

Spiritual Abuse: An Additional Dimension of Abuse Experienced by Abused Haredi (Ultraorthodox) Jewish Wives

Violence Against Women

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Abstract

This article aims to conceptualize *spiritual abuse* as an additional dimension to physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse. Growing out of an interpretivist participatory action research study in a therapeutic Haredi (Jewish ultraorthodox) group of eight abused women, spiritual abuse has been defined as any attempt to impair the woman's spiritual life, spiritual self, or spiritual well-being, with three levels of intensity: (a) belittling her spiritual worth, beliefs, or deeds; (b) preventing her from performing spiritual acts; and (c) causing her to transgress spiritual obligations or prohibitions. The concept and its typology are illustrated by means of examples from the women's abusive experiences and may be of theoretical and therapeutic worldwide relevance.

Keywords

spiritual abuse, spirituality, ultraorthodox Jewish women, wife abuse

*Wife abuse*¹ crosses races, cultures, societies, socioeconomic statuses, and geographic environments. This phenomenon, for long underestimated and ignored, was defined as a social problem in Western societies three decades ago. It has been studied extensively since then in the United States, Great Britain (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Dutton, 2006; Gelles, 1979, 1997; Haley & Braun-Haley, 2000; Lundberg-Love & Marmion, 2006; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1981), and in southeastern, Middle-Eastern, and African countries.

Theories of wife abuse were first generated by academic scholars using a quantitative approach in the context of Western culture. Over the past two decades, qualitative studies have pointed to the particularity of the phenomenon in other cultural contexts (Badyal, 2003;

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Bhaumik, 1988; Da Silva, 1990; Fong, 2000; Makofane, 1999; McClusky, 1998; Newton, 2000; Sripichyakan, 1999; Yip, 1995). Some expressed the necessity of further research to bridge the gap between theory and practice in wife abuse intervention in various cultures.

This article broadens existing theories of wife abuse and increases cultural competency in practice. Traditionally, wife abuse was widely conceptualized into four dimensions (Carlson, 2008; Davis, 1995; Nichols, 2006): physical abuse (e.g., pushing, hitting, or injuring the woman), psychological abuse (e.g., making the woman feel bad or think negatively about herself), sexual abuse (e.g., forcing the woman to have sex against her will or relating to her as an object), and economic abuse (e.g., controlling the woman's resources and making her feel financially dependent). Based on an interpretive participatory action research study in a therapeutic Haredi (Jewish ultraorthodox) group of eight abused women, this article argues that the concept of *spiritual abuse* is required, in addition to physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse, to adequately reflect the experience of abused religious Jewish women.

Although the conceptualization arose from the study of a particular religious population, its significance and use may be extended to more fully understand and better help a wide range of populations for whom spirituality is a way of life or part of life. With the renewal of spirituality in Western culture, and its ongoing importance in most religious traditions, the spiritual dimension of abuse may be of relevance to social and mental health services in most societies.

The Israeli Haredi Community: A Particular Culture Needing Culturally Sensitive Social Interventions

The Haredi culture is deeply rooted in more than 3,000 years of Jewish tradition. It stresses the need to devote one's life to the Almighty, to conduct oneself according to Jewish Law, and to comply with the instructions of the *Gdolei hador*, the greatest rabbis of the generation. It encourages the implementation of Jewish societal values, especially that of a lifelong commitment to learning and teaching classical Jewish sources [Torah], a compassionate concern for the other, and family-related values. It is mainly distinguished by its all-encompassing religious lifestyle, its strict standards of religious observance, and its ideological choice to isolate itself to a great extent from the surrounding culture to preserve the traditional Jewish way of life (Friedman, 1991; Heilman, 1992; Heilman & Friedman, 1991; Shilhav, 1993).

