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Women's coping in various spheres in society: Challenges and opportunities

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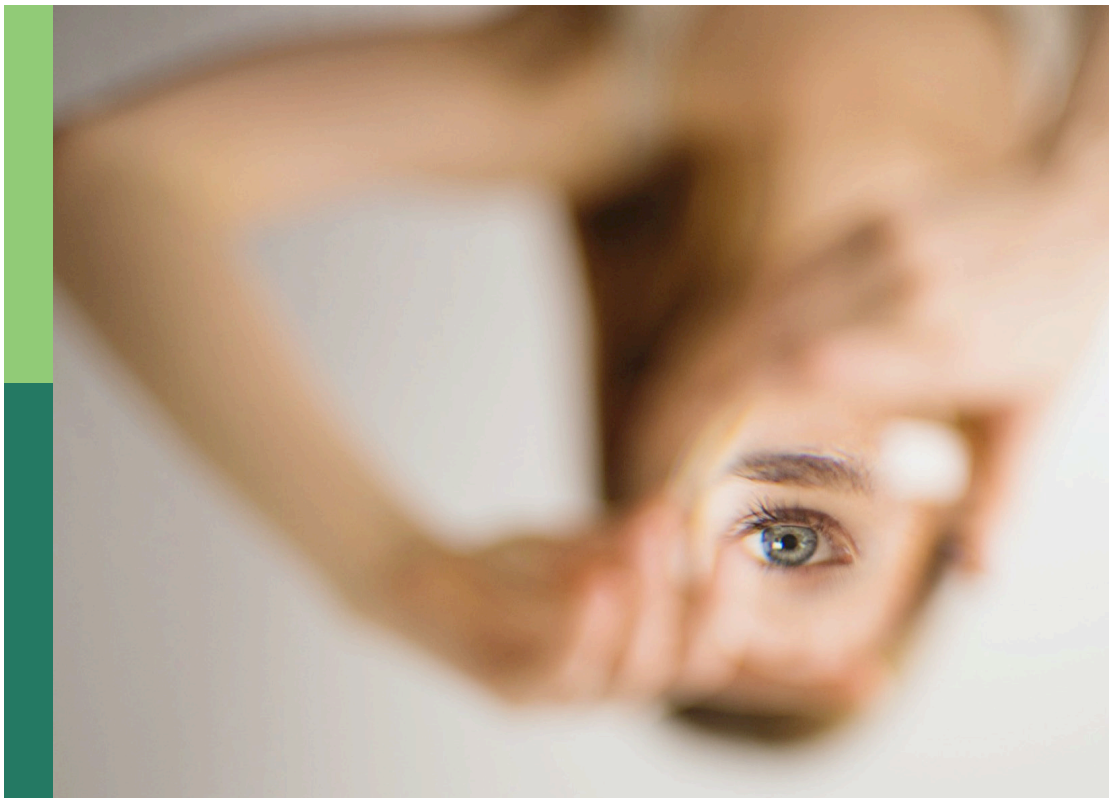

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Women's coping in various spheres in society: Challenges and opportunities

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Editorial: Women's coping in various spheres in society: Challenges and opportunities

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Women's coping in various spheres in society: Challenges and opportunities

Introduction

Women operate in various parts of society and in organizations, which have, in many societies, became extremely diverse in terms of culture, language, gender roles, competencies, and abilities. They experience challenges and stressful events throughout their lives (Braun-Lewensohn and Mayer, 2020). These challenges and events may affect their physical and mental health. This situation creates opportunities for each individual woman and for the development of a society (Mayer et al., 2018a).

Certain parts of society act in a gendered manner and gender biases often lead to gate-keeping, excluding women from certain spheres (De la Rey and Kottler, 1999; Mayer et al., 2018b). Women need to deal with a great deal of complexity on the local and global level. It has been argued that different core attributes might be helpful for dealing with complex and varied situations, such as curiosity, international experience, international management development, cross-cultural training, and intercultural sensitivity, as well as constructive development and psychological capital (O'Boyle Jr et al., 2011). Others have mentioned that the keys to managing a diverse and complex world are passion for diversity, intercultural empathy, and diplomacy (Javidan et al., 2016).

The aim of this Research Topic

This special issue explores women in various situations and contexts. We aim to demonstrate, through the various articles, the different ways in which women encounter, experience, and cope with stressful and challenging environments and events in various spheres of different societies. The articles collected here demonstrate how

these experiences contribute to women's distress, on the one hand, and to their growth, resilience, and leadership, on the other. These articles examine populations from many parts of the world, including China, India, Japan, Latin America, South Africa, Israel, Poland, and Spain, and describe studies based on different research methods. Ten of these studies were qualitative, seven were quantitative, and two were interpretive. The papers address themes such as employment (five articles), motherhood (five articles), armed conflict (three articles), and romantic partnership (two articles). Other articles in this issue concern attitudes toward lesbians, excluded young women, and the coping of an extraordinary woman.

The contributions in this Research Topic

Below, we present a brief introduction to the articles that comprise this special issue organized according to the different highlighted themes.

Employment

Gibbons et al. focus on higher education as a key driver of women's empowerment and claim that although women in Latin America well integrated as junior-level employees in academia, they are excluded from higher positions in this field. These researchers stress the importance of integrating women in this field and argue that doing so would promote the further involvement of women in education (i.e., providing role models for other women) and contribute to society in general.

Xue et al. address the career success of women in China, which affects the quality of their work and services. These researchers underscore the importance of this key factor for employment development, with a focus on the field of nursing. They suggest that managers should emphasize team stability and a sense of career success, to improve the resilience and satisfaction of female employees.

Jacobs and Barnard address the unique work environment of law enforcement. They highlight the experiences of women in this setting, which is highly aggressive, hostile, violent, and male-dominated. Despite the many challenges, they claim that women who work in this field are satisfied, resilient, and cope well. These authors report that these women feel authentic, present a mature sense of self, feel spiritual, and experience self-actualization.

Zinatsa and Donia Saurombe address a unique population within the workforce: tied migrants. They claim that, in addition to the regular challenges of the South African labor market, members of this population face additional barriers when they want to integrate in the labor market and that, for women, these challenges are even greater. These women face inequality due to their gender, race, and ethnicity and, therefore, they are not well integrated into the workforce and face both immobility and instability.

Kim investigated the value of female leadership in Japan, specifically its effect on diversity, an inclusion climate, and task-related positive attitudes of employees. She argues that there is a psychological mechanism by which female leadership contributes to positive attitudes of workers, which, in turn, facilitates a diversity climate and inclusion in the work sphere.

Studies addressing this topic in America, Asia, and Africa demonstrate the importance of this topic for women around the world. The authors focus on fields of employment in which women are still excluded and highlight the importance of women's leadership in various workplaces, to promote other women and to serve as role models for them. All of these papers note the importance of empowering women in different ways, including family support, religious faith, team stability, career success, and self-actualization.

Motherhood

Two of the articles in this special issue address maternal and parental stress in China. Chen et al. studied families that include a child with special needs (i.e., autism) and, more specifically, the relationship between maternal sense of parenting efficacy and parental stress. They found that maternal sense of parenting efficacy predicted parental stress in such families and that family interaction moderated the relationship between maternal sense of parenting efficacy and parental stress. Dong et al., who also studied maternal parental stress in China, found that depression mediates the relationships between parenting stress and marital satisfaction. Additionally, loneliness is a significant factor for parenting stress and depression, but does not significantly affect marital satisfaction. They concluded that mothers who experience high levels of depressive symptoms while also experiencing parenting stress report low levels of marital satisfaction.

Two other studies on motherhood explore stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic. A Polish study by Pieta et al. investigated pregnant women, social support, and body image against the backdrop of this pandemic. They stress the importance of the mechanisms that women can use to gain more body satisfaction during pregnancy, which, in turn, can lead to the planning of more effective psychological interventions, especially against the background of this pandemic and its related psychological distress. An Israeli study by Shoshi et al. explored mothers of preterm infants and their experiences of COVID-19. All of the mothers in this study reported cumulative stress caused by the infant's health and COVID-19 stressors. Those mothers also feared infections and loneliness. On the other hand,

they reported resources such as shared fate regarding the pandemic, improvements in their infant's condition, religious faith, emotional support from their partners, and support from professionals.

The last study on this topic, by Donath et al., took a unique look at Israeli women who are not sure whether they want to become mothers. Their findings question the typology of binary intersect and rigid classifications regarding women's reproductive decision-making. Those researchers found that while some women want to overcome their indecisiveness, others find that indecisiveness keeps options open for them and expands the boundaries of their autonomy.

Armed conflict

The three papers that deal with armed conflict address armed conflict in Peru, Colombia, Israel and the USA. These three articles address different issues related to women in this context. The Israeli study, by Daphna-Tekoah et al., aims to explore and understand the combat experiences and challenges faced by American and Israeli women soldiers during and after their service. Those authors suggest that there is a need for a unique method to be used in research related to women veterans, in order for that research to be adequate. They argue that female veterans' voices will not be fully heard unless we allow them to be active participants in generating knowledge about themselves.

The Colombian study, by González-Castro et al., addresses war-related violence against women and explores its impact on post-traumatic stress and recovery among women who have been exposed to such violence. Their findings provide strong evidence that recovery following such events is affected by the ways in which these women are treated by society and by their families. The authors stress the importance of examining PTSD and recovery through the analysis of social processes, as opposed to employing only an individual focus, and note the importance of incorporating the findings of such analyses into intervention practices.

The last paper on this topic addresses issues of post-war growth after horrific events that occurred as part of the armed conflict in Peru. The authors, Tavara and Lykes, aimed to create opportunities for women who had experienced such events to reflect on those stressful times. The authors engaged in participatory action research, in which a group of women initiated economic and collective projects. They found that the wounds from this armed conflict have generated many different forms of silence, which have prevented these women from openly expressing how they feel. These authors highlight the limitations of interventions based exclusively on verbal communication and argue for action-based approaches that draw on the knowledge and practices of the affected population.

Romantic partnership

Two papers from Israel address this topic from two different angles. The first paper, by Peichich-Aizen and Segal-Engelchin, explores the complexity inherent in relationships between a woman who does not have any children and a male widower who has young children. This article describes how many of these women feel that the deceased wife continues to be present in their partner's life and in their relationship, in a triangular system consisting of the woman, her partner, and his late wife.

Kook and Harel-Shalev examined a different sort of romantic partnership, focusing on the special issues that the practice of polygamy presents for minority women. They demonstrate the tension between the different mechanisms that the state uses to address such relationships and the mechanisms used by the women themselves. They suggest that the concept of ontological security can inform our understanding of the government's different motivations in cases related to minority women, violence, and the right to protection.

The last four papers deal with range of topics. A paper by Birger Sagiv et al. addresses social policies designed to help socially excluded young adult women. In a psychobiographical study, on Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton Mayer presents the coping skills of one extraordinary woman. Chhajer et al. address safety concerns as key factors that discourage women from traveling. Finally, Tzur Peled et al. examine perceptions regarding the quality of perinatal care provided to lesbian women, in terms of the attitudes of nurses from different ethnic groups, subjective norms, behavioral intentions, and assessments of communication and relationships.

Conclusions

The way forward

In this special issue, we aim to explore women in various situations and contexts. Indeed, the 19 articles included in this collection demonstrate—through qualitative, quantitative, and interpretive methods—different ways in which women encounter, experience, and cope with stressful and challenging environments in various spheres of life in different societies around the world. We can conclude that in both Western societies and more culturally traditional societies, women face challenges and mostly cope well with them. Some of them are universal; women around

the world still face conflicts regarding their workplace and regarding their motherhood and romantic partnerships, as well as challenges associated with armed conflicts. However, several challenges are unique to particular countries and/or cultures. One example, which is common in several developing countries and societies, is the challenge of studying and developing through higher education. Another more unique challenge, which exemplifies the conflict faced by members of a traditional culture within a Western country, is the challenge of polygamy and the way the state deals with that issue.

Many researchers and organizations around the world are currently working to promote and empower women. Still much work remains to be done, in order to close gaps and create a universal egalitarian society. Policymakers should become aware of the different studies collected here, which we hope will contribute to research-based, theory-driven policies and prevention and intervention programs to promote safe and equal treatment of women. Efforts made toward these goals will help women to better adjust and cope in different spheres.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Ontological Security, Trauma and Violence, and the Protection of Women: Polygamy Among Minority Communities

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In this article, we examine the special challenges posed by the practice of polygamy to minority women, focusing on the ways that the state and the women confront the related experiences of violence and trauma associated with this practice. Based on analysis of both policy and interviews with women, we demonstrate the tension between the different mechanisms adopted by the state as opposed to those adopted by the women themselves. We suggest that the concept of ontological security is valuable for a deeper understanding of the range of state motivations in cases related to minority women, violence, and the right for protection. Our case study is the Bedouin community in Israel. We explore the relationship between individual and state-level conceptions of violence and trauma and the complex relationship between these two. We examine state discourses of ontological security through a gendered lens, as frameworks of belonging and mechanisms of exclusion.

Keywords: minority women, challenges, ontological security, protection of women, polygamy, Israel

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INTRODUCTION

Central to the definition of a democratic state is its role as guardian of citizens' rights. Indeed, the history of democracy is to a very large extent the history of the evolution of these rights. A growing component of these rights has been a commitment to protect women's rights ever since the emergence of the feminist movement at the end of the 19th century. Thus, as hallmarks of political and economic development, contemporary democratic regimes – prompted by international organizations, such as the OECD and the UN – show commitments to the promotion and protection of equal rights for women and to the protection of women from violence (OECD, 2020; UN Women, 2020). Concomitantly, the discourse on women's equality, rights, and protection is increasingly being complicated by the inclusion of discussions relating to immigration, minority cultures and cultural values, and cultural belonging (Kagan et al., 2019), thereby raising fundamental questions regarding the nature of gender equality and the role of the state in guaranteeing equality and security for women.

A timely case in point is offered by an analysis of the practice of polygamy among the Bedouin minority in the south of Israel and of the recent policy changes of the State of Israel

toward this practice. Polygamy is a gender-neutral term for marriages with multiple spouses, regardless of the gender combination (in 78% of cultures, plural marriage is practiced as polygyny, that is, one man married to multiple women; Davis, 2010, p. 1966). While polygamy is acknowledged as a phenomenon which is potentially harmful and discriminatory, it is also widely acknowledged that the lived experiences of women in polygamous families differ widely from place to place, culture to culture, and society to society (Harel-Shalev, 2013; Cook and Kelly, 2006; Gross, 2008). This said, it is clear that polygamy is far more than a set of marital practices, with implications for members of the practicing communities varying according to the wider political, national, and cultural contexts within which it takes place. The disadvantages and modes of subordination experienced by members of polygamous communities intersect with varied and different hierarchies of power which may ultimately contribute toward embedded gender, national, or religious inequality. Polygamy is practiced in over 850 different communities the world over (Aburabia, 2011a). In many countries, polygamy is prohibited by law; in others, it is legal, in yet others it is illegal but tolerated, and globally, it is outlawed by international human rights laws. It is widely acknowledged by international agencies that polygamy constitutes a practice that is discriminatory and harmful to the women and children involved and poses many challenges on physical, economic, and psychological levels. In Israel, polygamy is illegal, but the practice is nonetheless widespread among the Bedouin minority community, and, up until recently, it has largely been tolerated by the State. Critics of the State's lack of enforcement of the law prohibiting polygamy have accused it of supporting harmful practices in a minority that suffers marginalization and discrimination and hence of abusing the rights of minority women, while proponents of the State's policy have defended it in the name of multiculturalism, cultural autonomy, and the protection of minority rights. Others have argued that Israel's failure to implement the prohibition derives from political considerations and the desire to coopt the dominant conservative Bedouin leaders (Boulos, 2019).

A change in the attitude of the State toward polygamy occurred in 2017 with the establishment of an inter-ministerial task force to make recommendations for combatting the practice. With the publication of its wide-ranging report in 2018 (The Inter-Ministerial Committee Dealing with the Negative Consequences of Polygamy Concluding Report, 2018; hereinafter "The Inter-Ministerial Report"), references to polygamy began to permeate official political discourse and became a common reference point for discussions related to the Arab-Bedouin minority. This discourse included the need for the protection of Bedouin women from violence as part of wider discussions of identity, gender, and identification with the Israeli state.

In this article, we examine the special challenges posed by the practice of polygamy to minority women, focusing on the ways that the state and the women confront the related experiences of trauma and violence associated with this practice. Based on analysis of both policy papers and interviews with women, we demonstrate the tension between the different mechanisms adopted by the state as opposed to those adopted by the women themselves. Our methodology is based on narrative and content analysis. The article critically explores the role of the state in guaranteeing the protection of women and investigates the wider contexts in which states formulate notions of gender (in)security. We suggest that the concept of ontological security is central for a deeper understanding of the range of state motivations in cases related to minority women, violence, and the right for protection. We explore the relationship between individual and state-level conceptions of violence and trauma and the complex relationship between these two. In addition, we examine state discourses of ontological security through a gendered lens, as frameworks of belonging and mechanisms of exclusion.

We make three main arguments. The first focuses on the relationship between individual and state-level conceptions of ontological security and the complex interconnectedness between these two narratives of "self." We propose that notions of ontological security play a central role both in the ways states formulate policies related to the protection of women and in the ways women narrate experiences of trauma and violence. We argue that the concept of ontological security may be used to promote our understanding of the role of the state in protecting women from trauma and violence by focusing on the particular interpretations of security that contextualize state policies in this regard. In our second argument, we suggest that policies aimed at protecting marginalized minority women cannot be fully understood without accounting for the relationship between ontological security and narratives of national belonging as they are promoted by the state (Stein, 2017). Finally, we argue that, in the context of multicultural politics, states often make strategic use of gendered narratives of ontological security, such as the narrative recently promoted by Israel with regard to the Bedouin practice of polygamy, to further entrench national narratives of belonging.

