary trauma for her, as suggested by the findings in Ellis et al., (2022)'s study.

Further reflections

This study was strengthened by my position as an insider researcher, as this created a sense of trust between myself and the participants, and helped me to understand their values, social cues, cultural subtext, context and 'language' - both literally and metaphorically. It was strengthened also by its rigorous use of IPA methodology and its adherence to Yardley (2000)'s quality indicators of excellent research.

This study was, however, limited by the small sample size. This was due to significant recruitment barriers, with women hard to reach and then difficult to engage – likely due to the process of recruitment through third parties, and because of the cultural and social stigma of the topic. The range of ages and temporal distance from the abuse was another potential limitation of the study, with two participants having several decades between the events of the abuse and their present-day circumstances. There is potential for recall bias to be a factor here, however, it is worth remembering that phenomenological research is not about the true reality or story, but rather what the person perceives it to be (Willig, 2013). The participants' memories may or may not be exact, but it is their experiences as relayed now, which matter.

The findings of this study offer clinical insights for psychologists who work with Jewish women who have been religiously abused. It highlights a need for cultural sensitivity and attention to religious nuance, ensuring not to dismiss or trivialise events which are spiritually significant to a woman. Counselling psychologists would do well not to assume that a client is disconnected from their faith as a result of their experiences, and where appropriate, should encourage them to draw on spiritual resources (Senter and Caldwell, 2002). Clinicians should also approach work with curiosity, without any assumptions about where blame is attributed – to the perpetrator, community, religion, or elsewhere. This is essential in establishing trust between client and psychologist, and creates safety around discussions of spiritual trauma, spiritual confusion, and their experiences of abuse.

There has been a sharp rise in antisemitism over the last few years, and a resulting pain and trauma within the Jewish community (CST, 2024). When working with Jewish clients, secular psychologists must acknowledge environmental influences on community and individuals as part of their work. Schnall (2006) discusses the growing mental health needs of the Jewish community, and it would be prudent to suggest that this has only increased since the events of October 7th. Counselling psychologists should take care to be empathetic, curious and open to understanding the influence of Jewish culture and history, and to consider competing traumas which might affect survivors of RCC.

Recommendations for future research

This study offers a broad perspective of the experiences of Orthodox survivors of RCC. Going forward, it would be interesting to expand on this further, perhaps to capture an understanding of the experiences of Agunot specifically, or women who are in the Ultra-Orthodox communities where RA might occur from fellow community members alongside their partners.

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