Haredi communities exist worldwide. In Israel, the Haredi sector includes a wide range of orthodox religious streams, groups, and subgroups, each with different cultural emphases and customs. Haredi Jews are diversified by a variety of lands of origin and times of immigration. Furthermore, numerous Jews from nonreligious, traditional, or orthodox family backgrounds have adopted a Haredi lifestyle some time in their lives. Although the Israeli Haredi population is heterogeneous, the cultural and demographic characteristics of the Haredi sector as a whole clearly differ from those of the general Israeli population (Gurovich & Cohen-Kastro, 2004; Weil, 1990).

For historical, cultural, and political reasons, the Israeli Haredi population was at first reluctant to reveal its social and individual problems to social services (Dehan, 2004; Weil, 1990). This sector preferred, and in most areas still prefers, to hide problems or seek informal help first, especially the help of rabbis (Greenberg & Witztum, 1991, 2001). Nonetheless, it is opening itself up, little by little, to social welfare agencies and now recognizes the importance of cooperation with Israeli authorities to better deal with some serious social, economic, and culture-related problems that it is facing (Dehan, 2004). The Israeli welfare system, following the trend toward cultural sensitivity in the United States and Great Britain, increasingly acknowledges the need for cultural competency and more than ever makes an effort to become more responsive to the Haredi sector's needs (Ben-David & Amit, 1999; Dehan, 2004; Greenberg & Witztum, 1991, 2001).

Wife Abuse in Israeli Society: An Emergent Awareness

The awareness of Israeli social services and the academic community of the existence of wife abuse in Haredi society is quite recent and stems from the general shift in awareness of wife abuse in Israeli society. Until the late 1980s, the overall political and public belief was that there is no domestic violence in Jewish families (Steinmetz, 2002). Feminist women and organizations initially refuted this false assumption as they gradually opened shelters for abused women, the first one at Haifa in 1977. The infamous child abuse case of Moran from Tiberia in 1988 was a brutal eye opener to child abuse and indirectly to wife abuse as well. It was the catalyst for several amendments to the Juvenile Law, Intervention and Care, including the mandatory report of child abuse (Amendment no. 16 to the Punishment Law, 1989), and brought about an increasing number of child abuse cases being reported to social services. Those became the trigger for broader family interventions, revealing numerous cases of wife abuse. Legally, wife abuse was first addressed by the Law Against Violence in the Family in 1991. Based on the earlier report of the Karp commission released by the Israeli Minister of Justice in 1989, this law enabled women to demand that the abusive partner be forbidden access to the home for a limited period of time and mandated local authorities to provide services for abused women. The growing rate of complaints to the police by abused women and the number of women murdered by their spouses during the past decade, and especially the past few years (10 in 2004, 11 in 2005, and 12 in 2006), compelled the Israeli government to acknowledge wife abuse as an urgent social problem (Eisikovits, Winstok, & Fishman, 2004; Knesset Israel, 2006). The legal obligation to protect children and to help abused women has had the effect of boosting the provision of social services dealing with cases of abuse in all sectors of the Israeli population.

Wife Abuse in Haredi Society: An Evolving Field of Knowledge

The occurrence of wife abuse in Israeli Haredi society, although mostly hidden, is now supported by the reports of the official and communal services for abused Haredi women (Regev, 2007). Despite the increase in services and programs dealing with the phenomenon,

until recently there has been a dearth of research exploring it. Scarf (1988) divulged Jewish wife abuse in the United States, Cwik (1996) revealed that American rabbis are regularly confronted with abuse of different kinds and degrees, and Hasis (1996) presented the case of an abused Orthodox Jewish woman and the values underlying the staff's intervention at an American Jewish Community Center.

Twersky (1996) denounced the denial of wife abuse in American Haredi communities and Graetz (1998) in modern Jewish societies. They analyzed Jewish traditional sources concerning wife abuse and highlighted the clash between the religious obligations of husbands toward their wives and the harsh actual treatment of the abused wives. The importance of their studies is not only philosophical but also practical because traditional Jewish texts and Jewish law are an integral component of the day-to-day life of Haredim as well as a recommended part of the therapeutic discourse with them (Bilu & Witztum, 1993).