Literature Review

Ontological (In)security – Narratives of Self and National Belonging

The use of the notion of "ontology" as part of a wider focus on the fundamental elements of existence and being has become increasingly widespread in social science research, leading to what many have called the "ontological turn" (Todd, 2016; Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017). Generally, the concept of "ontological security" is employed to refer to the needs of individuals for a consistent sense of "self," as a necessary condition for leading stable and healthy lives, thus adding a non-physical component to the idea of security. One of the main scholars of ontological security, Jennifer Mitzen, defines the term as follows: "Ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency" (Mitzen, 2006b, p. 342). Psychiatrist RD Laing, one of the main originators of the concept, described the "ontologically secure agent" as someone who has "a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person," while its absence

"renders the ordinary circumstances of everyday life [as] constitute[ing] a continual and deadly threat" (as quoted in Zarakol, 2017, pp. 39–40, 50). In the sociological iteration of the term, emphasis is placed on the importance of routine forms of behavior and knowledge, known otherwise as habitualization or habitus (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). The promotion and maintenance of a coherent biography as a point of reference is an essential component of this routine. Thus, inherent in the idea of ontological security is the importance of providing for shared ontological structures that provide for a shared social context (Mitzen, 2006b).

Any analysis of ontological security, on the collective level, will thus draw attention to collective biographical narratives and to routinized practices as modes for its construction and sustainability, helping us to understand how such practices shape political possibilities and outcomes (Kinnvall, 2004). In the context of political science research, this perspective of ontological security suggests that state actors recognize the importance of ontological security in addition to physical security and act in ways that contribute to a stable sense of the collective "self" (e.g., Huysmans, 1998; Lang, 2002; Kinnvall, 2004, 2006, 2015; Zarakol, 2010; Rumelili, 2015; Subotić, 2016). It is, thus, currently commonplace to assume that states are ontological security-seeking agents (Mitzen, 2006a,b; Delehanty and Steele, 2009; Zarakol, 2017). From this perspective, the legitimacy of the state ultimately rests not only on its capacity to provide physical security, but on its capacity to provide *order* – not a particular content of order but the function of *ordering*, of making life not only possible and sustainable, but also intelligible (Huysmans, 1998).

States' conceptions of self-identity, in terms of ontological security theory, are constructed internally through the development of autobiographical narratives that draw upon national histories and selective historical moments to provide "comforting stories [about the self] in times of increased ontological insecurity and existential anxiety" (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 755). Whether related to the existential effects of modernity and liberalization or the far-ranging implications of mass migrations and regional conflicts, the need for a secure and continual sense of self is promoted and offered by the state as a necessary component of its physical, social, and political integrity (Giddens, 1990; Huysmans, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2011). The provision of ontological security by the state is often bolstered by the use of narratives that highlight the insecurity, dread, and anxiety that result from a lack of security. In general, as Kinnvall (2015, p. 518) has noted, the production of security is also the production of insecurity.

While the discursive construction of fear, anxiety, and threat is intertwined with a variety of factors and feelings related to processes of economic and political change, recent research suggests that over the past few decades, narratives of fear and anxiety are often tied into general feelings of shared cultural and/or national "loss" (Mudde, 2007). As reflected in the widespread rise of right-wing and populist parties (Norris, 2019), the promotion of narratives of insecurity that construct immigrants and multiculturalism as threats to identity appeal to the tendency of individuals to overcome their own insecurities by viewing minorities and immigrants as menacing the integrity of the national community and as obstacles to the maintenance of a continuous stable sense of collective self (Minkenberg and Pytlas, 2012).

Gendered Readings of Ontological (In)security

Scholars of feminist international relations have long paid attention to the different gendered assumptions and premises underlying state power (Tickner, 1996; Golan, 2015); to how centralized power is conceptually represented as embodying and representing "masculine" norms (True, 2003); and to how security studies have tended to devalue other aspects of "security," such as global inequality or environmental issues that are not within the "masculinized" understanding of security that focuses on war and conflict (Tickner, 1996, pp. 48–49). This disciplinary perspective underscores the fact that the sense of self that is constructed through discourses and practices aimed at promoting security is constructed mainly as masculine – rendering women and their rights and protection as subordinate and marginal (Tickner, 1996; True, 2003).

Shifting from a focus on constructions of masculinity inherent to security studies, recent research has looked at the different ways the promotion of ontological security by the state contributes toward the construction of femininity and issues of women's rights and protection (Kinnvall, 2004; Delehanty and Steele, 2009). Given that the provision of ontological security is connected to the knowledge that one's most intimate community is protected and secure within the larger political, social, and economic landscape, formulations of ontological security have roots in gendered concepts of family, intimacy, and home – and in the type of belonging that we associate with "home" (Massey, 1992; Mitzen, 2018). These connections, which rhetorically link the centrality of intimacy and home to a sense of security, add additional components to the political construction of femininity and womanhood. As Kinnvall (2004, p. 761) has noted, "The nation [becomes] associated with home, the place where the door will always be open for you, where a fire will be lit upon arrival and where you will receive the warmth of your mother's care. Essentialist views of women, men, femininity, and masculinity are at the basis of such family metaphors …." Kinnvall (2004, 2015, 2019) has contributed to an understanding of the gendered relationship between nation, security, and home and how this gendered conception is linked to ideas of the nation-as-family. She builds on significant previous research examining the nationalist trope of the woman as the protector and progenitor of the nation and how this trope has been woven into nationalist strategies (Berkovitch, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 2011). However, as Balibar (1991) and others have pointed out, images of gender, race, and nation are never far apart (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 782). In this sense, family metaphors have served to assign "others" to the ranks of second-class citizens, with women and minorities often being denied any direct relation to national agency and women from minority groups sometimes being perceived as

threatening the safety and stability of the nation (Rossdale, 2015; Gazit, 2020).

Finally, recent feminist scholarship on fertility policies has contributed to this perspective by expanding our understanding of the construction of women as progenitors of the nation and the way fertility policies engage with ontological-security narratives (Leuprecht, 2010; Stopler, 2011). As Turner (2001) noted, the state promotes the desirability of fertility and reproduction as a foundation of social participation, thereby underscoring the demographic objective of securing and sustaining the connection between reproduction and citizenship. Nevertheless, past and present experience has taught us that fertility policies set by states and communities to respond to their population's needs have more often than not ignored the rights and needs of the women recruited to carry them through and have privileged the rights of majority women over those of minority women. This preferential treatment is especially discriminatory against women in minority cultural communities who suffer from multiple levels of subordination. In these contexts, fertility can be seen as a component of security – when focused on women members of the state majority (Skey, 2010) – or as a threat and a component of insecurity – when focused on women members of marginalized or subordinate minorities. The discrepancy between the needs and rights of women as formulated by state legislators and as articulated by women themselves reinforces the need to explore vernacular expressions of ontological security alongside state-promoted narratives (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2016).

Thus, while significant research has looked at the gendered assumptions underlying discourses of ontological security, less attention has been focused on the propensity of states to employ narratives of ontological security when dealing with issues of the protection of women – particularly of minority women. The reality of minority Muslim women globally is a case in point in that they have been targeted both as an object of state protection and simultaneously as the embodiment of a threat to the state, thus serving a double role in discourses of ontological security. Moreover, the commitment of the west to protect Muslim women has been systematically narrated in terms taken from the discursive landscape of *ontological* security and less from that of physical security (Kinnvall, 2019). Thus, for example, certain Western states with high numbers of Muslim immigrants have passed legislation aimed at limiting, and in some instances prohibiting, Islamic gender practices, such as veiling, the maintenance of strong patriarchal authority within the family and, in extreme cases, genital mutilation, that are considered as discriminatory and harmful to women (Abu-Lughod, 1990). These legislative initiatives, which may be viewed as curtailing cultural rights, were justified as a part of the state's role as the protector of women's human rights but were narrated as part of the state's provision of ontological security to women (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Similarly, feminist scholars have analyzed the ways in which the United States justified its military involvement in Afghanistan (Shepherd, 2006) and Iraq by claiming that it was aimed at *saving the women*. Playing on anxieties and fears is also evident in references to fertility and "Islamic birthrates" made by some Western countries in the context of their "battle against terror" (Goodwin et al., 2005). Studies of anti-terror campaigns in Europe have documented how Muslim women are at times portrayed as "demographic bombs" (Goodwin et al., 2005), with both popular and state-promoted discourses using terms such as "demographic takeover" to refer to the high birthrates among Muslim immigrants (Busher, 2013). In summary, states can promote policies that are aimed at reducing or limiting practices that are seen as harmful to women and hence at enhancing their ontological security, while at the same time promoting policies that play into collective fears and anxieties regarding Muslim immigrants and citizens, thus promoting a sense of ontological insecurity for the other – security and insecurity woven together.

The Case Study: The Consequences of the Practice of Polygamy Among the Bedouin Minority in Israel

Israel is a state with a deeply divided society, comprised of multiple religious, national, and ethnic communities and with a power structure that is rooted in ethnonational divisions (Karayanni, 2018; Ariely, 2021). This ethnonational hierarchical structure is premised, primarily, on the identification of the primary political nation with the ethnoreligious Jewish nation. Although all Israeli citizens, regardless of nationality, ethnicity and religion, are entitled to fundamental civic rights, including the right to vote, the ethnonational hierarchy privileges the Jewish national majority over the Arab-Palestinian minority. This national dimension of the hierarchy is considered to be a central component of Israel's identity, as is also true for other ethnonational states (Waxman and Peleg, 2020).

The Arab-Bedouin Minority

The Bedouin community in Israel constitutes a minority within a minority. As Muslim Arabs, they are part of the Arab-Palestinian minority of Israeli citizens, a group made up of 80% Muslims and 20% Christians and constituting a minority of 18% of the total population (Abu-Kaf et al., 2019). The Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel – being a religious, national, and linguistic minority (Arabic-speaking in a predominantly Hebrew-speaking society) – thus embodies three overlapping cleavage lines (Ghanem and Rouhana, 2001). The minority as a whole suffers from institutional discrimination and inequality that is expressed in many ways, including discrimination in land ownership and property rights, discrimination in government budget allocation, and inequality in employment opportunities (Ghanem and Rouhana, 2001; Haklai, 2011).

The Bedouin Arabs, numbering approximately 230,000 individuals, constitute 3.5% of the Israeli population (Abu-Kaf et al., 2019). They constitute a distinct cultural traditional community within the larger Muslim Arab-Palestinian minority, but are, on the whole, poorer and more marginalized (Weissblei, 2017). Most live in communities in the southern region of Israel known as the Negev (Nasasra, 2017). Most of the Bedouin municipalities fall within the lowest clusters of the socio-economic status index (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019), with

estimations that almost half of the Bedouin men are unemployed, and levels of women's unemployment reaching 78%.

While there are shades of variation among the different Bedouin communities, Bedouin society is, on the whole, a patriarchal society that abides by the norms of tribal tradition (Allassad-Alhuzail, 2018). Since the 1970s, Bedouin women have been subjected to conflicting processes. On the one hand, the weakening of traditional norms has granted girls and women access to higher levels of education and more varied employment opportunities (Harel-Shalev et al., 2020). On the other hand, the ambivalent and partial incorporation of modern norms and practices has made room for the entrenchment of deep patriarchal control over women, which is manifested in the persistence of traditional practices, such as polygamy and honor killings (Aburabia, 2011a; Yazbak and Kozma, 2017).

Polygamy in the Bedouin Community

Since its establishment in 1948, the State of Israel has granted full religious autonomy to all its religious communities. The implications of this religious autonomy are that issues of personal status fall under the exclusive authority of religious courts, with the exceptions of permitted age of marriage and polygamy. Although polygamy is permissible under certain interpretations of Islam and Judaism, Israel chose to limit religious autonomy over this marital practice and to prohibit and criminalize it under the Israeli Penal Law (Aburabia, 2011a). Despite the legal prohibition, over the years, the government has systematically failed to enforce the law, leading to the situation that over the past decade, 20–40% of Bedouin marriages in the Negev are believed to be polygamous (The Inter-Ministerial Report, 2018; Boulos, 2019). The consequences of this practice for the Arab minority in general and for the Bedouin community in particular are far-reaching. Polygamy results in higher levels of poverty, lower educational attainment for school children and for women, and, as we demonstrate below, overall impact on mental health and stability. These outcomes are felt by the entire community and are not limited to the polygamous families themselves (Aburabia, 2011a). Within these polygamous families, the husband will set up separate households, each with two to four wives. It is difficult to quote precise statistics regarding the number of polygamous marriages in this community, since to avoid criminal sanctions, most polygamous marriages are conducted in private religious ceremonies that are not registered in official records (Abu al-Asal, 2010; Boulos, 2019). There are, however, some data showing that over the past three decades, there has been a consistent number of polygamous marriages in the Bedouin society in Israel, irrespective of age, education, or socio-economic status (Aburabia, 2017).

To fully grasp the impact of polygamous realities on Bedouin women, it is necessary to examine these realities within the wider context of Bedouin patriarchy. As noted above, Bedouin communities continue to be characterized by a deepening of the existent patriarchal control over women (Aburabia, 2011b, 2017). Women are expected to maintain customary feminine roles within the home, including primary if not exclusive responsibility for childcare, care of the household, and care of the husband. Moreover, the authority of the traditional extended family structure is expanding, and it continues to maintain authority and control over every aspect of women's lives (Aburabia, 2011a; Richter-Devroe, 2016). In parallel, data indicate that domestic violence is on the rise (Yazbak and Kozma, 2017; Allassad-Alhuzail, 2018). For decades, the Israel government has proactively supported traditional and tribal leaders and reinforced patriarchal institutions that foster submission and obedience as a means to lowering the costs of controlling the local population (Hasan, 2002; Boulos, 2019). In this respect, the status of Bedouin women is strongly affected by state policy.

However, in the context of the Israeli case, arguments that support the toleration of traditional customs, such as polygamy, in the name of cultural autonomy (The Inter-Ministerial Report, 2018) have been confronted with mounting evidence as to the harmful and indeed violent ramifications of polygamy for the women themselves and their children. Studies conducted from both within and outside the Bedouin community have, for example, indicated higher rates of mental health issues in polygamous women compared with monogamous women, including a higher prevalence of low self-esteem and depression (Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo, 2008; Shepard, 2013). Moreover, there is some research-based evidence that women in communities in which polygamy is prevalent tend to suffer from anxiety even when they are not personally involved in polygamous marriage, since they frequently worry about what would occur should their husbands decide to take a second wife (Al-Krenawi and Lev-Wiesel, 2002; Abu-Shareb, 2017).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our research is based on two main sources. To investigate government policy toward polygamy and the overall perception of ontological security from the state's perspective, we based our study on content analysis of policy documents, public speeches, and media coverage. To investigate the perspective of the women themselves regarding trauma and violence within the context of polygamy, we conducted group interviews and analyzed previously published personal narratives of women in polygamous families.

Content Analysis

Our investigation of government policy is based on a careful reading and content analysis of two main sets of documents. To perform the content analysis, we read through the documents multiple times, discussed them together, and identified common themes. We then organized the content accordingly (Bengtsson, 2016). The two sets of documents are as follows:

1. The first is the government report published in 2018 and the related Knesset discussion protocols. We focus mainly on this report as it was the first significant government report on the issue ever produced;
2. The second included print and digital media articles regarding the report which showcased government official positions. In Israel, there are several news media outlets. Based on

the Internet searches that we conducted, it became apparent that there were two main media outlets that published items related to our research. These included Haaretz and Yisrael Hayom – both news outlets which boast a very high readership and that cater to different audiences. Both of these news outsets appear digitally and in print. In addition, it is important to note that these two reflect the spectrum of political positions in Israel – from left leaning to right leaning (Korn, 2021). These articles included government official's public statements about the report in particular and polygamy among the Bedouin community in general. It is important to note that as we were investigating the positions voiced by the official government, the items we chose were those that reflected the position of the leading coalition at the time led by then Prime Minister Netanyahu. The items we chose to discuss are representative of the way the government position was represented.

In our analysis, we identified several main themes which came up in the 2018 report's analysis and which invoked central theoretical concepts from the study of ontological security. Accordingly, after identifying the main themes in the government report (our main source), we then collected media coverage and leading government official's public statements concerning the report and conducted narrative analysis based on these themes.

Interviews

Our research of the women's perspective is based on both group and individual interviews. During the last 4 years, we conducted four group interviews with 32 women, in polygamous and non-polygamous relationships, asking them about their lives, about their relationships, and about the topics of divorce and polygamy. The setting of group interviews is seen as uniquely suitable for facilitating critical feminist epistemologies in that group interviews can promote diverse forms of expressions of women's insights and the shared, co-construction of knowledge (Kook et al., 2019; Kaplan et al., 2020). The interviews were conducted with 32 women divided into four groups, each group including eight adult women, with an age range chosen to represent different generations – that is, from 21 years of age to 60 years old. The women were from both recognized and unrecognized villages in the south of Israel. The research population is, of course, not representative of all Bedouin women; nonetheless, the group interviews gave us important insights derived from the field and from the dynamics that emerged within the groups. We employed a research assistant who facilitated both the recruitment process by snowball technique (see Cohen and Arieli, 2011) and the moderating of the groups. The research assistant conducted the interviews in Arabic and Hebrew. She translated the Arabic language segments into Hebrew in the transcription. Interviews were semi-structured and included questions related to everyday life, gender relations, family, marriage, and divorce. At the start of each session, the interviewees were assured of confidentiality and were asked to sign an informed consent form. Each group interview lasted between 120 and 160 min and was audio-taped and transcribed. In addition to our primary sources, in our analysis, we included secondary sources as well – narrative analysis of 23 personal interviews conducted by Insaf Abu Shareb, a human rights lawyer with years of experience working with women in polygamous relationships. The age range of the interviewees was between 21 and 70 years of age. They were from both recognized and unrecognized villages in the south. The transcriptions of these interviews were included in a public report submitted to members of the Israeli parliament in 2017 (Abu-Shareb, 2017). This report constituted one of the sources that the Government Report of 2018 was based on, and therefore, we decided to include these interviews in our analysis as well.

Analysis of the interview materials was in keeping with feminist narrative research that seeks to uncover previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience. We used narrative analysis to process the material. Listening to the women's narratives enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of the various implications of polygamy, in line with the notion that there are various narratives of knowledge among women (Ackerly et al., 2006). In narrative analysis, scholars typically direct their research to working *with* narrative and *on* narrative (Bamberg, 2012). In working first with narrative, knowledge is constructed in a bottom-up direction. In the second phase, on narrative, we analyzed the interviewees' narratives, by paying special attention to the ways in which individuals conform to and confirm existing social and political norms and circumstances (Wibben, 2011).

Ethical Approval

This research was approved by the Human Subjects Research Committee, Ben-Gurion University – approval number 1782-1.