Steinmetz (2002; Steinmetz & Haj-Yahia, 2006) examined the attitudes of Israeli Haredi men toward wife abuse. She found that most Haredi men condemned abuse of women, although a small, but nevertheless nonnegligible, percentage of Haredi men, typically with lower levels of education, patriarchal attitudes, and of Middle Eastern or North African origin, justified violence in certain cases or attributed some mental health disorders to the battered women.

At the First International Conference on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish community held in Baltimore in 2003, Palant (2004) described her experience administrating a shelter for abused orthodox Jewish women in Israel. Besides special difficulties encountered by the women, unusual components to ensure in the shelter because of their religious lifestyle, and especially challenging difficulties met during the rehabilitation stage, she succinctly pointed to unique manifestations of abuse related to religious observance.

Clearly, there is a great need for further empirical research to better understand and better address culturally specific aspects of wife abuse in the Haredi population.

The Method: Interpretivist Participatory Action Research

This study was conducted according to the interpretivist participatory action research method. Participatory action research (PAR) encourages the study of real-world problems, values the input of the people acting in the investigated situation, and focuses on particularistic and local issues, although it may be the basis for the development of theories and models that are of interest in other contexts (Willis, 2007). PAR is especially well suited to meet goals of social work, such as the development of knowledge from practice and the change of the social order (Healy, 2001). It further links the traditional body of social work theories and modern professional discourses, which more recently shape social work practice (Healy, 2005).

Interpretivist action research generally has five characteristics (Willis, 2007): (a) The work is collaborative, with researchers and practitioners willing to work together at the theoretical, practical, and political discourse levels; (b) the setting is naturalistic and constitutes a sound basis for reflection and inquiry; (c) *phronesis*, or cultural understanding, is the goal, and it results in a doing-action or praxis aiming to alleviate suffering and improve

lives; (d) the process is participatory, so the people involved in the setting are part of the process; and (e) theory and practice interact, overcoming the discontinuity between the academy and the field of practice.

A Researcher–Practitioner Collaboration

The present study was based on the collaboration between an academic researcher and a practitioner. The academic researcher teaches about the Haredi community in two academic institutions in Israel and, prior to the present research, engaged in other studies of abused Haredi women during 2006–2007. The practitioner has 20 years of experience in social services in the field of youths at risk and has served for the past 4 years as the abuse coordinator of the Northern Welfare Department of Jerusalem, supervising social workers dealing with abuse in six agencies. The two of us met and spoke several times, considering how the academic researcher could obtain informants for her pilot research and discussing the innovative therapeutic group for abused Haredi women that the abuse coordinator newly started. During these discussions, the abuse coordinator revealed that she was facing a practical challenge, and we agreed to collaborate on an action research project.

A Naturalistic Setting and Informants Recruitment

Group processes have proven to be effective with abused women, and therapeutic groups were widely conducted as part of the effort of the Jerusalem Welfare Department to improve the services provided to abused women. Abused Haredi women remained a challenge, however: Not only did they generally refuse to take part in groups for non-Haredi women but, due to the especially high respect for privacy needed when working with the Haredi population, it was also long considered absolutely impossible to form a group of abused Haredi women.

The Jerusalem Welfare Department decided to reconsider this assumption and the abuse coordinator undertook the task. Of almost 60 abused Haredi women on file at the six agencies, 15 were identified as potential participants in a group of this kind; 13 of them accepted an invitation to discuss the subject with the coordinator; 9 were both willing and found suitable to attend the group; 8 completed the first series of group meetings and pursued a second series, much to the surprise of the staff.