RESULTS I

Women's Perspectives

Opinions regarding the practice of polygamy within practicing cultures frequently vary within societies and families, across age groups, and gender, even among and within those who practice it (Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo, 2008). Furthermore, perspectives of polygamy have been documented as varying even among the respondents themselves (Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo, 2008; Shepard, 2013). Interview-based research on women from polygamous Bedouin families has provided evidence of the prevalence of feelings of humiliation, fear of physical violence, a deep sense of existential insecurity and isolation, and uncertainty about their self-identity and belonging (Huss and Cwikel, 2008; Abu-Shareb, 2017; Hassan, 2019; Sa'ar, 2020). Moreover, research indicates significant prevalence of mental health issues in polygamous women compared to monogamous women, including higher prevalence of low self-esteem, somatization, depression, anxiety, and psychiatric disorder in women involved in polygamous marital relationships (Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo, 2008; Shepard, 2013). While some studies suggest better treatment toward

first wives and their children, there is evidence among the Bedouin community that suggests that even first wives and their children are often neglected by their husband, since the first marriage is often dictated by tribal custom, while the second might be a product of choice among the partners (Al-Krenawi and Graham 2006; Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo, 2008; Aburabia, 2017). The second wives are also a victim to this practice since their rights are fewer than women in monogamous marriages (Aburabia, 2017), and apparently, they suffer from similar mental health problems. In fact, research indicates higher levels of potency and lower levels of wife abuse among monogamous as compared to both first and second polygamous wives (Al-Krenawi and Lev-Wiesel, 2002). Furthermore, women in societies in which polygamy is prevalent might suffer from anxiety even when they are not personally involved in a polygamous marriage, since the decision of husband to take a second wife is always present (Al-Krenawi and Lev-Wiesel, 2002; Abu-Shareb, 2017).

In many cases, the uncertainty regarding their sense of self is related to the fact that, for most women, exiting a polygamous marriage within the traditional Bedouin community is not a realistic option, given both the extremely negative social implications of divorce and the lack of support given to such women by their families and communities (Abu-Shareb, 2017; Harel-Shalev et al., 2020). Given the centrality of community and family in a coherent sense of self in Bedouin society, threats to this sense of self can have significant consequences, particularly for women (Aburabia, 2011a). Many Bedouin women in polygamous marriages experience existential insecurity: They have reported a general feeling of helplessness, particularly given their lack of trust in their community and the ability or desire of the state to provide assistance. This lack of trust is enhanced by their reality of dire poverty and their limited access to sources of support and funding. These women often shoulder the burden of providing for their families, while being regularly abused by their husbands, both emotionally and physically, in some cases, even being prevented from access to basic services of healthcare, employment, and education (Abu-Shareb, 2017).

The findings from our narratives correspond well with these observations and emphasize the harsh realities. We now bring a few examples that exemplify this. It is important to note, that in most cases, the women did not express objections to the custom *per se*. They emphasize, however, the deep ontological insecurity that surrounds them in this context.

Here is an example of a woman with 12 children, in a polygamous marriage, sharing her experiences (Abu-Shareb, 2017):

> I married when I was 16, and it was fine. Then, after he decided he wants another wife, my life turn to a nightmare. He went to live with the second wife and rarely came to visit us. A year later he left us completely, no visits, no support, no nothing. We were divorced by the tribe with no official papers, so I couldn't receive support from the state. 12 people [referring to her kids] with no income, no support, hunger and poverty. All the burden is on my shoulders all the sudden. I feel exhausted.

As is evidenced from this narrative, polygamous women experience extreme difficulty and express extreme frustration. In addition, they describe a deep sense of ontological insecurity, uncertainties about their future, and about their self-identity (Abu-Shareb, 2017):

> I am married as a second wife. Before that I was married to a relative of my family, a violent man. I married very young. He was violent and unbearable. I had three kids with him. One day he hit me in front of many people outside the village. People called the police and an ambulance. Off course, my kids were taken away from me, although the court's verdict ruled that I have the custody. I was transferred to a secret shelter after the recovery at the hospital.

> After some years, I met a man who promised to protect me, he was married. I agreed to marry him. He is the father of three of my children. We were poor, after some time he went back to his first wife and left us. I am poor, I had nowhere to go since my family expelled me, I had to move in with my mother-in-law, I am afraid to go out of the house, since I will probably be killed.

> We were living with my mother-in-law who receive a small stipend from social security. I can't buy a closet so our cloths are in plastic bags. I am suffering since I cannot provide for my kids. I turn to legal aid to receive individual support, it was a very long battle, with ups and downs, at the end I got this. And I have some air. I can provide for my children now and make them happy. I will not stand helpless anymore.

The individual stories of the women were difficult and involved elements of fear, violence, poverty, and the sense that there is no one to turn to – doubts in their self-identity and anxiety about their status in their community. Most narratives indicate that when a state stipend is available, it is helpful; however, in most cases, this requires a long and expensive legal struggle. In other cases, state support goes to the husbands. These battles leave the women feeling abandoned (Abu-Shareb, 2017):

> Nobody cares about me. I don't have the energy and the courage to continue.

Another woman emphasized that even if the husband remains and is not violent, the pain is unbearable (Abu-Shareb, 2017):

> I am a first wife, he later married two additional wives. I never felt comfortable in this marriage. Even before

> he married he threatened that he would remarry and it hurt me. After his 2nd marriage I suffered more. When he got married I felt like someone stabbed me in the chest, this pain is always there in particular when I rethink about these humiliating moments. I cried and even tried to kill myself. I was very angry but I didn't think of divorce. There was no reason for his additional marriage but his family encouraged him. To my family it was an ordinary thing, they don't care. We and the other wives are not treated equally … I demanded alimony and I got it from him, after a court verdict. He comes to visit us, but he is missing in the house in our routine. He is not what he used to be. I feel that I am lacking something; I feel that something is wrong with me. I nevertheless, moved on, with my kids; slowly, I became independent and responsible for my home.

As evidenced in this narrative, divorce in the context of Bedouin society is not an easily accessible option. Despite rising rates of divorce partially related to polygamy (Aburabia, 2017), being a divorcee continues to be a highly vulnerable status for women – one that often entails severe social and economic hardships that keep some women imprisoned in a highly subordinate relationship with the larger community (Harel-Shalev et al., 2020). As some of the interviewees claim during a group interview, we conducted:

> If you get divorced, it is hell.

Others, in a different group interview, describe the option of divorce as a "black stain" – women describe divorced women as weak and limited, entailing severe limitations to appear un-chaperoned in the public sphere:

> Their parents and the extended family do not allow divorced women to go out … It is a black stain of the family.

At the same time, some of the divorcees are forced into polygamous marriages since it is considered worse off being divorced than being in a polygamous relationship (also see Hassan, 2019; Sa'ar, 2020).

Most women do not get divorced and those who chose to leave polygamous relationships talk about being forced to leave their community and feeling abandoned (Abu-Shareb, 2017):

> I was in polygamous marriage, a second wife. At first it was relatively fine, but then the violence started. My husband used to hit me all the time, even when I was pregnant …. I had to run away to a shelter, although it is unacceptable in our society. They took my kids away from me to their father. The whole process was run by men and they decided what would I do and how, I didn't have a choice … I lost my kids.

These women often worry about their status in their community and their self-identity – they would rather not leave their community but at the same time they worry about their lives. Some women noted that polygamy is a part of their religion and tradition, and some even admitted that "if the man takes care of all his wives" then it might work. Others rejecting the idea altogether. All were very skeptical that the state could intervene and make their situation better.

We are aware that in some cases, women join polygamous marriages as a second or a third wife, in order to gain the status of a married women, to be "secure" and find shelter (Hassan, 2019; Sa'ar, 2020). However, in our research, the narratives by the interviewees, both among first wives and second wives in polygamous marriages, reflect several recurring themes. Overall, women in polygamous marriage are often presumably married but they need to take the burden of providing for their families by themselves, and they are regularly abused both emotionally and physically, and often are even prevented from gaining basic services of healthcare, employment, and education. Some of these women have no support whatsoever from their families and their husband's family and are often neglected by the state as well. Their ontological insecurity is evident and striking they feel humiliated and often experience both emotional pain and physical pain. Many shared that they felt unaccepted by the community – they lost their status in their tribe. Nevertheless, in this deep sense of helplessness and ontological insecurity, many of them shared their efforts to overcome the obstacles.

RESULTS II

The State's Perspective

In Israel, a state founded within the geopolitical context of widespread opposition and resistance, issues of physical security have always been central to government policy (Barak and Sheffer, 2009). Objections of Arab states to Israel's existence were, from the onset, not limited to its physical presence but also intertwined with opposition to its identity as a Jewish state and therefore to its *ontological identity*. Thus, over the years, Israel has sought not merely to guarantee its physical survival, but also to gain acceptance and recognition of its identity as a Jewish state and hence of the authority of its political institutions to provide the Jewish people with a concrete representation of their national identity and a secure ontological framework. Indeed, for many of the neighboring Arab states, as well as for the stateless Palestinian people, the centrality of Israel's self-declared identity as a Jewish state has constituted a focus of opposition on the basis of its exclusionary attitude toward non-Jews, in general, and Arab-Palestinians, in particular (Barak and Sheffer, 2009). It is in this wider context of the centrality of identity in the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflict that scholars have recently adopted the concept of ontological security to investigate the dynamics of the conflict and attempts at its resolution (Mitzen, 2006b; Rumelili, 2015; Subotić, 2016). Israel's efforts to promote and maintain its identity as a Jewish state in the wider context of ontological security are, however, not limited to the international arena.

On the contrary, the main policy efforts aimed at securing this identity take place within the domestic arena. Within the domestic arena, two discoursive elements have emerged as central to the discussion about identity: The first is the discourse of demography which links between the ability of Israel to maintain its identity as a Jewish state and the demographic balance between Jews and non-Jews, and the second is the discourse of modernization which links between Israel's identity as a democratic state and its modernizing role in the larger Middle Eastern landscape.

One of the prominent policy acts of the Israel government in the domestic context was the passing, in 2018, of the Basic Law: Israel as Nation-State of the Jewish People, informally known – and referred to here – as the Nationality Bill. This law, legally enforcing Israel's identity as the nation-state of the Jewish people, states that the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people, that Hebrew is the official language and that therefore implicitly that the heritage and history of the Jewish people is the state's sole tradition. The Nationality Bill, promoted by Prime Minister Netanyahu, offers a narrative – story with meaning, a story about belonging, and a story about identity. The Law provoked a great deal of controversy within and beyond the country, although many noted that it merely entrenched in law what was already known (Lustig, 2020). Seen through the lens of ontological security, however, its purpose becomes clear. To the extent that narratives of ontological security are basically stories that states tell themselves and the international community about their own identity, the narrative promoted by the Nationality Bill tells a story about what Israel is and the conditions necessary for making Israel secure in this identity. By legislating the identity of the state, the Law can be seen as providing Israelis with a stable and secure framework that ensures the continuity and integrity of their national identity by explicitly defining who belongs and making clear the hierarchies of membership. Within this story, the non-Jewish, Arab minority communities have a tenuous and, some may say, insecure role.

Israeli Policy Toward Polygamy – Engaging With Ontological (In)security

The publication of the Inter-Ministerial Committee's Report on polygamy, and the ensuing public campaign that accompanied it, preceded the passing of the Nationality Law by 1 year. From the perspective of the proximity of the two events, we suggest that Israel's campaign against polygamy can be read as a chapter in the master narrative of its ontological security, and in its spirit, a chapter that highlights its gendered elements. The "polygamy campaign" tells a story regarding the essence of Israel's identity and about who belongs and who does not. Moreover, and most significantly for this article, the polygamy campaign presents gender identity as an explicit and central actor in this narrative. While gender is always implicitly present in security narratives, analysis of the polygamy campaign through the lens of ontological security exposes the ways gender informs our sense of individual and collective self.

As noted above, polygamy is illegal in Israel and constitutes a criminal offense under Israeli law. The prohibition dates back to the promulgation of the Women's Equal Rights Law in 1951, which included a clause specifically declaring polygamy as illegal. Overall, this law has played a seminal role in establishing women's formal equality, by determining the legal boundaries of state intervention in family matters and by imposing what were at the time normative notions of femininity, family values, and overall gender roles (Berkovitch, 1997; Aburabia, 2011a). However, as Aburabia (2019, p. 311) has noted, while the Women's Equal Rights Law defined women's citizenship, the "citizenship of Muslim women was not at the core of the debates and was indirectly defined as secondary and marginal to the main definition of Jewish women's citizenship." According to Aburabia (2019), the criminalization of polygamy needs to be understood within the wider context of the exclusion and marginalization of the Arab minority and the lack of recognition of their interests, identity, and rights.

The above notwithstanding, over the years, the legal prohibition against polygamy has not been enforced. By 2018, only a handful of polygamy cases had been brought before the courts, with few convictions (Ben Zikri, 2020a). Similarly, until recently, the issue of polygamy has received scant media, popular, or even academic attention. Until the 2000s, the little attention that was paid to polygamy was almost exclusively in the field of mental health, with numerous studies focusing on the challenges faced by women in polygamous realities. Data were (and still is) hard to come by, but the government's seemingly indifferent attitude supports Aburabia's claim regarding the significance of the wider context of marginalization suffered by the Arab-Palestinian minority. Other scholars have made the stronger claim that the lack of enforcement derives from the interest of the government in cooperating with conservative patriarchal forces (religious and tribal leaders) within the Palestinian community (Hasan, 2002; Boulos, 2019).

This attitude of neglect changed abruptly in 2017 when Ayelet Shaked, the then Minister of Justice and member of the right-wing party *Habayit HaYehudi*, declared "war on polygamy." Under her sponsorship, the Israel Government established an inter-ministerial task force mandated to conduct a comprehensive study on polygamy (The Government of Israel, 2017). The task force met and consulted with academics, mayors of Bedouin localities, Qadis of Sharia courts in Israel, members of Parliament, feminist activists, members of the police force, professionals from various ministries, social workers, and other professionals. In addition, it conducted visits to various Bedouin localities and institutions. The Final Report published by the task force in July 2018 clearly acknowledged that the State had failed to enforce the criminal prohibition on polygamy (The Inter-Ministerial Report, 2018; Boulos, 2019). Alongside the need for educational, employment, development, welfare and economic training programs, and measures, the Report also emphasized the need to enhance police and legal enforcement of the law (The Inter-Ministerial Report, 2018, pp. 215–229).

The publication of the Report drew extensive media attention and provoked official and unofficial government statements,

including those of the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu (Netanyahu, 2018). The fight against polygamy thus became part of the national agenda. However, despite the wide scope and inter-disciplinary nature of the Report and its recommendations, media coverage and government briefings focused on very specific aspects of polygamy referred to in the Report, namely, the links between demography, fertility, and security and the links between the political authority of the state, the lawlessness of Bedouin society, and Israel's role in "modernizing" them. These are the same issues which, as noted above, are central to Israel's discourse of ontological security. It is thus not surprising that the publication of the report evoked much criticism from Bedouin feminist activists and scholars (Sa'ar, 2020).

Demography – The Jewish "Self" Identity of the State

A dominant theme that emerged in the public discourse surrounding polygamy was that of "demography," particularly, the impact of increased birthrates resulting from the practice of polygamy on the demographic identity of the State. In most cases, references to "demography" were linked to notions of security threats. Shortly following the Report's publication, the then Minister for Homeland Security, Gilad Erdan, was quoted as saying:

> Polygamy among the Bedouin, and in particular when we talk about a Palestinian woman, is a crazy and dangerous phenomenon that we are obligated to eliminate by any means available. Children who grow up here and who are influenced by Palestinian incitement can eventually be tools in the hands of terror organizations and threaten the demography and our governability the Negev and beyond. Not only is the despicable polygamy harmful to women and children but it is a real security threat (Ben Zikri and Breiner, 2018).

This quote, from a very high-ranking political leader, illustrates the explicit connection made between terror and polygamy, which is intertwined with the notion of fertility. A similar quote was posted on Prime Minister Netanyahu's Facebook page: "Polygamy … is not a "social and economic phenomenon" – it is first and foremost illegal …. [It] is harmful to the status of women and in addition disrupts the demographic balance in Israel …." (Netanyahu, 2018). A similar tone was adopted by member of parliament Bezalel Smotrich, belonging to the far-right party *Habayit HaYehudi*:

> the birth rate among Israel's Bedouin community "is a bomb that must be handled, …. If we don't defuse it, it will blow up on us much stronger … they double themselves every 12 years, and so it's something that needs handling … the more you modernize them, the less children they have (Ben Zikri, 2020b).

Modernization – "Saving" Muslim Women

The above quote links directly to the second theme – modernization – which highlights the belief that Muslim Bedouin women are helpless victims, under threat from their own society and in need of the modernizing influence and power of the State of Israel. This theme frames Israel as a Western liberal state characterized by modern norms and values, a state with low "modern" birthrates, and a state that is capable of saving the less developed Islamic community by promoting these values.

This theme emerged in the discussion on the Report of the main causes of polygamy, which privilege the cultural over the political: Statements similar in essence to "… polygamy is connected to the social and patriarchal structure of traditional societies characterized by homogenous norms and values based on a tribal social structure" are presented in one part of the Report (2018, p. 14), despite the widespread acknowledgment, elsewhere in the Report, of the role played by economic and political neglect in the perpetuation of the practice of polygamy. When addressing the causes of polygamy, the Report highlights the essentialist narrative: "The origin of the phenomenon among the Bedouin is in the Koran …." (The Inter-Ministerial Report, 2018, p. 14). In another place: "[despite recent processes of change] the change in the status of women is slow and their social behavior is anchored deep within tradition and convention" (p. 30). Similarly, the Report also relates explicitly to the modernizing influence of Israel on the Bedouin community, linking it to the pitfalls of Bedouin culture:

> [changes within the Bedouin community] are a result of the interaction with Israeli society and with modernization, globalization and urbanization …. The efforts of the government to provide services, to improve governance and the establishment of legal government institutions as is acceptable in Western countries – have promoted modernization processes and integration of the Bedouin community within - Israeli society (p. 35).

Thus, while the Report acknowledges that political and economic contexts factor into the reality of polygamy, it also portrays polygamy as an essentially cultural and traditional phenomenon, an inherent component of Bedouin identity, which should be eliminated, but only with the aid of resources and budgets (pp. 31–37). The modernization trope was picked up by leading members of parliament:

> …. The more we westernize them … the lower the birthrates will become … the more the Bedouin population will be "*managed*"; will live in proper towns, will be educated and will enter the work force (Smotrich quoted in Ben Zikri, 2020a).