The group was formed in January 2006 and met 17 times during a period of 6 months; the second series began in November 2006, and the group met 20 times during the next 6 months. The women were between 30 and 45 years old and had been clients of the social welfare agencies for a length of time ranging between 2 and 10 years; five were married, and three separated. The only divorced woman dropped out after the first two meetings. Two women were Haredi from birth, five were *ba'alot tshuva* (returnees to Judaism) who became Haredi before they got married, and one was a religious woman, who although was not Haredi preferred taking part in the Haredi group. The women each had between 6 and 12 children. They were trained as school teachers, kindergarten teachers, or secretaries but were not working outside the home at the beginning of the first series of group meetings. During the group treatment, two women were divorced, one entered a shelter, and four

women began to work part-time. The group sessions were conducted in the morning, without the knowledge of the husbands.

Naturalistic Data Gathering and Data Analysis Toward Phronesis

The abuse coordinator ran the group together with a copractitioner. To facilitate authentic participation, they immediately addressed the issue of confidentiality. Similar to other groups of abused women, they initially used the Power and Control Wheel. This tool, widely used in social agencies in Israel, was first developed in Duluth by abused women attending women's education groups sponsored by their shelter (Minnesota Program Development, n.d.). It places the power and control of the man in the center of a circle devised into eight categories: physical, emotional (psychological), sexual, economic, and verbal abuse; explosion of anger and threat; social isolation; and using the superiority of men.

The abuse coordinator became perplexed: Although this tool was found to be useful in helping women to both talk about and acknowledge the abuse they had suffered, it turned out to be incomplete for working with the Haredi group of abused women, some of whose narratives of the abuse did not fit this tool well. Together with the researcher, the coordinator decided to propose a concept that expresses the specific aspect of those unusual narratives. To do this, stories were first transcribed and then classified using a qualitative content analysis in which inductive categories or themes were derived from the stories (Flick, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). Throughout this process, a spiritual dimension of abuse was first broadly defined, then refined, and a typology of spiritual abuse was suggested.

At this point, the abuse coordinator presented the concept of spiritual abuse to the Haredi group of abused women. The women found it very enlightening and helpful. They felt relief as, for the first time, their experiences were grasped and verbalized. As they reflected on the suggested concept, they added further examples of the spiritual abuse they experienced, thus confirming the validity of the concept.

Extensive research for references to spiritual abuse in the professional and academic discourses confirmed the worth of the conceptualization, as worldwide the spiritual dimension of abuse has been mostly disregarded by academic scholars² as well as at the intervention level.³ At several presentations of the research and its findings, the professional audiences found this concept innovative and enlightening, and some practitioners told us it will be very useful for their work. Judging from the interest it triggered in the field, the concept seems to fill a gap and verbalize an essential dimension of abuse.

PAR is a living emergent spiral process, which moves from the action phases to the reflection stages and then to further action, depending on the capacity of the collaborators to individually and collectively use the evidence and findings as a basis to further develop theory and practice (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Thus, the abuse coordinator has integrated the findings into her practice, that of her department, and that of the social workers under

her supervision, making the typology of spiritual abuse an integral part of the intervention at the Northern Welfare Department of Jerusalem. Presenting the research findings to Haredi community members and organizations as culturally sensitive theoretical and practical knowledge arising from the work of social agencies with Haredi women turned out to be a means of strengthening their trust in the welfare system. The academic researcher and the abuse coordinator both included the concept in their teaching and are involved in the concept's dissemination. They plan to further explore the religious and spiritual components of the women's experiences while taking part in the next therapeutic Haredi group of abused women.

Spiritual Abuse: The Concept and Typology of Levels

Spirituality is typically used in a fairly broad sense to refer to the human sense of and search for transcendence, meaning, and connectedness beyond the self (Sherwood, Wolfer, & Scales, 2002). It has been defined as a "basic human drive for meaning, purpose, and moral relatedness among people, with the universe, and with the ground of our being" (Canda, 1989, p. 573). Spirituality may be very close to religiousness; however, this is not always the case as "the concepts of transcendence, meaning, and connectedness are inclusive enough to provide a basis for communication among persons with a wide range of beliefs and worldviews, including the non-theistic" (Sherwood et al., 2002, p. 3).