In a related theme, the Report placed strong emphasis on the role played by language in the ability to fight polygamy: "Lack of Hebrew language proficiency causes the Bedouin society to be isolated and closed to the rest of Israeli society and has direct impact on the status of women …" (The Inter-Ministerial Report, 2018, p. 141). The lack of Hebrew language

proficiency was thus linked to the overall weakness and lack of power and the restricted access of the women and their children to higher levels of social and economic achievement. This lack of language proficiency perpetuates the dependence of the women on their husbands, who tend to know the language better and to reinforce the isolation of the women. While the importance of Hebrew language skills is substantiated by studies, different multilinguistic and multicultural perspectives were not explored at all in the Report, just as consideration was not given to the importance of maintaining a community's native cultural environment. Hebrew was presented as the language of the powerful and as a means to achieving modernity and shedding the bonds of tradition. Thus, the implication was that only through shedding these bonds would women be able to fully modernize and escape the subordination of patriarchy, implying that adherence by Bedouin women to traditional norms, to their native language, perpetuates patriarchal subordination, and constitutes in itself an unsafe act.

The overall attitude and cultural assumptions of the Committee reflected the liberal feminist premise of the need "to save brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1993). Thus, the logic of the Committee echoes the "politics of savior" prevalent in the West that looks at Islamic women as needing to be saved. This kind of logic avoids political questions and presents itself almost as a humanitarian project that expresses feelings of empathy in its drive to help and save polygamous women. Feminist Bedouin organizations that insist on the centrality of political questions such as issues of land ownership and systematic political de-legitimization were therefore viewed with suspicion, as ungrateful, and as provocateurs who are themselves preventing these helpless women from receiving the help they deserve (Sa'ar, 2020). Thus, ultimately, the Islamic community is portrayed as constituting a threat both to its own women and children and to Israeli society at large. In the public and political discourse surrounding the Report, the Bedouin community emerges as traditional – even primitive at times – abusive toward its women and children, lawless, and vulnerable to terror-inspiring ideologies and interests and, as such, is viewed as a direct threat to the physical and ontological security of the State. At the same time, by positioning the fight against polygamy as a component of government policy, the narrative contributes toward the promotion of a notion of Israeli identity as Jewish and Western (concepts that are ideologically intertwined), hetero-normative, modern, law abiding, and peace seeking, and as a chapter in the larger ontological security narrative discussed above in the context the Nationality Bill. The current article focused on the empirical case of the Israeli society but is relevant beyond this specific case, since states uses similar mechanisms of exclusion in order to enhance what they see as ontological security.

DISCUSSION

The focus of this article was the special challenges posed by the practice of polygamy to minority women, focusing on the ways that the state and the women confront the related experiences of trauma and violence associated with this practice. We demonstrated the advantages of employing the concept of ontological (in)security to investigate these issues in a nuanced and complex fashion. Special attention was given to the relationship between ontological security and gender and the challenges posed to minority women by these securitized narratives. Our analysis of the discourse surrounding polygamy in Israel in the context of ontological security is applicable to other empirical cases and reveals three main theoretical insights. The first concerns the relationship between individual and state-level conceptions of ontological security and the complex relationship between these two narratives of "self." This insight reflects the stark contrast that exists between the ways in which the narratives of the women themselves highlight the long-lasting and deeply traumatic impact of the practice of polygamy to their overall mental, economic and social health, and the strategic nature of the discourse of the state. Overall, in this article, we propose that notions of ontological security play a meaningful and central role both in the ways states articulate policies related to the protection of women and in the ways women narrate experiences of trauma and violence. The second addresses what can be inferred from narratives of ontological security regarding the frameworks of belonging as presented by the state and specifically how these narratives often serve as mechanisms of exclusion. The third contributes to our understanding of the central and often defining role of gender and gender relations in state narratives of ontological security.

Individual Vs. State-Centric Perspectives of Ontological Security

One of the central issues in the discourse surrounding ontological security is the tension between individual and state-centric approaches. Since polygamy as a social, cultural, and political practice is perceived as constituting a threat to ontological security both by the individual women who are trapped in polygamous arrangements and by state officials, the case of Israel's attitude toward polygamy in the Bedouin community provides an opportunity to investigate the dynamics of these two perspectives in a shared template.

Indeed, the discussion presented above demonstrates that polygamy, for a vast majority of the women involved, constitutes a significant breakdown in their sense of ontological security. Our discussions of the narratives of the women indicated that polygamous women experience a more or less constant sense of alienation, displacement, and rupture, lacking a focus of belonging and the ability to maintain a stable sense of self. The lives of polygamous women were narrated as violent and humiliating. Moreover, the local community that should provide integrity, certainty, and a sense of belonging failed to consistently provide support to the women and their children. Interviews conducted with women who themselves were not involved in polygamous practices revealed that the threat of polygamy manifests as a constant presence forcing them to put up with abuse for fear of losing their status as "single" wives. This practice leads to enormous

challenges and often devastating circumstances in which the women are exposed to violence and trauma on a daily basis.

The sense of ontological insecurity associated with polygamy from the State's perspective was vastly different. As noted above, the State narrated a three-pronged story of polygamy: As being a source of ontological insecurity because of the ways, it impacted the demographic balance of the population, as being linked to traditional, non-modern modes of behavior and normative values, and as being connected to terrorist ideologies. Hence, polygamy was framed as a threat that is both physical and ontological, namely, that through their "unbridled" fertility, polygamous women seriously upset the delicate demographic balance of the State, threaten the identity of the State as Jewish, and cast a shadow on the State's identity as Western, modern, and enlightened.

Thus, the different threats to ontological security are embodied in different forms and types of "self": While the ontological security "self" narrated by the women described above was threatened by the behavior of men, the "self" that was narrated by the State was threatened by the implicit behavior of the women as vessels of fertility and as progenitors of demographic threats and potential terrorists. This divide exemplifies how states employ gendered narratives of ontological (in)security in a strategic fashion, portraying their policies as a means of protection of women against violence, but in fact motivated by interests related to national identity and security.

Narratives of Ontological Security and Hierarchies of Belonging

Our second contribution focuses on the state. To the extent that states are ontological security-seeking actors, the process whereby states define their ontological security needs becomes a particular way of defining a "sense of state distinctiveness" (Mitzen, 2006b). Moreover, the logic of ontological security leads us to acknowledge the inherent relationship between this "sense of state distinctiveness" and the ontological needs of individuals for a stable and coherent biographic identity. Thus, the perspective of ontological security adds an additional dimension to theoretical discussions of national identity building and to the discussions of state trauma. As Mitzen noted: "Grounding a nation's needs for ontological security in terms of individual needs in this way suggests that state institutions are not just an aggregate of leaders' decisions, but that states also project self-images to which its citizens will be attached in complicated ways." (Mitzen, 2006b, p. 352).

This theoretical insight was validated by our empirical analysis. Through the narratives of government leaders and the government Report, polygamy is presented as a real and immediate threat to the fundamental components of Israeli identity and hence as a threat to the existence of a stable cognitive environment. Polygamy is constructed as a threat to the stable continuity of the Jewish identity of the state, and hence to what is considered natural, appropriate, and acceptable to of Israel's Jewish majority. By defining ontological security in these terms, the State enforces the distinction between the majority and the minority – between those who belong naturally and those who threaten the natural bonds of membership. By narrating polygamy as a threat to the demographic balance, the State is reinforcing the importance of a demographic balance to its stable identity, while also reinforcing hierarchies of belonging. Moreover, the modernization trope that identifies traditional practices as dangerous reinforces the imagination of the Jewish nation as besieged by the indigenous landscape but at the same time essential to its transformation. Insofar as Israel's sense of self is embedded in these two tropes – besiegement and modernization – Israel's insistence on highlighting the demographic dimensions of polygamy alongside its modernizing role of a traditional minorities can be seen, according to Zarakol (2010) as a "performance" of ontological (in)security and a reproduction of the state's sense of "self." Through the narrative of polygamy, the transformative capacity of the Jewish Israeli nation is reinforced and reconstituted in basic, binary formulations: modern vs. traditional; West vs. East; and rationality vs. passion. It is in the last of these binary constructions, which positions the rational capacity of the Israeli nation-state against the so-called sexualized passion of the Bedouin minority, that the gendered nature of the narrative is most apparent.

The Gendered Nature of Ontological Security

With its focus on issues related to fertility, demography, and the home, gendered understandings of security are central to the rhetoric of ontological security. As Kinnvall has articulated, the need for a stable and continually available and welcoming "home" is at the root of our needs for security and is always present in state-level expressions of ontological security needs (Kinnvall, 2019). Women, as guardians of the home and as protectors of the family, will therefore always implicitly figure in these narratives. As the commitment to protect women's rights and to prevent violence against women figures more and more centrally in discourses of state security, these gendered notions are moving from the background into the foreground.

Within the public discourse on polygamy, the role of the state as the protector of women's physical integrity is deeply embedded within images and narratives of ontological security. The polygamous woman embodies the duality inherent in these narratives and images: She is at one and the same time the object of protection and also the source of a threat. Thus, through focus on the female body, the ontological security discourse constructs the hierarchical relationship between the Jewish majority and the non-Jewish Bedouin minority as one in which the majority is cast in the role of protector and simultaneously in the role of victim – protector of the physical and ontological security of Bedouin women, but victim of the practices in which they are implicated, namely potential terror, potential demographic takeover, and potential lawlessness (inherent in the concept of polygamy). Finally, within this narrative, gender is employed both as a central organizing trope and also as a strategic political mechanism. The need to "domesticate" minorities by eradicating patriarchal abusive practices is used not only as a trope but also as a strategic political mechanism.

In this article, we demonstrated that policies promoted by states to protect minority women from violence rely significantly on notions, concepts, and values related to ontological security, narratives of self and belonging, and identity. Thus, we suggest that the concept of ontological security should be seen as an organizing trope for a deeper understanding of the range of state motivations in cases related to women, violence, and the demand for security.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ben Gurion University Ethics Committee. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms Among Polyvictimized Women in the Colombian Armed Conflict: The Mediating Role of Social Acknowledgment

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For decades, in a situation of armed conflict in Colombia, women have suffered polyvictimization and discrimination with severe consequences that last even during the post-war peace process. This study analyzes the impact on posttraumatic stress and recovery of war-related violence against women, discrimination, and social acknowledgment. A cross-sectional study was conducted in 2019–2020. Participants were 148 women with a mean age of 47.66 years (range 18–83), contacted through the NGO *Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres* who had experienced significant personal violence. Results show that levels of perceived discrimination and lack of social acknowledgment are mediators in the relationship between polyvictimization and posttraumatic stress symptoms. Recognition by significant others, disapproval by family and the larger social milieu affects different posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) dimensions and therefore how these women adapt to the effects of trauma. Findings provide strong evidence that the way society and family treats women after a traumatic event affects how the victim recovers from this event. Recognition as a victim and disapproval can coexist and be a burden for women if not adequately addressed. Results stress the importance of understanding and intervening in PTSD recovery through the analysis of social processes, and not only through and individual focus.

Keywords: armed conflict, violence against women, discrimination, social acknowledgment, posttraumatic stress

INTRODUCTION

Violence perpetrated during periods of armed conflict may have a lasting effect on individuals, and how they reconstruct their lives. Most studies have analyzed periods of active conflict while directing less attention toward the impact of violence during post-conflict transitional periods. Moreover, the role of gender and the effects of conflict and violence on women and their reactions to the experienced trauma have been less studied and merit a significant level

of attention (Østby, 2016). In armed conflict environments, the level of all types of violence suffered by women is higher than in non-conflict-related contexts (Marsh et al., 2006). Different forms of gender violence are used as war tools both in situations of armed conflict and in post-conflict environments contributing to destabilize, humiliate, and underestimate the population while also helping foster a climate of fear and submission. Moreover, this type of gender violence acts for the perpetrators as a reaffirmation of their role in society (Manjoo and McRaith, 2011). As Álvarez-Múnera et al. (2020) have mentioned, in many instances during an armed conflict, women have had to accept the logic of a patriarchal society that has cosified their existence while at the same time suffering severe physical and psychological impacts having their voices and narratives silenced. In these post-conflict societies, women are not only the main providers in the reestablishment of social bonds and interaction processes but may also be more stigmatized than men suffering social discrimination and rejection due to the violence inflicted on them (Blay-Tofey and Lee, 2015). Moreover, because of the different types of violence they have suffered women may experience reintegration difficulties and social stigma and in many cases are ostracized by their family and community (Manjoo and McRaith, 2011).

Colombia is country which has endured six decades of internal violence and armed conflict, with over 20% of the population, mostly civilians, victims of violent episodes (Single Victims Registry (Registro Único de Víctimas), 2018). Social rejection suffered by women because of rape, forced displacement, threats, male abuse, and recruitment of their children has made their recovery more difficult and led to cycles of abuse in form of revictimization. As Kreft (2020) mentions, victims may be forced into silence by family members concerned about the negative repercussions of these experiences. Moreover, especially in cases of conflict-related sexual violence, there are also instances of impunity, victim blaming, or revictimization by the judiciary due to lack of training and gender sensitivity (Kreft, 2020) This situation can lead to a rise in social stigmatization and an absence of social support networks (Albutt et al., 2017).

In 2016, a peace accord between the Colombian government and the most relevant guerrilla (FARC) was finally struck, apparently putting an end to an armed conflict which had caused a burden to the personal, social, and economic development of Colombia (Pinzón, 2014). Feminist and pacifist social movements, such as the Ruta Pacífica de la Mujer (RPM) (Women's Peaceful Route), have worked for over 20 years to visualize the effects of war and its trauma on women's lives empowering women in the reconstruction of their individual and collective memory and confronting the sequels derived from this violence. Nevertheless, women who have been victimized in armed conflicts are frequently overlooked in post-conflict reconstruction processes (Togeby, 1994). In fact, many of these women and associations that were mobilized both during the conflict and in the post-conflict years are now victims of new violence scenarios. This is not a situation limited to Colombia as has also been the case in countries, such as Afghanistan or Myanmar, in which persistent social structures that limit a women's presence in civil representation contexts have not been erased after the conflict (Zulver, 2021). As Adjei (2019) pointed out gender is often used as a rhetorical device to reinforce narratives to exclude women from the peace process.

Both direct and indirect exposure to war and armed conflict have a long-lasting impact on civilian populations leading to responses, such as emotional distress or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), considered to be the most relevant long-term consequence of such events (Bleich et al., 2013). Exposure to armed conflicts is related to increased anxiety, depression, and PTSD among women, in comparison with men, both during, and in post-conflict situations (Rugema et al., 2015; Charlson et al., 2019). Mundy et al. (2020) studying refugees in Denmark indicated that the number of traumatic events experienced by these participants had an influence on symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, and somatization to a greater extent in women than in men. In this same study, trauma burden and PTSD symptoms were moderately correlated for women but not for men. Various studies have found that exposure to multiple traumatic or life-threatening events, in comparison with singular events, has a greater negative impact and explains more variance in PTSD symptoms (Green et al., 2000; Breslau et al., 2008; Ogle et al., 2014).

A conflict that heavily impacts a society's social system, such as an armed conflict or persistent low intensity war, affects not only an individual but also the whole social fabric. As such, recovering from trauma caused by suffering violence in these contexts should not only be analyzed as an individual phenomenon. As Charuvastra and Cloitre (2008) mention, posttraumatic stress recovery is highly dependent on social phenomena because social experiences, both positive and negative, play a pivotal role in the way people respond to traumatic events. An analysis on the impact of the social and relational framework in which trauma responses occur is needed to achieve a more thorough understanding of trauma stress and its recovery, not only analyzing the event from a mere individualistic perspective (Maercker and Horn, 2013; Woodhouse et al., 2018).

Meta-analytic reviews have shown that perceived discrimination has negative consequences on an individual's mental health (Schmitt et al., 2014). Nevertheless, fewer studies have examined the association between discrimination and PTSD, although the latter is related to poor quality of life and mental and physical health (Brooks Holliday et al., 2020). Verelst et al. (2014) found that discrimination significantly explained the impact of war-related sexual violence in Eastern Congo adolescents and PTSD. A study analyzing this association with war victims conducted by Ibrahim et al. (2018) found in a sample of Yazidi women victim of enslavement and genocide that the relationship between trauma events and depression was mediated by perceived social rejection. Nevertheless, the mediation effect for PTSD was non-significant.

As PTSD is related to social responses toward a victim, social acknowledgment – defined as referring to how appreciated, as a

victim of a traumatic event, an individual feels he or she is by family and the general population is an important factor in the psychological adaptation to the traumatic stressor and future recovery (Maercker and Müller, 2004).

Maercker and Horn (2013) have shown that interpersonal traumatic events relate to high levels of PTSD through the social process of social acknowledgment. Woodhouse et al. (2018) conclude that social acknowledgment may have a stronger predictive power than social support in a posttraumatic environment.

This article further elaborates on the previously mentioned literature developing and testing a social model of trauma symptoms as shown in **Figure 1**. The complete model is exploratory because the combination of variables has not been fully tested before. The proposed model includes social processes (discrimination and social acknowledgment) that may lead to the preservation of the negative effect that women's polyvictimization has on PTSD. The structure of the model and the order of the variables reflect past theory and empirical evidence, as mentioned before (i.e., the relationship between suffered traumas and social processes or between social acknowledgment and PTSD). Due to the nature of the study, instead of inferring a causal direction, we will establish relations between constructs. The effect of personal trauma (polyvictimization) on PTSD is predominantly explained through the judgments (discrimination and social acknowledgment) that the members of a society make regarding the experienced trauma. Previous literature (Kohli et al., 2014; Ibrahim et al., 2018) regarding social acknowledgment and rejection suggests that an individual's social network, family, and society at large respond to trauma that has afflicted a person and that a victimized woman may perceive this response in terms of more or less discrimination and social acknowledgment. Some of the indirect effects of trauma on PTSD will be mediated by these social processes. A woman in these contexts of armed conflict who has experienced different types of personal trauma (psychological, physical, or sexual violence) may suffer more discrimination, and less social recognition, from their family, community, and society in general (Manjoo and McRaith, 2011). In this case, the individual perception of social acknowledgment will be low because discrimination hinders the possibility of sharing sympathy and recognition of the experienced traumas. Based on empirical data on social acknowledgment, lower levels of this type of recognition will be linked to more posttraumatic stress symptoms (Maercker and Horn, 2013).

The objective of this research is to test a social model of trauma to explain the variance in PTSD symptoms. This study will analyze how experienced violence, and the number of violent acts one has suffered (polyvictimization), affects a group of women's posttraumatic stress and recovery. This relationship will be mediated both by the levels of perceived discrimination a person has experienced and the degree in which not only individuals, but also social groups influence the person by judging the victim's unique state and

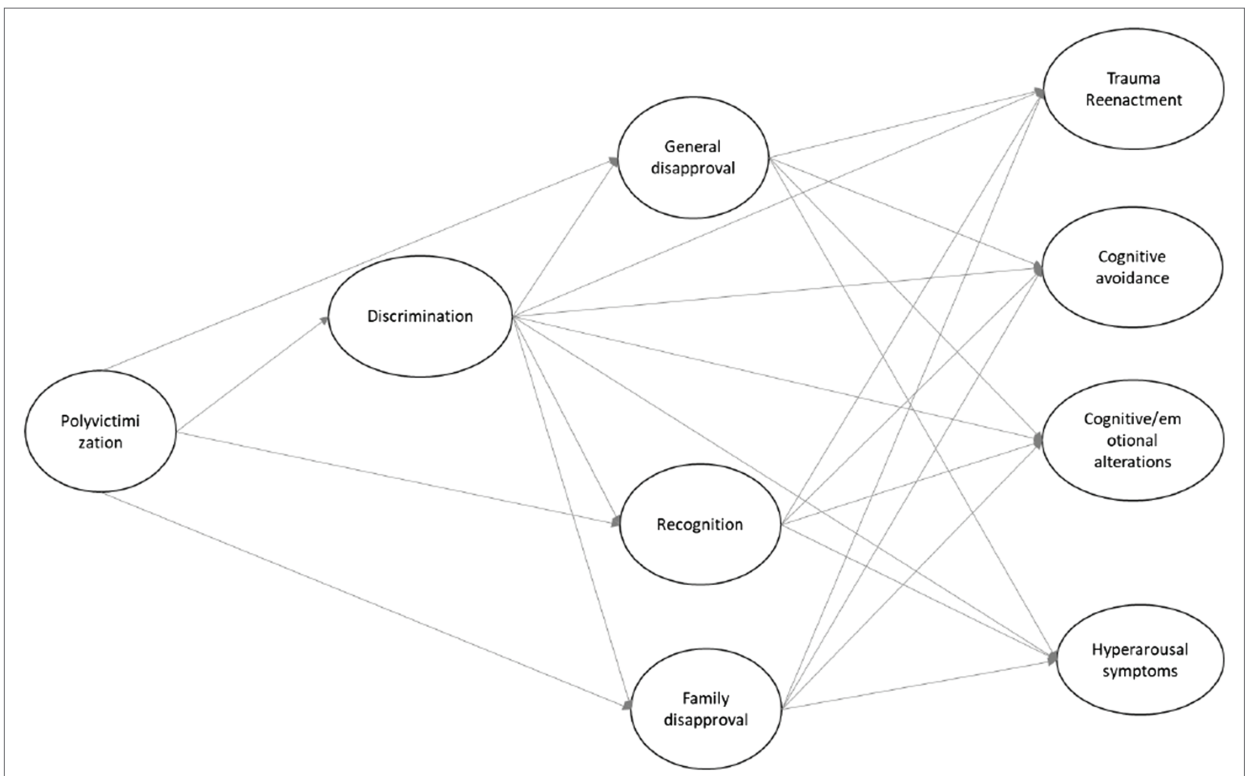

FIGURE 1 | Theoretical integrated model depicting observed paths among study variables.

acknowledging, or not, the victim's current difficult and/or traumatic situation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample

The sample comprised 148 women contacted through the NGO RPM. RPM is a women's social movement that has been directly involved for over 25 years in making the impacts of war on women's lives and bodies visible and trying to influence the process, negotiation, and non-violent resolution of conflicts. The 25-year experience of the RPM has generated in many women, victims of the conflict, enough confidence and legitimacy to approach, get involved, and become part of this organizational process. Due to the nature of the NGO and the aims of this study, all the women who voluntarily participated in the study throughout their lives had experienced victimizing events (e.g., forced displacement, forced recruitment of their children, sexual violence, stigmatization, murder of family members and loved ones, massacres, and harassment, among other victimizing events) that in many cases, they did not recognize as such for a long time. However, their membership in the RPM has allowed them to transform and reconsider these personal and social experiences of violence. For many women, the RPM is the only resource they have to recognize and highlight in a safe context all the suffering they have experienced with no judgments made and in which the center of the narrative is a women's life and experience. The exclusion criteria were as: a) being a minor because research processes with minors require other protocols and authorization from adults that are difficult to obtain; b) women who had participated in the RPM for a period of less than 2 years because these women may have fewer resources to face questions about reenacting very painful experiences. Women who have been engaged in some way with the RPM for over 2 years probably have more resources to cope with the questions that bring up painful memories without stressing revictimization.

The participating women belonged to the areas of Bolívar., Santander, and the Eje Cafetero. The regions and municipalities where the study was carried out were selected for two main reasons: (1) the RPM has recognition and legitimacy among women victims in the regions where the study was carried out, which facilitated the meeting and their willingness to participate in the study; (2) selected regions, such as Bolivar and Santander, have had a history of violence due to the armed conflict that is socially recognized in the country. Also, in the Eje Cafetero region, violence due to the armed conflict has been invisibilized and minimized. Therefore, we intend with this study to contribute to its visibility and recognition.

Mean age of the participants was 47.66 years ($SD = 15.65$) ranging from 18 to 83 years. **Table 1** outlines the population demographics of the participating women.

An aggregate score of accumulated trauma (polyvictimization) indicated that $n = 62$ women (41.9%) had suffered only a single form of violence: physical, psychological, or sexual; $n = 60$ (40.5%) two of them; and $n = 26$ (17.6%) all three types of violence.

TABLE 1 | Descriptive analyses. Socio-demographic characteristics.

	N (range)	%
Region		
Bolívar (Cartagena, Aragón and San José del Playón)	31	20.9
Eje Cafetero (Caldas and Risaralda)	97	65.6
Santander	9	6.1
Missing	11	7.4
Race		
Afro-Colombians	32	21.6
Mixed	18	12.2
Native	97	65.5
Missing	1	0.7
Residence		
City	71	48
Village	76	51.3
Missing	1	0.7
Labor activity		
Working	36	24.3
Unemployment	3	2
Student	19	12.9
Housewife	77	52
Retired	8	5.4
Others	5	3.4
Education		
None	37	25
Primary School	42	28.4
Secondary school	52	35.1
University	17	11.5
Marital status		
Single	46	31.1
Married	43	29.1
Consensual union/ Romantic relationship	22	14.8
Widow	20	13.5
Divorced	16	10.8
Missing	1	0.7
Religion		
Catholic	127	85.8
Others	21	14.2
War-related violence (Yes)		
Physical	82	55.4
Psychological	144	97.3
Sexual	34	23
Forced displacement (Yes)	85	57.4

Procedure

This is a cross-sectional study conducted in Colombia in 2019–2020. In order to engage participants in the study, first, one of the researchers in Colombia, who is an active member of the RPM for 10 years, contacted the RPM coordinators in the different regions where the NGO has offices. Second, various coordination meetings were held between the research team and RPM representatives to explain the aim and procedure of the research.

Third, potential participants were contacted and recruited for the study (by telephone) through the RPM coordinators. Four, meetings of the coordinators with the participating women were held in each of their territories to explain the research project and to set the dates for data collection. Finally, the researchers from Colombia traveled to the territories to ensure the participation of the women without additional effort for them, since many of them live in very isolated rural areas and other are leaders who have been threatened and silenced and the only resource they have to explain their experience is that provided by the RPM. The data collection was carried out in their own personal spaces, such as booths, the offices of partner organizations, and rooms that had optimal conditions (light, ventilation, chairs, and tables) for carrying out the procedure.

RPM experts worked with one of the researchers to carry out the data collection in the municipalities of Supía and Pereira (Eje Cafetero), Cartagena, Aragón and San José del Playón (Bolívar) and Santander. Approval for the study was given by the Ethical Committees of the institutions involved as: Burgos University and Basque Country University. Once the informed consent forms had been signed, respecting the ethical principles established in the Declaration of Helsinki, the evaluation protocol was completed in groups of three or four women under professional supervision. The protocol took approximately 90 min to complete.

Instruments

Violence Scale

Based on the systematic review conducted by Ba and Bhopal (2017), an *ad hoc* scale was developed to address information on three types of violence. This review is one of the most recent, specific, and comprehensive in analyzing different types of violence in an armed conflict zone. Eleven forms of sexual violence (e.g., rape, forced marriage, and sexual slavery), 11 categories of physical violence (e.g., being pushed and/or grabbed), and 10 types of psychological violence (e.g., being harassed and threatened) were identified. The response option was dichotomous (yes/no). An aggregated violence score (polyvictimization) was created to include those women who had suffered one, two, or all three types of violence.

Everyday Discrimination Scale

The original scale was developed by Williams et al. (1997). In this study, an Verelst et al. (2014) for girls who have suffered violence in a context of war was applied. The (Everyday Discrimination Scale) EDS in general assesses the underlying construct of perceived discrimination equivalently across diverse racial/ethnic groups. It is one of the most widely used discrimination scales in epidemiologic and public health research. The 14 items (yes = 1/no = 0) focused on experiences of different aspects of stigmatization as a result of violence, including perceived discrimination and social exclusion in the family and community context (e.g., being treated as if you were different, being isolated by the nuclear family, and being treated badly by family members, people act as if they are better people than you). The total score was calculated with the sum of items. The higher the score the greater the perceived discrimination.

Social Acknowledgment Questionnaire

This scale (Maercker and Müller, 2004) has been widely used, with good psychometric properties in women samples and accurately assesses the degree to which people feel validated and supported by their social environment after a traumatic event. This is a self-report scale composed by 16 items measuring social acknowledgment as a victim or survivor. It is rated on a Likert scale from 0 (not at all) to 5 (completely). It contains the following subscales: recognition as a victim or survivor (six items, "My friends feel sympathy for what happened to me") (0–30), general disapproval (five items, "Most people cannot understand what I went through") (0–25), and family disapproval (five items, "My experiences are underestimated in my family") (0–25). These subscales capture information on social acknowledgment in three contexts: family, friends, and people in the community. The higher the score the greater the perceived social acknowledgment as a victim and greater general and family disapproval.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptom Severity Scale (EGS-R)

This scale (Echeburúa et al., 2016) evaluates the severity of posttraumatic stress symptoms. It is an instrument that has been recently created in the Spanish language and shows good psychometric properties. It comprises 21 items (e.g., having unpleasant and recurring dreams about the event) and consists of four scales based on the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria assessing a) trauma reenactment (five items, e.g., "do you experience involuntary unpleasant and repetitive memories or images of the event), b) cognitive avoidance (three items, e.g., "do you avoid or make efforts to take your mind off memories, thoughts or feelings linked to the event because they cause emotional displeasure?"), c) cognitive/emotional alterations (seven items, e.g., "do you experience a constant negative mood in the form of terror, anger, blame or shame?"), and d) hyperarousal symptoms (six items, e.g., "Are you in a constant state of alarm, for instance suddenly stopping to see who's next to you. etc. since the event took place"). Responses are given on a Likert-type scale in accordance with the frequency of the symptoms (from 0 = never to 3 = 5 or more times a week/very often). Total scores on the global scale range from 0 to 63.

All scales, except the EGS-R, have been translated into the Spanish language following the International Test Commission (2017) recommendations. These scales were first translated from English to Spanish by a bilingual speaker. They were then revised by two members of the research team to analyze if the translation captured the meaning of the original items. Consequently, they were back translated into English by a native speaker to correct any mistakes or omissions. Finally, they were adapted into Spanish used in Colombia and a pilot study with five participants was performed to check if the scales were correctly understood.

Data Analysis

A series of descriptive statistics were conducted (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) to describe

the sample and variables under study. Cronbach's alpha was used to analyze reliability of the instruments. Multivariate analysis and Pearson correlation coefficients between variables included in the study were calculated. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS v.25. Effect sizes of the mean differences were estimated using Cohen (1988) criteria. A small effect was conceptualized as $d = 0.20$, medium $d = 0.50$, and large $d = 0.80$.

The impact of armed conflict-related violence against women, discrimination, and social acknowledgment of posttraumatic stress was analyzed by a path analysis. These path analyses with observed variables were performed on raw data files using the maximum likelihood estimation procedure in the Mplus v.8.5 software (Muthén and Muthén, 1998-2007).

A series of global fit indices were used to determine whether the data fitted the proposed path model, including a chi-square test of model fit (χ^2), the root mean square error of approximation value should be less than 0.08 to declare satisfactory fit, the comparative fit index value should be greater than 0.90, the Tucker Lewis index value should be greater than 0.90, and the standardized root mean square residual should be less than 0.05 (Kline, 2010). Indirect effects were calculated using 10,000 bootstrapping samples. A conditional indirect effect is considered statistically significant if the confidence interval (CI at 95%) does not include the value 0.

RESULTS

Multivariate and Correlation Analyses

Differences between women who had suffered one, two, or all types of violence (physical, psychological, and sexual) were found for discrimination (one type: $M = 2.41$, $SD = 2.44$; two types: $M = 2.65$, $SD = 2.84$; three types of violence: $M = 5.34$, $SD = 4.52$, $F = 9.18$, $p = 0.0001$, $d = 0.65$) and recognition as a victim (one type: $M = 9.54$, $SD = 7.30$; two types: $M = 6.08$, $SD = 6.07$; three types of violence: $M = 8.46$, $SD = 7.99$, $F = 3.86$, $p = 0.023$, $d = 0.44$). Post-hoc test showed that victims of physical, psychological, and sexual violence were more discriminated than women who suffered two or one type of violence. Furthermore, women who suffer two types of violence were less recognized as victims than women who suffered one type of violence. Results also showed more discrimination (yes: $n = 34$, $M = 4.47$, $SD = 4.38$, no: $n = 114$, $M = 2.59$, $SD = 2.66$, $F = 9.38$, $p = 0.003$, $d = 0.60$) and family disapproval (yes: $M = 10.71$, $SD = 7.43$, no: $M = 8.84$, $SD = 5.66$, $F = 5.81$, $p = 0.017$, $d = 0.30$) in women who suffered sexual violence than among non-victims of this type of violence. Discrimination was also more common among victims of physical violence than among non-victims (yes: $n = 82$, $M = 3.54$, $SD = 3.66$, no: $n = 66$, $M = 2.39$, $SD = 2.45$, $F = 4.72$, $p = 0.031$, $d = 0.36$). There were non-significant differences between victims and non-victims of psychological violence in the variables under study.

In **Table 2**, we present the Cronbach' alphas of the scales and a series of correlations to explore the relations among variables. Polyvictimization was positively associated with discrimination but also with more family disapproval, indicating that both social and family rejection increased with the accumulated trauma experiences. It was also linked positively to the trauma reenactment symptom of PTSD. Furthermore, the EDS total score was positively related to general and family disapproval and with recognition as a victim. Moreover, it was also positively associated with trauma reenactment, hyperarousal, and total EGS-R score. Recognition as a victim correlated positively with general disapproval and negatively with family disapproval. It was also positively related to trauma reenactment. General and family disapproval also correlated significantly. General disapproval was related positively with all the EGS-R dimensions. Family disapproval is also linked with more cognitive and emotional alterations, hyperarousal, and the total EGS-R score.

Paths From Polyvictimization to PTSD Symptomatology

We hypothesized a PTSD model that yielded an adequate fit to the data (see **Figure 2**). Results revealed that polyvictimization is positively related to discrimination. Moreover, discrimination had a significant direct effect on general and family disapproval, and on recognition of others as victim. The indirect effects were significant in general ($\beta = 0.09$, $Se = 0.03$, $p = 0.018$) and family disapproval ($\beta = 0.10$, Se: 0.04, $p = 0.018$), and recognition as a victim ($\beta = 0.08$, $Se = 0.03$, $p = 0.005$) indicating that discrimination mediates the relationship between polyvictimization and the different dimensions of social acknowledgment as a victim. Discrimination increases the effect of being a victim of more than one type of violence on social and family disapproval and on being recognized as a victim. Nevertheless, discrimination has no direct effect on the PTSD' dimensions.

In a second step, the direct effect of social acknowledgment on PTSD and the indirect effect of discrimination on the four dimensions of PTSD through general disapproval, family disapproval, and recognition as a victim were tested.

First, results indicated that general disapproval had a direct and positive effect on trauma reenactment, cognitive avoidance, cognitive and emotional alterations, and hyperarousal. The indirect paths were significant from discrimination to trauma reenactment ($\beta = 0.18$, $Se = 0.05$, $p = 0.0001$), cognitive avoidance ($\beta = 0.16$, $Se = 0.05$, $p = 0.0001$), cognitive and emotional alterations ($\beta = 0.16$, $Se = 0.05$, $p = 0.0001$), and hyperarousal ($\beta = 0.15$, $Se = 0.04$, $p = 0.0001$) through general disapproval.

Second, the direct path from family disapproval to cognitive and emotional alterations was also significant. Moreover, the indirect effect showed that family disapproval explained the emotional and cognitive alterations caused by social discrimination ($\beta = 0.07$, $Se = 0.03$, $p = 0.050$).

Third, recognition as a survivor was negatively related to cognitive and emotional alterations and the indirect effect indicates that this recognition decreases the effects of discrimination on this PTSD symptom ($\beta = -0.05$, $Se = 0.02$, $p = 0.022$) (see **Figure 2**).

TABLE 2 | Correlation Analyses.