For Haredi Jews, men and women, spirituality is an integral, intensive, and all-encompassing dimension of life, as Jewish law demands the incorporation of spirituality into every facet of living (Pliskin, 1983). The material world, including the most mundane tasks such as eating, cooking, or even having sex, is made holy by being performed in accordance with Jewish law and with the intention of doing the Almighty's will. Any deviance from Jewish law is spiritually perturbing for the committed individual.

The term spiritual abuse has recently been used in the literature in the sense of the misuse of power in a spiritual context (Langone, 1993; Masis, 2004; Wang, 2007; Wehr, 2000). In the present article, however, the concept of spiritual abuse is used to define an entity that is ontologically different from physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse. In the context of wife abuse, spiritual abuse may be broadly defined as any attempt to impair the woman's spiritual life, spiritual self, or spiritual well-being. The analysis of the culturally specific stories told by the abused women at the Haredi group meetings led to a typology of three levels of intensity of spiritual abuse: (a) belittling the woman's spiritual worth, beliefs, or deeds; (b) preventing the woman from performing spiritual acts; and (c) causing the woman to transgress spiritual obligations or prohibitions. Because for abused women spirituality may be an important, if not the only means, of giving meaning to a life otherwise perceived as chaotic and without significance, damaging their spiritual life or spiritual self means damaging their very identity and well-being. This is shown in the following three examples of spiritual wife abuse selected from the women's numerous stories that did not match the existing conceptualization of abuse, each illustrating a different level of the typology.

Example 1

Prayer is a means of getting close to the Almighty and a very basic spiritual activity. Jewish men are required to pray 3 times a day; Jewish women must do so once or twice a day only, as their obligations as wives and mothers are time consuming (Feldbrand, 2003). One of the women told the group that her husband mocked and criticized her while she was praying, saying, "Your prayer has no worth," "you should rather be a good wife," "better to honor your husband first, and then you may think about praying." Her husband's words were hurtful and with time they altered her self-perception. However, devaluing the woman's prayer involved more than psychological abuse: By saying "your prayer has no worth," the husband was preventing his wife from feeling spiritually satisfied through her act of praying. He damaged her spiritual experience and abused her spiritual self; that is, he spiritually abused her.

Example 2

Jewish law recommends baking homemade bread for Shabbat (Saturday) on Friday, and for some this contributes to the creation of a Jewish home atmosphere. Separating challah, that is, taking a small piece from the dough and burning it (when baking with more than a certain amount of flour), is considered one of the three special religious commandments assigned to women. This act has several spiritual meanings and effects: It is worthy of a reward in the world to come, repairs the sin of Eve, and is a means for renewal and benediction, a way of atonement, and a special conduit for asking favors from the Almighty for oneself and others (Silbiger, 2000).

One woman related that her husband never allowed her to buy the yeast and flour she needed to bake bread, even when she explained that it was for the sake of performing the commandment of separating challah. The reasons he gave were "baking bread is a waste of time," "because of that we will be late for Shabbat" (which begins at a set time), "you should finish other tasks which are much more urgent." By not permitting her to buy the ingredients, bake, and separate the challah, he was not only controlling her expenses and devaluing her ability to bake, that is, abusing her economically and psychologically, but he also prevented her from performing a positive commandment and denied her the satisfaction of that spiritual act and of being the cause and recipient of its spiritual effects. In restraining her spiritual life and limiting her spiritual development and fulfillment, he abused her spiritually.

Example 3

According to Jewish law, a woman during her menstrual period has the status of *niddah*, which means that she is forbidden to be in physical contact with her husband, until she counts 7 clean days, without any trace of blood, and then immerses herself in a ritual bath called *mikve taharah*. This is also one of the three special commandments assigned to Jewish women. The prohibition of intercourse during the forbidden period belongs to the

strictest category of prohibitions, the transgression of which is punished by *karet*, a concept with several meanings, such as early death, the death of one's children, or being excluded in this world and the next from the Jewish people (Silbiger, 2000).