	α	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Polyvictimization	0.85			1								
2. Discrimination-EDS	0.85	3.03	3.22	0.45***	1							
3. General disapproval-SAQ	0.82	9.27	6.13	0.15	0.30***	1						
4. Recognition as a victim-SAQ	0.80	7.95	7.09	−0.10	0.25**	0.21*	1					
5. Family disapproval-SAQ	0.66	10.11	4.39	0.23**	0.37***	0.23**	−0.26**	1				
6. Trauma reenactment-EGS-R	0.95	8.41	5.54	0.17*	0.16*	0.60***	0.19*	0.15†	1			
7. Cognitive avoidance-EGS-R	0.86	5.25	3.32	.15†	0.10	0.48***	0.03	0.08	0.81***	1		
8. Cognitive and emotional alterations-EGS-R	0.89	8.69	6.51	0.11	0.15	0.53***	−0.12	0.35***	0.77***	0.72***	1	
9. Hyperarousal-EGS-R	0.86	7.26	5.40	0.10	0.26**	0.53***	0.04	0.25**	0.81***	0.73***	0.83***	1
10. Total EGS.R	0.96	29.61	19.02	0.14	0.19*	0.59***	0.03	0.25**	0.92***	0.86***	0.92***	0.93***

*N = 148. EDS, Everyday Discrimination Scale; SAQ, Social Acknowledgment Questionnaire; and EGS-R, Impact of Event Scale-Revised. ***p ≤ 0.01; **p ≤ 0.01; *p ≤ 0.05; †p < 0.10.*

DISCUSSION

The way society treats a person after a traumatic event affects how the victim recovers from this event as well as reflecting the social fabric of communal relationships. Results from this study show that social acknowledgment has an impact on how women who have survived violence in an armed conflict process their traumatic experiences emotional and cognitively. Polyvictimization and discrimination affect PTSD symptoms through how the rest of the community accepts or rejects victims. Recognition or disapproval by family, significant others, and the larger social milieu has an important, and differential, effect on these women's psychological adaptation to the consequences of trauma (Maercker and Müller, 2004; Mueller et al., 2008).

The dose–response relationship literature, and more specifically in the case of Colombia, results from Campo-Arias et al.'s (2017) research show that polyvictimization was related to more discrimination in comparison with victims of a single event and that discrimination is a form of indirect violence (Fernández Cediel, 2014). Moreover, polyvictimized women have suffered the stigma-discrimination secondary complex related to the traumatic event (Campo-Arias and Herazo, 2015). Victims of sexual violence (Rees et al., 2011) and forced displacements (Burgess and Fonseca, 2020) in situations of armed conflict show how discrimination and stigma may have as severe an impact as the experienced trauma. This not only represents another potential stressor for victimized women, but also multiplies the probability of experiencing PTSD symptoms after suffering a traumatic event (Kennedy et al., 2014) and is one of the main barriers impeding participation in actions that try to change one's life (Burgess and Fonseca, 2020). Most of the women in this study are members of vulnerable social groups in society with limited access to critical social networks that could offer opportunities for a positive change and mental health recovery.

Maercker and Horn (2013) have shown that low levels of social acknowledgment derived in higher levels of PTSD cognitions through strengthening feelings of fear and mistrust. Rebolledo and Rondón (2010) stress the importance of social approval or rejection and are critical of a medical and individualistic model of PTSD that does not consider the social and political context in which women live. To reduce posttraumatic stress, it is as important to work on the symptoms, as it is to understand and try to change the context in which these violent acts take place. Although individual interventions may mitigate the impact of being a victim of violence, these women in many cases must return to a social and relational context (with family and friends) in which it is necessary to integrate the process of collective recovery. Public recognition, or in other words, the transit from a private (suffering) to a public sphere helps restore that which was sullied by trauma. The use of violence in armed conflicts and the persistence of these acts, including by civilians, in post-conflict environments clearly destroys the social fabric of families and communities. As a result, there is an all over impact on the health of individual victims (Verelst et al., 2014).

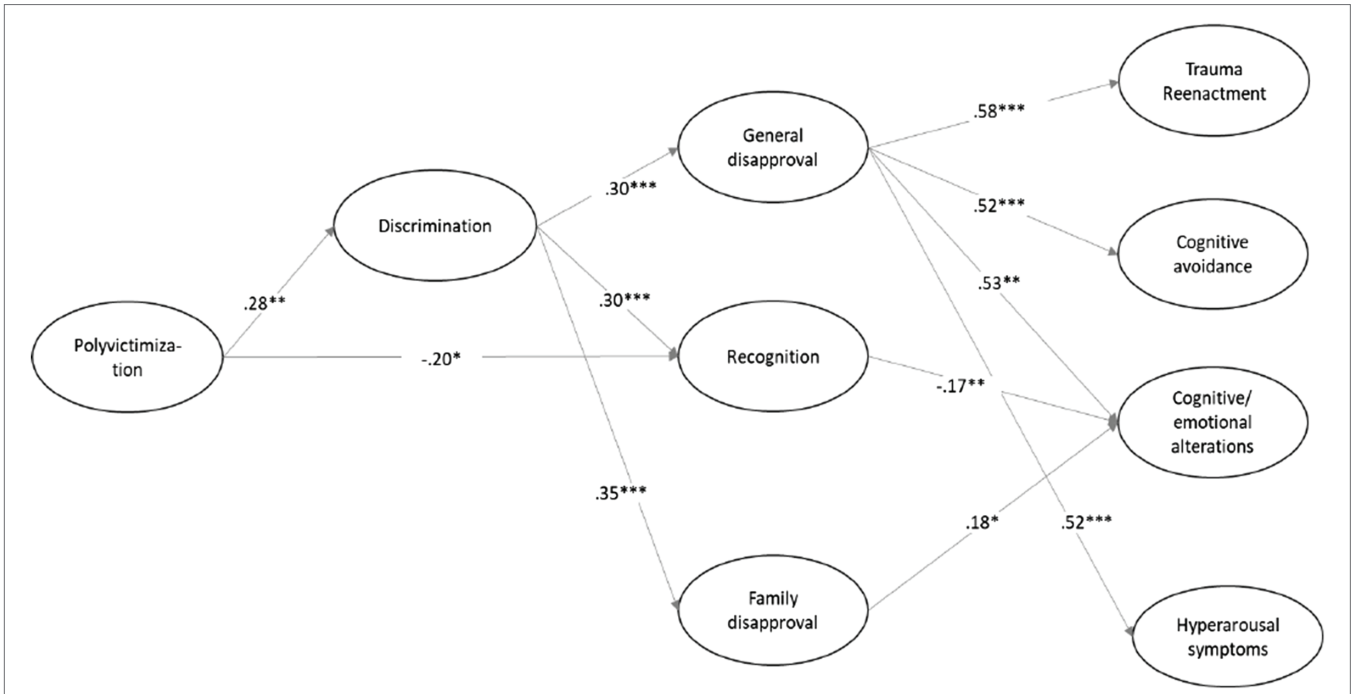

FIGURE 2 | Path analysis and standardized coefficients. Non-significant coefficient were not shown ($p \leq 0.50$) Model fit: χ^2 ($df = 0.36$, $N = 148$) = 746.44, p = 0.0001, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.07, SMR = 0.014, 95% CI [0.001 0.153].

This study shows that society, close relations, or one's own family disapproval or recognition (social acknowledgment) increases the negative effect of both discrimination and polyvictimization on a victim's PTSD symptoms. Moreover, although a victim may receive recognition as such by one's close social group, at the same time, they may face general and family disapproval. In Colombia during the last few years, there have been developments favoring a holistic reparation of the violence suffered by women mainly through the actions and interventions of social movements (Fernández Cediel, 2014). Women from this study are part, or have ties, with the RPM, an NGO in favor of reparation and a negotiated end to the armed conflict in Colombia. It is reasonable to argue that these polyvictimized and discriminated women have a more positive environment in which they are acknowledged as victims by those significant within their context (friends, neighbors, local authorities, etc.). These women have witnessed how through the actions of associations, such as the one they belong to, the Colombian government has implemented different laws supporting women victims of violence (e.g., law 1,257 from 2008 or resolution 1,441 in 2013).

Nevertheless, these dispositions have not necessarily been implemented by successive governments. There are still flaws in the support local and national government departments offer women victims of armed conflict violence. This situation does not allow for significant changes in the role and image of women in society and could explain why the more discrimination women victim of armed conflict suffer, the higher both general and family disapproval (Casa de la Mujer and Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, 2010).

Disapproval and recognition not only play a different role in linking polyvictimization and discrimination to PTSD, but family and general disapproval also impact on different PTSD symptoms. General disapproval, the opinion of an abstract set of society members, leads to an increase in the effect of discrimination in all symptoms of posttraumatic stress. That is, a recrudescence of the re-experience of the traumatic event that induces a state of high anxiety, cognitive avoidance, emotional reactivity, and hyperarousal. These findings support the idea that social reactions of disapproval and lack of support are related to PTSD in women survivors. Moreover, these results are consistent with other studies that have found similar results showing that general disapproval was the only factor of the Social Acknowledgment Questionnaire (SAQ) that in different contexts was positively and significantly related to PTSD (Koenen et al., 2003; Mueller et al., 2008; Schumm et al., 2014; Lis-Turlejska et al., 2018). Xu et al. (2016) state that a positive change in social recognition was linked with a decrease in PTSD after treatment. These results support the idea that social disapproval may be especially psychologically harmful for survivors trying to recover from these events (Fontana et al., 1997; Koenen et al., 2003). Moreover, Ullman (2010) stresses that the different sources of recognition may be more or less influential depending on, for instance, cultural factors. Maercker et al. (2009) found that traditional values as those predominant in cultures, such as Colombia (Casas and Méndez, 2019), inhibit social recognition as a victim. In this case, a low sense of social acknowledgment was accompanied by the need to tell others about the trauma and led to more PTSD. Our results suggest that general disapproval is most

relevant in its capacity to explain PTSD results. As a result, it should be considered an important aim in interventions whose objective is to promote trauma recovery and reduce PTSD symptomatology.

On the other hand, both family disapproval and recognition as a victim by significant others mediate the effect of discrimination on the cognitive and emotional PTSD problems. The way disapproval and recognition affect PTSD seems to be completely different: Family disapproval leads to an increase in the cognitive and emotional symptoms while recognition decreases the effect of discrimination and polyvictimization. In a family, its members may suffer different impacts which combined erode family interactions and force the group to reconstruct itself. The social effects of armed conflict not only affect individuals but also the social structure of close kin groups. In many cases, the family milieu has turned into something alien which is no longer a reference for security and identity. Although many families try to reorganize their relationships to continue to support its members, in certain cases, and due to the sequelae of the traumatic situation, we find that blame, rage, hurt, and impotence emerge in family interactions. This is especially the case in victims of sexual violence who suffered more discrimination and family disapproval than those non-victims of such type of violence. This family conflict in situations of armed conflict is sometimes resolved through networks of community sociability.

Moreover, as Jones et al. (2006) have shown, the positive effect of recognition as a victim by significant others has less impact than the negative effect of general disapproval. The political and social context of Colombia may also limit the effect of recognition by significant others. In countries in which armed conflict has persisted for decades, previous periods of unpunished violence have led to a continuing acceptance of violence against socially and politically marginalized groups, such as is the case of women (Tarnaala, 2019). Different reports have shown that if indiscriminate violence against women was common during the conflict, targeted assassinations and threats turned into common practice after the demobilization. Moreover, this violence in numerous cases is directed toward social movements, such as the RPM in Colombia, who are part of the scarce social support networks available to these women in fractured societies. Surveys conducted in different areas of the world have revealed that people who have a more active political and civic interest have more possibilities of being a victim of different types of violence (Bateson, 2012). In the case of women's organizations and individual activists, murders, attacks, and direct threats were a warning to other women to abandon social activism and "return" to more traditional gender roles (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2014). To make matters worse, after the peace accords and perpetrators, people who have killed, mutilated, and raped, often returned to live in the same communities in which their victims and families, were living. Currently, crimes against women are committed with the same unaccountability and impunity as during the conflict. These women's lives are still now on an organizational, political, and socioeconomic level restricted and under control. Notwithstanding these limitations, in many cases, only women survivors and their organizations are able to preserve the memory of the repression, organize public events of solidarity with victims, and forced the government to play an active role in their protection (Tarnaala, 2019).

We have seen that polyvictimization suffered by women in a context of armed conflict has two distinct phases. First is the instance in which the violent acts took place. Second, we find the moment of impunity and lack of mechanisms to recognize what has happened, a point in which these acts are "quietly" forgotten. This phase can lead to irreparable repercussions in victims. These are two complementary forms of psychological damage.

Practical Implications

This study supports placing a stronger emphasis on applying social psychological theories and constructs to the study of traumatic events and their impact on mental health. These results may have important clinical implications in interventions with women victims of violence in armed conflict and post-conflict situations. It is necessary to develop a holistic perspective that includes both the victim and their social environment (family, community, and society at large) (Kelly et al., 2012).

Moreover, the United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1,325 not only addressed the issue of gender inequalities in conflicts, and how it disproportionally affects women, but also stressed the need to include gender perspective in peace conflict resolution mechanisms. Women are not only victims of armed conflicts, but also leaders and peacemakers. This implies not reducing the role of women to more traditional spheres of peace education but engaging in women peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding activities, although everyday interventions show us that women still do not systematically participate in decision making about reconstruction and peace negotiations (Jansen, 2006; Adjei, 2019). This aim must be achieved through the direct involvement of women, and women's organizations, victim of gender violence in armed conflict situations, but also through counseling and support from professionals well versed on the nuances of each context and situation. For instance, Jansen (2006) stresses how social workers, and other health and social services professionals, are trained to understand not only trauma suffering but also resilience and a person and community's coping mechanisms. NGO's, governments, and professional health care providers must learn to correctly assess needs and understand how the larger interplay of social relations and culture may resound on the impact of trauma on individuals and groups, mobilizing women to participate in effective social reconstruction. Women and their families should be offered services, resources, and means to facilitate a group/social trauma approach and provide positive psychosocial support that does not exacerbate trauma or discrimination but rather individual and group integration, recovery, and resilience.

There is a need to develop interventions in women's most proximal social environments and promote family therapy and community interventions to strengthen a victim's closest social networks (Verelst et al., 2014). Nevertheless, interventions based on social capital must be socially and politically adapted in order

to increase their efficacy. The interdependence of the various community intra- and inter-social contexts will assign a different weight, influence, and importance to the improvement of a victim's mental health in each of these contexts (Flores et al., 2018). The results from this study stress that a collective social change could be the most appropriate proposal to address the mental health needs of women victims of armed conflict. Since stigmatization and general disapproval explain a large part of the impact of violence on the mental health of women victims, interventions should include approaches that take into consideration the social system. Stigma and disapproval toward women are enhanced by mass media messages, the initiative of government representatives and the actions, and omissions, of many members of the general public. More awareness interventions are needed to alert the general population, police, and army of the need to create safe havens that have banned stigma and discrimination directed toward these severe violations of human dignity and rights. Promoting the social approval of victims would be beneficial in family and community environments weakened by prolonged armed conflict. The aim would be to improve their ability to take actions and strengthen the positive result which a shared acknowledgment by those social groups closer to the victim may have on survivors' mental health (Campbell, 2019). An approach that integrates more individualistic clinical psychological perspectives, and more collective sociopolitical variables offer an opportunity to promote long-lasting changes in more vulnerable communities, such as those from which most of the women who participated in this study come from Burgess and Fonseca (2020).

Limitations

The number of women who participated in the research was low, although the complexity of the questionnaire, and the physical difficulty of accessing the terrain and sites did not allow for a larger sample which would be necessary to explore the mediating effects of social acknowledgment found in this study. The cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for an analysis of causation. To address this problem, more longitudinal studies should be designed and implemented in the future.

The nature of the participants and their implication in the actions of an NGO does not allow for a generalization of results to other women who have suffered the same violence but who may lack the assistance of a structured organizational network in which to share one's experiences. Moreover, participants answered a self-report remembering their actions and feelings years after the events took place in many cases. This may pose a problem of recall and memory reconstruction, although due to the nature of the events, these studies will always be reconstructive since objective data from the moment the events took place, and women suffered these episodes of violence, are very difficult to obtain.

CONCLUSION

Polyvictimization and posttraumatic stress symptoms are related indirectly through discrimination and lack of social acknowledgment. Results of the study stress the importance of understanding and intervening in PTSD recovery through the analysis of social processes and not only as an individual variable. Recognition as a victim and disapproval can coexist and be a burden for women if not adequately addressed. Family, close relations, and the more general society have different impacts on the various symptoms of PTSD, and as such must be considered when intervening and designing programs for women victims of armed conflict induced violence. Enhancing the recognition of women who have suffered violence by significant others and decreasing family and social disapproval can help recover women's mental health, despite the trauma caused by violence.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethical Committees of the institutions involved: Burgos University and Basque Country University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SU, AP, and JL contributed to the conception and design of the study. GM and AP collected the data. MG and AP organized the database. JL, SU, and AP performed the statistical analysis. JL, SU, AP, DP, and MG wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the manuscript revision, reading, and approving the submitted version.

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Body Image During Pregnancy in the Era of Coronavirus Disease 2019: The Role of Heterogeneous Patterns of Perceived Social Support

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Objective: The aim of this study was to explore the profiles of pregnant women on perceived social support with regard to sociodemographic variables, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)-related distress issues, and body image. We compared the aforementioned relationships within the study variables between pregnant women and a control group of non-pregnant women.

Method: The study sample comprised 345 women, 157 pregnant women, and 188 women in the control group. Participants filled out paper-and-pencil or online psychometric questionnaires to assess the variables analyzed in our research.

Results: Latent profile analysis revealed six profiles of pregnant women based on perceived social support, which varied in terms of body image evaluation. The high-support profile differed from the profiles with the lowest scores in all support domains. Significant differences in body image between the profiles of pregnant women and the control group were noted.

Conclusion: Understanding the mechanisms through which women can attain more body satisfaction during pregnancy is an important research topic that can inspire planning for more effective psychological help, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and related psychological distress.