One woman in the group related that her husband forced her to have intercourse during her period. She described how terrible she felt, full of shame and unable to accept herself. She had the sensation of being far from the Almighty and unworthy of His love. From the point of view of Jewish law, the woman is not considered culpable, as she was forced into the act: She was a victim and not the offender. Having intercourse without the woman's agreement at a permitted time, itself a transgression of Jewish law, would have been an act of sexual abuse. However, by transgressing and forcing his wife to transgress such a central religious prohibition, the husband made her a participant in a very serious spiritual wrongdoing. He caused her intense spiritual pain, damaged her self-perception as a Jewish law-abiding woman, disrupted her connection with the Almighty, and destroyed her inner feeling of spiritual integrity. His act was an extreme case of spiritual abuse.

Acknowledging Spiritual Abuse

All the examples above could have been considered cases of physical, psychological, economic, or sexual abuse embedded in a particular cultural context, but this would not have reflected the spiritual dimension of the abuse and of the women's suffering. In the same way, it would have been inadequate to see only a case of physical and psychological abuse in one of the women's descriptions of how her husband repeatedly ate bread in a room already cleaned for the Jewish Passover, necessitating the cleaning of the room again and again. The woman's spiritual fear of transgressing the strict commandment of not possessing and not seeing bread during the 7 days of this holiday, on one hand, and the very essence and severity of the abuse committed by her husband, on the other, are reflected and understood only when the case is classified as spiritual abuse of the third level of intensity.

It seems that differentiating between the psychological and spiritual components of the abuse depends on the acknowledgment of the existence of spirituality. In other words, if a mental health practitioner or researcher has no sense of what spirituality means or is, spiritual abuse may seem to him or her a cultural kind of psychological abuse. However, although spiritual abuse may be interrelated with physical, psychological (emotional and cognitive), sexual, or economic abuse, as is the case in the stories presented above, the spiritual aspect of the abuse is an essential dimension of its own and often constitutes the focal factor of the women's experiences. The sensitization to this type of abuse is therefore an important constituent of cultural competency.

All types of abuse harm the abused woman's feelings. The conceptual differentiation between them stems from the identification of the essential channel or target of each of them and is crucial for effective interventions. When the abuser uses the realm of the woman's spiritual experiences and connectedness beyond the self to hurt her and when the main damage does not occur at the interpersonal level, but rather at the transcendental one, the focal dimension of the abuse is spiritual. Spiritual abuse puts the woman's spiritual life, spiritual self, and spiritual well-being at risk.

Toward Nominal and Operational Definitions of Spiritual Abuse

The examples of abuse given above were only some of those from the women's narratives referring to spiritual abuse. Apart from belittling the worth of the prayers or blessings, some husbands were accusing their wives of being too religious or not religious enough, of being ignorant of religious texts, or of having a very inadequate understanding of Jewish law. In addition to preventing baking for Shabbat, some forbade their wives to take part in important prayers at the synagogue or attend lectures on religious subjects. The lighting of Shabbat candles, Holiday candles, or candles for the elevation of the soul of a departed family member or holy person were also the subject of derision, denigration, and mockery. Some husbands extinguished the candles or forcefully prevented the woman from lighting them in the first place. Some did not include the woman in a religious lighting ceremony or in the *Kiddush* and *Havdalah*—benedictions over a cup of wine, at the beginning and end of Shabbat, respectively. Knowledge of the Haredi culture helps classify the narratives between the second and third levels of intensity of the spiritual abuse.

To arrive at a nominal definition of spiritual abuse, the typology of degrees of severity that arose from the analysis of the women's narratives in the therapeutic group and the consequences of the abuse as revealed through the illustrative examples should be combined with at least two additional critical factors discussed in the professional literature, namely, the intentions underlying the abusive acts and the frequency of their occurrence. If wife abuse is intended to show and reinforce control over the woman, and if it is better understood as a chronic and ongoing process rather than an isolated or episodic event, then spiritual abuse could be propositionally nominally defined as

damaging the woman's spiritual life, spiritual self, or spiritual well-being, by means of purposely and repetitively criticizing, limiting, or forcing her to compromise or go against her spiritual conscience, resulting in a lowered spiritual self-image, guilt feelings, and/or disruption of transcendental connectedness.

Recognizing, acknowledging, and conceptualizing spiritual abuse as an additional dimension of abuse engenders the need to propose an operational definition of the concept. The authors intend to review the relevant literature, to collect supplementary narratives from additional survivors, and to consult informed professionals to develop a well-validated and comprehensive screening questionnaire, covering the main range of spiritual abuse and differentiating spiritually abused women from nonspiritually abused women. This would be useful for intervention purposes but even more for the construction of a scale of spiritual abuse, as recently done with the economic dimension of abuse (Adams, Sullivan, Bybee, & Greeson, 2008).

Spiritual Abuse or Religious Abuse

While searching for a concept reflecting the women's experiences, we considered both the term spiritual abuse and religious-spiritual abuse. We chose spiritual abuse for three

reasons. First, it better reflects the experience of abuse, as the religious acts themselves are not at the basis of the suffering but rather the transcendental meanings attributed to them. Even in the Haredi cultural context in which spirituality is embedded in concrete actions directed by religion, spirituality is the main point, not religion itself. The woman's evaluation of the worth of her spiritual affiliation and acts, her suffering engendered by the nonperformance of a voluntary spiritual deed, and the shame she feels after having been kept from performing a religious obligation or forced to transgress a religious prohibition are not corollaries of the religion but rather dependent on her subjective understanding of it and connection to it. The second reason for this choice is that spiritual abuse more straightforwardly fits the whole-person approach, which acknowledges a spiritual self beyond body and mind. Lastly, spiritual abuse includes nonreligious spirituality as well. Focusing on the spiritual essence of the abuse while omitting its connection to religion has the advantage of expanding the use of the concept spiritual abuse to broad cultural contexts and populations.

Gender Issues in Spiritual Wife Abuse

A key question on wife abuse that emerges from the literature is whether patriarchal ideology is a cause of abuse (Haj-Yahia, 2003, 2005), or is it adopted by men suffering from psychopathologies to justify the abuse (Dutton, 1995)? Although focusing on spiritual abuse in the context of the Haredi family, additional questions come to mind: Is the hierarchy in which the man being superior in terms of religious duties and religious knowledge and Jewish law freeing women from some religious duties to give them the possibility to devote themselves to home making and child rearing (El-Or, 1993) linked to spiritual abuse? To what extent do gender differences and inequalities, as reflected in Jewish classical sources and the way of life in the Haredi society provide a favorable ground for spiritual abuse (Cwik, 1995)? To what extent do these questions arise from the academic tendency to blame ethnic cultures for the abuse prevalence, reinforce cultural stereotypes, and disregard the fact that abuse does not occur in all homes where traditional values are held (Marmion & Faulkner, 2006)? Are personal traits and mental health disorders of the husbands the main factors linked to wife abuse, including spiritual wife abuse? There is a need for empirical research to address these questions. As a first step, essays written by Haredi women on their spiritual experiences and gender issues (Heller, 2000; Kornbluth & Kornbluth, 2000; Slonim, 2008) may be helpful for examining gender, spirituality, and spiritual wife abuse in the context of Haredi ideologies and ways of life.