Keywords: pregnancy, body image, social support, COVID-19, person-centered approach

INTRODUCTION

Body image is a multidimensional construct in which various thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors play a dynamic role in the subjective evaluation of the physical appearance of the self and general approach to the own body of an individual (Cash, 2011). Pregnancy is characterized by the experience of important physical changes and significant weight gain that can lead to a sense of loss of control and dissatisfaction with the own body of an individual, which poses a risk of psychological distress among pregnant women, including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Watson et al., 2017). The most common explanation for the relationship between poor body image and pregnant-related distress refers to socio-cultural factors and thinness ideals, which are

impossible to maintain during pregnancy (Grogan, 2007; Młozniak and Schier, 2016; Watson et al., 2017). Other theoretical explanations highlight the issue of body image standards among women during pregnancy (Fuller-Tyszkiewicz et al., 2013). Interestingly, authors representing this latter standpoint have provided mixed findings on body image concerns over the course of pregnancy. Although the majority of studies observed an intuitively obvious trend pointing to more negative body image and a drop in body satisfaction (Skouteris et al., 2005; Clark et al., 2009), there are also studies providing evidence for stable or even improved body image during pregnancy (Duncombe et al., 2008; Loth et al., 2011). The unexpected latter result may be linked to the fact that pregnancy is a time when weight gain is not so stigmatizing and also when the reproductive role is more important than physical attractiveness.

Some authors have underlined the role of individual differences in perceived social support, mostly from intimate relationships, in coping with the challenges of this transgressive period (Hodgkinson et al., 2014). Social support is shown to act as a protective factor against body image disturbances and pregnant-related mental disorders (Westdahl et al., 2007; Rashid and Mohd, 2017) and, importantly, may enhance subjective well-being and self-efficacy in coping with stress and anxiety (Ginja et al., 2018). In this study, we focused on the association between perceived support from significant others and body image during pregnancy at the time of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, as compared with non-pregnant women.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major stressor that uniquely affects the well-being of pregnant women worldwide (Moyer et al., 2020; Mortazavi et al., 2021). Current studies show that the influence of the pandemic on pregnancy care in hospitals, fear of infection among close relatives, restrictions for visits in hospital and thus poor social support, and social stressors like income/job loss, act as additional predictors of distress of pregnant women (Nanjundaswamy et al., 2020). The history of psychiatric disorders was associated with elevated depressive and even posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms among pregnant women during "lockdown" (Ravaldi et al., 2020), and social distancing also has the potential to amplify body dissatisfaction and increase the motive for thinness among women (Swami et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic creates an increased risk of psychiatric disorders among women during the perinatal period, which substantially limits the resources required to adapt to the pregnancy period.

Despite evidence for the vulnerability of pregnant women during the COVID-19 pandemic (Capobianco et al., 2020; Ravaldi et al., 2020; Hamzehgardeshi et al., 2021; Mortazavi et al., 2021), some studies have indicated a paradoxical possibility of better well-being and lower depression rates compared with pre-pandemic times (Pariente et al., 2020). It seems that pregnant women constitute a highly heterogeneous population, but the majority of studies disregard this fact, following the variable approach only (Hodgkinson et al., 2014; Watson et al., 2015; Morley-Hewitt and Owen, 2020), which ignores the heterogeneity of participants within the study variables. The use of the person-centered perspective in studying pregnant women is relatively new and thus, scarce in the literature (Talmon et al., 2020; Raspovic et al., 2021). This methodological design can help us better understand individual differences in the functioning of pregnant women during the COVID-19 pandemic by extracting different profiles of these women with unique relationships within the analyzed variables.

CURRENT STUDY

The aim of this study was twofold. First, we wanted to verify whether we could observe different profiles of pregnant women with regard to perceived social support. Second, we aimed to investigate whether profiles of pregnant women differ regarding sociodemographic variables, COVID-19-related distress issues, such as the subjective rating of COVID-19-related mental difficulties and medical history of depression, and body image. Finally, we aimed to interpret the aforementioned differences in the context of analog values acquired from the control group of non-pregnant women. In other words, we wanted to verify whether being pregnant in the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered body image and what the role of social support is in this aspect.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies conducted with pregnant women that would be useful as a direct source of research hypotheses in the case of this special study design, particularly with a control group of non-pregnant women. We mainly employed an exploratory approach in this study. Based on existing studies within different methodological frameworks (Talmon et al., 2020; Raspovic et al., 2021), we expected that our sample of pregnant women would be heterogeneous in terms of perceived social support and that support would differ in relation to sociodemographic variables, COVID-19-related distress issues, and body image. Finally, we expected that women after childbirth would experience, on average, a more negative body image than those from the comparison group. These relationships may also change if we take into account distinct profiles of perceived support during pregnancy.

METHODS

Participants

The study sample consisted of 345 women, 157 pregnant women, and 188 non-pregnant controls. The pregnant women were recruited from Princess Anna Mazowiecka Clinical Hospital, Poland. The control group was recruited *via* social media platforms *via* an advertisement prepared by the research group. The study participants filled out paper-and-pencil or online questionnaires and voluntarily participated in this study, with no remuneration provided. In cases of pregnancy, the eligibility criteria included being in the third trimester of pregnancy and being admitted to the hospital for childbirth, which was screened by medical doctors working in the hospitals where the research was conducted. The exclusion criteria included cognitive impairment or major medical complications associated with childbirth, such as possible premature childbirth as diagnosed by doctors.

TABLE 1 | Sociodemographic variables in the two study samples of women ($N = 345$).

Variable	Control *N* (188)	Pregnant *N* (157)	
Age in years (M ± SD)	31.05 ± 8.57	31.94 ± 4.60	$t_{(296.17)} = -1.22, p > 0.05$
Relationship status			$\chi^2_{(1)} = 30.52, p < 0.001$
Stable relationship	147 (79.5%)	155 (98.7%)	
Single	38 (20.5%)	2 (1.3%)	
Education			$\chi^2_{(3)} = 3.52, p > 0.05$
Elementary	2 (1.1%)	5 (3.2%)	
Vocational	1 (0.5%)	3 (1.9%)	
Secondary	54 (28.7%)	41 (26.1%)	
Higher education	131 (69.7%)	108 (68.8%)	
Employment			
Full employment	151 (80.3%)	126 (80.3%)	$\chi^2_{(2)} = 9.33, p < 0.01$
Unemployed	36 (19.1%)	22 (14.0%)	
Other	1 (0.5%)	9 (5.7%)	
Place of residence			$\chi^2_{(4)} = 20.52, p < 0.001$
Up to 20.000 inhabitants	24 (12.8%)	39 (24.8%)	
21.000-100.000 inhabitants	22 (11.7%)	33 (21.0%)	
101.000-500.000 inhabitants	15 (8.0%)	16 (10.2%)	
More than 500.000 inhabitants	126 (67.0%)	68 (43.3%)	
No permanent residence	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.6%)	
Financial situation			$\chi^2_{(4)} = 37.46, p < 0.001$
Very good	28 (14.9%)	13 (8.3%)	
Good	62 (33.0%)	96 (61.1%)	
Average	78 (41.5%)	48 (30.6%)	
Bad	17 (9.0%)	0 (0%)	
Very bad	3 (1.6%)	0 (0%)	
Quarantine or home isolation			$\chi^2_{(2)} = 13.29, p < 0.01$
Yes	59 (31.4%)	37 (23.6%)	
Limited going outside	54 (28.7%)	27 (17.2%)	
No	75 (39.9%)	93 (59.2%)	
Partner in quarantine or home isolation			$\chi^2_{(2)} = 1.16, p > 0.05$
Yes	21 (11.2%)	21 (13.4%)	
No	162 (86.2%)	134 (85.4%)	
Other	5 (2.7%)	2 (1.3%)	
Diagnosed with SARS-CoV-2			$\chi^2_{(2)} = 4.40, p > 0.05$
Participants	20 (10.6%)	17 (10.8%)	
Participants' partners	18 (9.6%)	6 (3.8%)	
None	150 (79.8%)	134 (85.4%)	
Epidemic situation affected financial status			$\chi^2_{(2)} = 2.47, p > 0.05$
Yes	37 (19.7%)	22 (14.0%)	
To a slight degree	60 (31.9%)	48 (30.6%)	
No	91 (48.4%)	87 (55.4%)	
Experiencing mental difficulties due to epidemic situation			$\chi^2_{(2)} = 31.91, p < 0.001$
Yes	61 (32.4%)	32 (20.4%)	
To a slight degree	85 (45.2%)	44 (28.0%)	
No	42 (22.3%)	81 (51.6%)	
Having children	132 (70.2%)	90 (57.3%)	$\chi^2_{(1)} = 6.19, p < 0.05$
Diagnosed with depression or other disorders	44 (23.4%)	4 (2.5%)	$\chi^2_{(1)} = 31.07, p < 0.001$
A loved one diagnosed with depression or other disorders	117 (62.2%)	22 (14.0%)	$\chi^2_{(1)} = 82.69, p < 0.001$

M, mean; SD, standard deviation; t, independent sample t-test; χ^2 chi-squared test for independence.

For the control sample, the inclusion criteria included not being pregnant at the time of conducting this study. The study took place between November and May 2021, a time described as the "second" and "third waves" of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland[1]. The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee.

Measures

Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ; Cash, 2000). The MBSRQ consists of 69 items making up 10 scales that relate to different areas of body image as follows: the appearance evaluation, the appearance orientation, the fitness evaluation, the fitness orientation, the health evaluation, the health orientation, the illness orientation, the body area satisfaction, the overweight preoccupation, and the self-classified weight. Higher results obtained in all scales except the overweight preoccupation and the self-classified weight scale mean a more favorable assessment of body image. An exploratory factor analysis revealed that the Polish MBSRQ items significantly loaded with the main factors of the scale. Internal consistencies of the subscales were satisfactory (Brytek-Matera and Rogoza, 2015).

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988). The MSPSS is a 12-item scale measuring perceived social support from three sources, namely, family, friends, and significant others, with no established population norms. Higher results obtained in the scales mean a more favorable assessment of social support from family, friends, a significant other, or a total assessment of perceived social support. The structure of polish adaptation of the scale is the same as to the original one—exploratory and confirmatory analyses have validated the three-factor structure and confirmed its satisfactory psychometric properties (Adamczyk, 2013).

COVID-19-related distress: In this study, we utilized short, but reliable operationalization of the COVID-19 distress based on some other studies published at that time, when we started our research (Gambin et al., 2020; Dragan et al., 2021). More specifically, we asked participants on a Likert 1–5 point scale how stressful (in general) was for them this pandemic and their life during it. The answers varied between 1 ("not at all") and 5 ("very much").

Data Analysis

The data analysis consisted of four consecutive stages. First, descriptive analysis was performed. Mean values, SDs, minimum and maximum values, and values of measures of skewness and kurtosis were computed. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables. Second, different profiles of perceived support in the group of pregnant women were extracted using the latent profile analysis (LPA; Vermunt, 2017). LPA is a statistical technique, which enables the exploration of unobserved heterogeneity within a study sample (Lubke and Neale, 2006; Nylund et al., 2007). In other words, this method allowed us to classify pregnant women into several exclusive subgroups, characterized by different profiles of perceived social support. A model with an optimal number of such profiles is selected based on several indicators. In this study, we based on the following indicators: Akaike information criterion (AIC), approximate weight of evidence (AWE), Bayesian information criterion (BIC), classification likelihood criterion (CLC), and Kullback information criterion (KIC; Lubke and Neale, 2006). Third, the sociodemographic variables and body image were compared within the subgroups of pregnant women with different support profiles with the use of Pearson's chi-squared test for independence and ANOVA followed by the Gabriel *post-hoc* test. Fourth, the differences detected were then interpreted in the context of the values acquired in the control group, which were used as a reference with the use of the planned contrast test. Conventional cut-off value $p < 0.05$ was used. Calculations were performed with the use of the tidy LPA package (Rosenberg et al., 2018) working in the R Statistics 4.1.0 environment and IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0, Chicago, IL.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of all the study participants, with statistical tests for differences between the groups.

In the group of pregnant women, more women were in stable relationships, fewer women were unemployed, and fewer women lived in a city with more than 500,000 inhabitants. Their financial situation was significantly better, fewer women were in quarantine, fewer women experienced mental difficulties due to epidemic situations, fewer women already had children, fewer women were diagnosed with mental disorders themselves, and fewer women knew that someone close was diagnosed with a

TABLE 2 | Descriptive statistics for variables in the study sample ($N = 345$).

	M	*SD*	Min	Max	*S*	*K*
Support						
Significant other	6.03	1.33	1.00	7.00	−1.82	3.22
Family	5.30	1.51	1.00	7.00	−0.86	0.09
Friends	5.48	1.33	1.00	7.00	−1.08	1.07
Total	5.60	1.21	1.00	7.00	−1.36	2.22
Body image						
Appearance evaluation	3.45	0.90	1.00	5.00	−0.60	−0.23
Appearance orientation	3.14	0.57	1.75	4.67	0.18	−0.08
Fitness evaluation	3.14	0.94	1.00	5.00	−0.30	−0.50
Fitness orientation	3.08	0.85	1.00	5.00	0.00	−0.52
Health evaluation	3.65	0.73	1.00	5.00	−0.52	0.21
Health orientation	3.26	0.59	1.50	4.63	−0.24	−0.12
Illness orientation	3.24	0.77	1.20	5.00	−0.05	−0.44
Overweight preoccupation	2.52	0.89	1.00	5.00	0.38	−0.49
Body areas satisfaction scale	3.31	0.77	1.00	5.00	−0.53	0.12
Self-classified weight	3.19	0.73	0.50	5.00	−0.31	1.68

M, mean; SD, standard deviation; min, minimal value; max, maximum value; S, skewness; K, kurtosis.

[1]Portal Gov.pl (2021). Retrieved 12 July 2021, from https://www.gov.pl/.

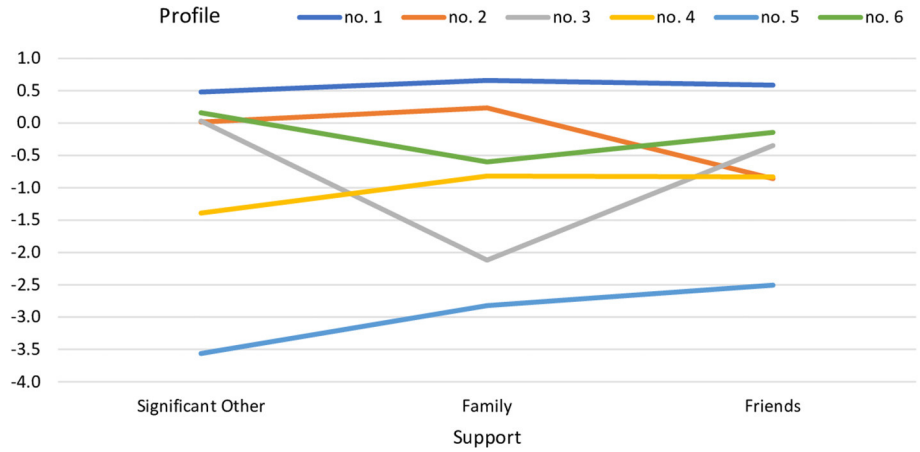

FIGURE 1 | Profiles of perceived support in the group of pregnant women.

TABLE 3 | Values of fit indices for solutions with different numbers of profiles.

No. of profiles	AIC	AWE	BIC	CLC	KIC
1	1,345.63	1,410.31	1,363.97	1,335.63	1,354.63
2	1,116.82	1,225.96	1,147.38	1,098.80	1,129.82
3	994.26	1,147.95	1,037.05	968.14	1,011.26
4	948.44	1,146.59	1,003.45	914.32	969.44
5	901.02	1,143.60	968.26	858.91	926.02
6	**889.44**	**1,176.54**	**968.90**	**839.27**	**918.44**

AIC, Akaike information criterion; AWE, approximate weight of evidence; BIC, Bayesian information criterion; CLC, classification likelihood criterion; KIC, Kullback information criterion.

The values of fit indices for the retained profile solution are in bold.

TABLE 4 | Number of participants in stable relationships depending on the profile of perceived support.

Profile	*n* (%)
No. 1	88 (100%)
No. 2	16 (100%)
No. 3	6 (100%)
No. 4	15 (100%)
No. 5	6 (85.7%)
No. 6	24 (96.0%)

mental disorder. Out of 157 pregnant women, 65 women (41.4%) planned to give birth by cesarean section, and 78 women (49.7%) planned natural childbirth.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the analyzed variables.

Distributions of support from significant others, friends, and total support were leptokurtic and negatively skewed. Self-classified weight in body image was also leptokurtic. Other variables did not differ from normal distributions in terms of range or symmetry.

The scores reflecting support from significant others, family, and friends were submitted to LPA. The analysis was performed on a group of pregnant women.

An analytic hierarchy process, based on the fit indices, i.e., AIC, AWE, BIC, CLC, and KIC (Akogul and Erisoglu, 2017), suggested the best-fitted model in the form of the six profile solution. The best-fitted model was accepted based on the lowest values of the aforementioned fit indices (see **Figure 1**). Values of all fit indices for six solutions are provided in **Table 3**.

The first profile ($n = 88$) was characterized by the highest level of support from all three sources, the second profile ($n = 16$) was characterized by an average level of support with a lower level of support from friends, and the third profile ($n = 6$) was characterized by a low level of family support. The fourth profile ($n = 15$) was characterized by a low level of support from significant others, the fifth profile ($n = 7$) was characterized by a low level of support from all three sources, and the sixth profile ($n = 25$) was characterized by an average level of support with lower support from family.

In the next stage of analysis, participants from the extracted profiles were compared in terms of socioeconomic data. As seen in **Table 4**, the number of participants in stable relationships was significantly lower in profile 5 (low level of support from all three sources) and profile 6 (average level of support with lower support from family) groups, $\chi^2_{(5)} = 12.51$, $p < 0.05$.

In the profile 3 group (low level of family support), both the number of participants diagnosed with mental disorders and those in a relationship with someone diagnosed with a mental disorder were higher than in groups of participants with other profiles of perceived support (**Table 5**).

There were no statistically significant relationships between profiles of perceived support and education, $\chi^2_{(15)} = 22.59$, $p > 0.05$, employment, $\chi^2_{(15)} = 13.02$, $p > 0.05$, place of residence, $\chi^2_{(20)} = 11.98$, $p > 0.05$, financial situation, $\chi^2_{(10)} = 9.61$, p

TABLE 5 | Number of participants diagnosed with mental disorders or in a relationship with someone diagnosed with a mental disorder depending on the profile of perceived support.