On the Relevance of Spiritual Abuse in Different Jewish Contexts

Before the Haredi group of abused women was formed, Dati (orthodox) women were treated within the conventional framework, together with nonreligious women, and the spiritual dimension of abuse was not noticed. In the Haredi group, spiritual matters were central and inherent to the women's lives, so spiritual abuse was openly spoken about. Once the concept was formulated, it proved to be insightful for the Dati woman of the

group as well. The same was the case during a program for the retraining of Haredi women in social work, which some Dati women entered for bureaucratic reasons. The latter said that they would never have brought the religious issues to the surface in a regular program but that, in the context of their group, they were very satisfied that those topics were dealt with (Dehan, 2004). The concept of spiritual abuse is thus without doubt useful in working with Dati women. It would be interesting to present other groups of abused women with this concept to investigate its relevance to them as well.

Most Haredi women known by social services, and most of the women in the group discussed here, are *baalot tshuvah* (returnees to Judaism). This raises the question whether the occurrence of wife abuse is indeed higher in this population or whether baalot tshuvah just turn to formal social services for help more easily than women who are Haredi from birth. In any case, further research is needed to explore the reasons for that discrepancy and to compare the phenomenon and experiences of wife abuse, including spiritual abuse, among these two Haredi subcultures as well.

On the Relevance of Spiritual Abuse in Different Cultural Contexts

In our continuous search for studies using the concept of spiritual abuse, we recently found two studies that underscore our findings, somewhat validate the definition and typology we have proposed, and support their possible relevance for practitioners and abused women in different cultural populations. The first one analyzes the accounts by seven abused Finnish women of their survival of intimate partner violence. Describing briefly the different kinds of abuse experienced by the women, the study reports that for those women “spiritual abuse involved preventing women from attending a church service or reading spiritual literature” (Flinck, Paavilainen, & Astedt-Kurki, 2005, p. 137). This description fits the second level of spiritual abuse, as defined in the present study. The second study aimed to foster cultural competency while dealing with domestic violence within African American faith-based communities. The study found that the participants in focus groups with abused women of three different churches expressed the need to broadly define spiritual abuse and to list the ways in which spiritual abuse may occur (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2008). Their concerns confirm the value of conceptualizing spiritual abuse and to propose a typology of its levels of severity as a means to help both the women and the practitioners to acknowledge and work through this kind of abuse. Both of these studies encourage further research to explore and investigate the unusual types of violence experienced in non-Western societies and to verify the relevance and adequacy of our definition and typology in other cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This article conceptualized spiritual abuse as a dimension of wife abuse in its own right, additional to the physical, psychological, sexual, and economic dimensions of wife abuse. The concept of spiritual abuse and the typology of its three levels of intensity contribute to enlarging the existing body of theory on abuse and provide an innovative means to improve the intervention of social services.

The ability to differentiate spiritual abuse from other kinds of abuse and adequately use the concept depends on the acknowledgment of spirituality as a component of life and of the spirit as a component of the self. It also requires the recognition that spiritual experiences may not only be a source of satisfaction and growth but also an area of vulnerability and abuse. Such awareness appears to be part of the cultural competency requested when working with abused women in many cultural contexts.

The present conceptualization of spiritual abuse invites further research that aims to explore this dimension of wife abuse and the ways it is experienced in all kinds of cultures, to elaborate comprehensive operational definitions of spiritual abuse against Jewish women and women of other faiths, and to incorporate those definitions both at research and intervention levels. The present study is only a preliminary step in this anticipated research process.

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Notes

1. *Wife abuse* is only one of the various terms used in this area. Other terms are wife battering, spouse abuse, spouse assault, domestic violence, intimate violence, violence against women, and intimate partner violence, to name a few.
2. See Gage (2005), Haj-Yahia (2000), and Nagae (2007) for examples of research in which the concept was not considered, although it could have been relevant.
3. Spirituality was not mentioned as a dimension of abuse in tens of sites consulted when this article was written, including MamasHealth.com (2000), National Youth Prevention Center (2001), Speak (2000), U. S. Department of Justice (n.d.), Womenshealth.gov (2008), and World Health Organization (2008).

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