Profile	Participant *n* (%)	Someone close *n* (%)
No. 1	1 (1.1%)	11 (12.5%)
No. 2	1 (6.3%)	1 (6.3%)
No. 3	2 (33.3%)	4 (66.7%)
No. 4	0 (0%)	2 (13.3%)
No. 5	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
No. 6	0 (0%)	4 (16.0%)

> 0.05, being in quarantine, $\chi^2_{(10)} = 8.18$, $p > 0.05$, being in relationship with a partner in quarantine, $\chi^2_{(10)} = 3.09$, $p > 0.05$, being diagnosed with severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), $\chi^2_{(10)} = 11.64$, $p > 0.05$, the impact of the pandemic on financial situation, $\chi^2_{(10)} = 17.46$, $p > 0.05$, experiencing mental difficulties due to the pandemic, $\chi^2_{(10)} = 10.28$, $p > 0.05$, and already having children, $\chi^2_{(5)} = 7.15$, $p > 0.05$.

The extracted groups with different profiles of support were also compared in terms of body image. **Table 6** presents the mean values of body image indicators with a one-way ANOVA.

There were statistically significant differences between the extracted profiles regarding appearance evaluation, fitness orientation, and health evaluation (see **Figure 2**). According to the values of Gabriel, *post-hoc* test profile 1 (highest level of support) differed significantly from profile 5 (low level of support) in terms of appearance evaluation, $t = 2.82$, $p < 0.05$, and from profile 4 (low level of support from significant other) in terms of fitness orientation, $t = 2.65$, $p = 0.068$, and health evaluation, $t = 3.11$, $p < 0.05$.

In the final analysis, the groups of pregnant women characterized by profile 1 and profiles 4 and 5 combined, i.e., groups that differed significantly in terms of body image, were compared to the control group. For this analysis, groups with profiles 4 and 5 were combined into a single group of participants with lower social support. The values from the control group were used as a reference. **Table 7** presents the mean values of body image indicators acquired in the three groups compared with the values of one-way ANOVA.

There were statistically significant differences regarding appearance evaluation and health evaluation and differences close to statistical significance regarding fitness orientation. For the purpose of comparison with the control group, contrast tests were used. Regarding appearance evaluation, there was a difference close to statistical significance between the control group and participants with profile 1, $t = 1.85$, $p = 0.065$, and a statistically significant difference between the control group and participants with profiles 4 or 5, $t = -2.10$, $p < 0.05$. Regarding fitness orientation, there was a statistically significant difference between the control group and participants with profile 4 or 5, $t = -2.31$, $p < 0.05$, but there was no difference between the control group and participants with profile 1, $t = 0.38$, $p > 0.05$.

Regarding health evaluation, there was a statistically significant difference between the control group and participants with profile 1, $t = 2.70$, $p < 0.01$, but there was no difference between the control group and participants with profile 4 or 5, $t = -1.00$, $p > 0.05$ (see **Figure 3**). The appearance evaluation in the group of pregnant women with profile 1 (highest level of support) was higher than in the control group. The appearance evaluation in the group of pregnant women with profiles 4 or 5 (low level of support from significant others or in general) was lower than in the control group. Fitness orientation in the group of pregnant women with profile 4 or 5 (low level of support from significant other or in general) was lower than in the control group. Fitness orientation in the group of pregnant women with profile 1 (highest level of support) was similar to fitness orientation in the control group. Health evaluation in the group of pregnant women with profile 1 (highest level of support) was higher than in the control group. Health evaluation in the group of pregnant women with profile 4 or 5 (low level of support from significant other or in general) was similar to the control group.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study were mostly in accordance with our explorative research hypotheses. First, we observed six profiles of pregnant women based on perceived social support, which varied in terms of body image evaluation. This study is the first to explain heterogeneity in the approach to the own body of an individual during pregnancy, depending on different social support profiles. More specifically, the largest group of women extracted in this study was characterized by high levels of support provided by significant others, as well as family and friends, and was associated with more positive self-evaluation in distinct body image subscales.

Pregnant women from the high-support profile differed significantly from the pregnant women from the profile with the lowest scores in all support domains in the context of appearance evaluation. Also, women with the highest perceived support levels varied from women characterized by low levels of support from significant others in terms of fitness orientation and health evaluation.

Pregnant women who perceive more social support in their close relationships tend to assess their changing bodies in more positive ways throughout pregnancy. A positive perception of the body during pregnancy allows women to maintain their feeling of being socially attractive, despite objective changes in their bodies (Hodgkinson et al., 2014; Ginja et al., 2018). This is in line with the argument of Schier (2021) that body image is a dynamic construct that can be influenced by actions and physical changes associated with the body and its role in specific life circumstances, especially if they are formative for the own identity of an individual.

In addition, the observed profiles of pregnant women with perceived support were also associated with some of the sociodemographic and medical variables controlled in this study.

TABLE 6 | Mean values of body image indicators with values of one-way ANOVA.

	Profile 1		Profile 2		Profile 3		Profile 4		Profile 5		Profile 6		*F*	df	*p*	η^2
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*				
Appearance evaluation	3.63	0.76	3.43	0.76	3.43	0.91	3.09	0.71	2.78	0.66	3.50	0.83	2.62	5.151	0.026	0.08
Appearance orientation	3.18	0.52	3.18	0.52	3.28	0.52	2.99	0.41	3.07	0.38	2.97	0.59	1.05	5.151	0.392	0.03
Fitness evaluation	3.18	0.89	3.31	0.43	3.11	1.13	2.87	0.71	2.71	0.71	3.29	0.87	1.00	5.151	0.419	0.03
Fitness orientation	3.16	0.75	3.13	0.50	2.96	0.66	2.65	0.38	2.69	0.41	2.83	0.76	2.37	5.151	0.042	0.07
Health evaluation	3.85	0.59	3.49	0.67	3.53	0.92	3.31	0.59	3.67	0.72	3.72	0.59	2.64	5.151	0.026	0.08
Health orientation	3.39	0.55	3.31	0.59	3.67	0.67	3.03	0.42	3.16	0.47	3.17	0.64	2.03	5.151	0.078	0.06
Illness orientation	3.38	0.72	3.30	0.71	3.13	0.95	3.09	0.70	3.03	0.99	2.97	0.82	1.48	5.151	0.201	0.05
Overweight preoccupation	2.44	0.70	2.52	1.15	2.71	1.18	2.47	0.72	2.18	0.95	2.21	0.98	0.63	5.151	0.673	0.02
Body areas satisfaction scale	3.38	0.78	3.26	0.47	3.28	0.94	2.91	0.77	2.78	0.85	3.38	0.68	1.77	5.151	0.123	0.06
Self-classified weight	3.23	0.71	3.13	0.76	3.42	0.97	2.87	1.36	3.43	0.93	3.04	0.80	0.88	5.151	0.495	0.03

M, mean; SD, standard deviation; F, one-way ANOVA; df, degrees of freedom; p, statistical significance; η^2, partial eta-squared measure of effect size.

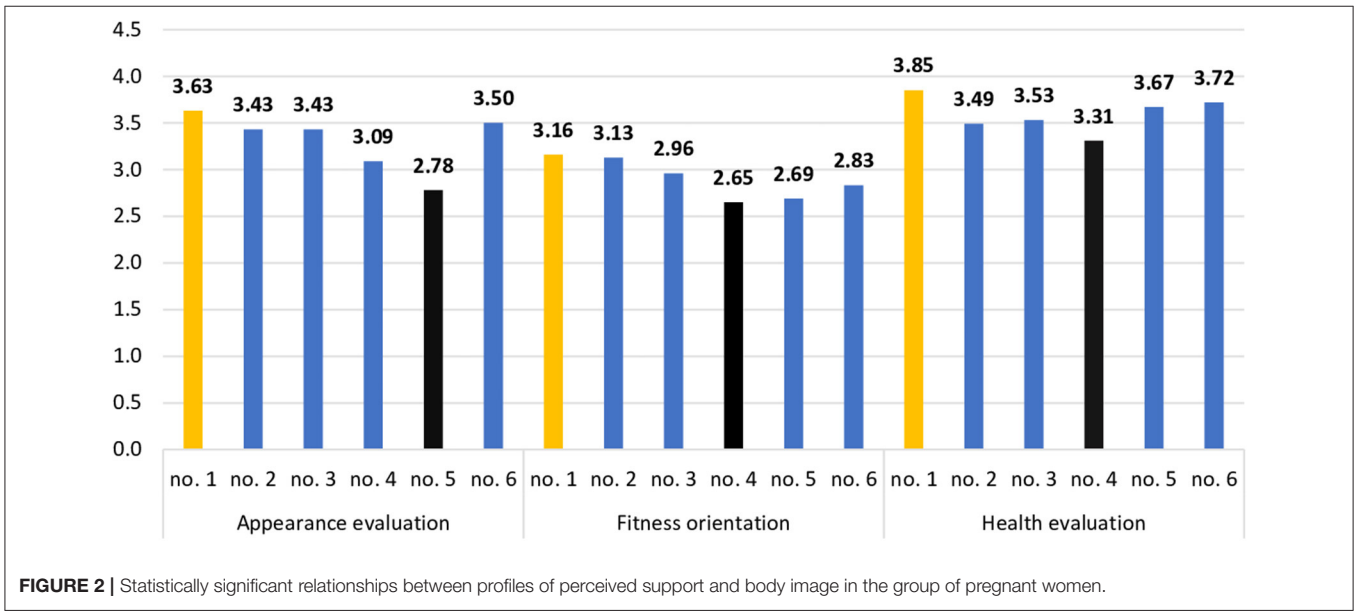

FIGURE 2 | Statistically significant relationships between profiles of perceived support and body image in the group of pregnant women.

First, we observed fewer participants in stable relationships among pregnant women belonging to profiles characterized by low levels of perceived support from all sources. Also, participants with a low level of family support were more often diagnosed with mental disorders or had been in a relationship with someone with psychiatric illness in the past. The co-occurrence of mental health problems and low levels of social support has important clinical and social consequences, as social support is shown to act as an important protective factor in mental health maintenance (Westdahl et al., 2007; Rashid and Mohd, 2017). In particular, mental health problems during pregnancy can have important consequences for both maternal and fetal outcomes and are linked to an increased risk of postpartum depression.

Interestingly, no other sociodemographic variables or COVID-19-related variables were significantly associated with the profiles of participants based on levels of perceived social support. This result is in line with studies conducted among women delivering during the first "lockdown," as they were found to be exposed to lower postpartum depression risk than women delivering before the COVID-19 pandemic (Pariente et al., 2020). We also found that pregnant women reported experiencing fewer mental difficulties due to the pandemic and were less often forced to undergo quarantine than women in the control group. Accordingly, women during pregnancy experienced less negative financial consequences of the pandemic compared to the control group.

The aforementioned surprising results, particularly the null result with COVID-19 distress, can be explained by the greater support that future mothers have in their situation of pregnancy compared to non-pregnant women who often cannot expect such support (Pariente et al., 2020). Furthermore, for pregnant women, having a partner plays a particularly important role in their psychological resilience (Harville et al., 2009; Khatri et al., 2018; Pariente et al., 2020). It may also be that pregnant women, who are more emotionally engaged in their close environment,

TABLE 7 | Mean values of body image indicators with one-way ANOVA.

	Control group		Profile 1		Profile 4 or 5		*F*	df	*p*	η^2
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*				
Appearance evaluation	3.41	0.97	3.63	0.76	2.99	0.70	4.80	2.295	0.009	0.03
Fitness orientation	3.12	0.96	3.16	0.75	2.66	0.38	3.01	2.295	0.051	0.02
Health evaluation	3.59	0.81	3.85	0.59	3.42	0.64	4.78	2.295	0.009	0.03

M, mean; SD, standard deviation; F, one-way ANOVA; df, degrees of freedom; p, statistical significance; η^2, partial eta-squared measure of effect size.

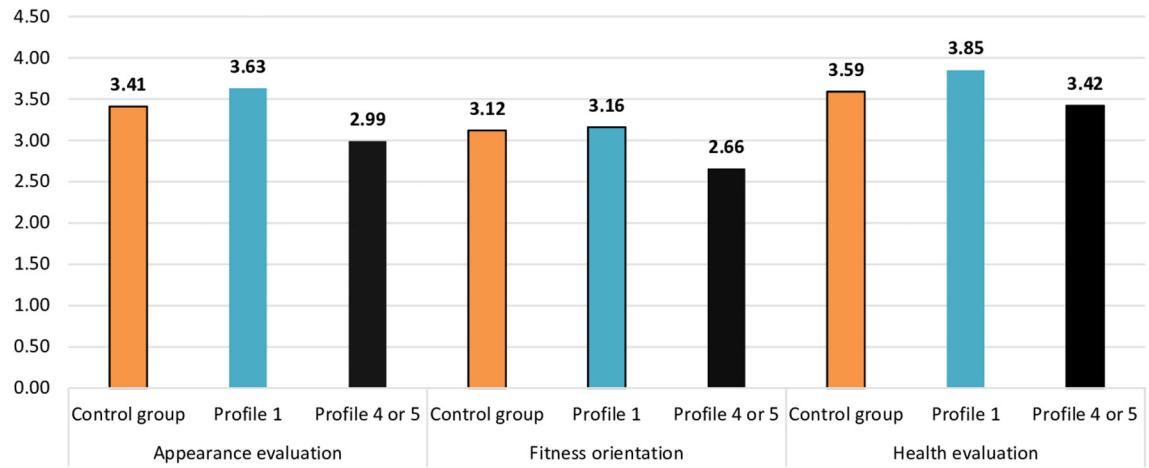

FIGURE 3 | Statistically significant relationships between profiles of perceived support and body image between pregnant women and the control group.

such as circumstances external to their household and family life, were impacted by COVID-19-related distress to a lesser degree.

Finally, we noticed differences in body image between pregnant women and women in the control group. Pregnant women from profiles with very high levels of perceived social support evaluated their bodies (i.e., appearance evaluation, health evaluation, and fitness orientation) much more positively than women from the control group. In other words, not all pregnant women assessed their bodies more favorably than women who were not pregnant—it depended largely on the level of perceived support. In most body image domains, pregnant women did not report significant differences when compared to the control group. Only profiles of pregnant women with the highest and the lowest levels of perceived social support differed from the control group in terms of appearance, health evaluation, and fitness orientation. In addition, alternative explanations of the obtained results cannot be overlooked and should also be considered in further research. In particular, further studies can explore the possible influence of some other latent factors, such as personality traits, that can influence both the body image attitudes and perceived social support, even if the two variables are not correlated.

It seems that pregnant women are a very heterogeneous group, which can be easily overlooked in studies exclusively following the variable-centered approach (Hodgkinson et al., 2014; Watson et al., 2015). In other words, it is impossible to draw universal conclusions on body image in pregnancy in general, but rather, the focus should be on specific profiles of pregnant women with regard to psychosocial factors uniquely related to particular body image profiles.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Our study has several strengths, including the comparison of pregnant women with a control group of non-pregnant women and the person-centered approach, which adds value to the literature on body image during pregnancy (Morley-Hewitt and Owen, 2020; Raspovic et al., 2021). Nevertheless, our study was not free from limitations. First, the study design was cross-sectional, so no cause-and-effect relationships could be drawn from its results. Second, the study sample was not very large and limited to women delivering in one hospital, which makes it difficult to draw representative conclusions of study findings for overall populations of pregnant women during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we did not gather extensive information about the medical history and medical variables of the women.

CONCLUSION

Despite these limitations, this study offers some new insights into the psychological situation of pregnant women in the global

pandemic. The possibility of gaining more body satisfaction during pregnancy is an important research perspective that can shed new light on the processes underlying potential identity change triggered by motherhood (Hodgkinson et al., 2014; Ginja et al., 2018). This study can be used for more efficient planning of potential psychological help for women in the perinatal period based on a better understanding of their heterogeneity and specific needs. In the future, longitudinal studies could be conducted that enable the discovery of causal relationships between study variables. Also, the psychological distress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic should be further explored, as the global health crisis can be a reason for long-term consequences that are not captured by current research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethics Committee, Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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Thank You for Hearing My Voice – Listening to Women Combat Veterans in the United States and Israeli Militaries

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The military service of combat soldiers may pose many threats to their well being and often take a toll on body and mind, influencing the physical and emotional make-up of combatants and veterans. The current study aims to enhance our knowledge about the combat experiences and the challenges that female soldiers face both during and after their service. The study is based on qualitative methods and narrative analysis of in-depth semi-structured personal interviews with twenty military veterans. It aims to analyze the narratives of American and Israeli female combat soldiers regarding their military service, with emphasis on the soldiers' descriptions, in their own words, about their difficulties, challenges, coping and successes during their service and transition to civilian life. A recurring theme in the interviews with the veterans of both militaries was the need to be heard and the fact that societies, therapists, and military institutions do not always truly listen to female veterans' experiences and are not really interested in what actually ails them. Our research suggests that conventional methods used in research relating to veterans might at times be inadequate, because the inherent categorization might abstract, pathologize, and fragment a wide array of soldiers' modes of post-combat being. Moreover, female veterans' voices will not be fully heard unless we allow them to be active participants in generating knowledge about themselves.

Keywords: veterans, military, women in combat, trauma, transition, war, violence, military sexual trauma (MST)

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INTRODUCTION

In April 2021, on Israel's Memorial Day, combat veteran Itzik Saidyan set himself alight in front of the offices of the Rehabilitation Department of Israel's Defense Ministry (Kubovich and Peleg, 2021). Following this shocking and devastating protest about ill treatment, many veterans, male and female alike, shared their painful memories with the public at large, and the issues raised by them prompted an intense public debate in Israel (Kubovich and Peleg, 2021). With the 'Saaidian affair' remaining in the media spotlight, veterans in Israel continue to speak out about their experiences in the battlefield and the impact of those experiences on their lives. Women veterans have added another dimension to this protest by revealing their double battle, one to actually carry out their military duties (with possible exposure to combat trauma) (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, 2020) and the other to integrate into a masculine military environment. Incidents like the one

described above are not unique to Israel, and, sadly, situations of extreme distress among veterans, including suicide attempts, are not uncommon. In the United States, for example, each day sees about 18 veterans committing suicide (US Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2020).

The continuously expanding body of knowledge on the implications of military service and armed conflicts for the lives of men and women combat soldiers spans a range of disciplines from psychology and other health sciences through critical security and military studies to political science and international relations. These disciplines both embody and reflect the events that influence the physical and emotional well-being of combat soldiers and veterans—men and women (Solomon and Flum, 1988; Harpaz-Rotem and Rosenheck, 2011; Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev, 2014; Rozanova et al., 2016; Grimell, 2018a). Just as the literature on veterans lies at an interdisciplinary junction, so, too, do the veterans themselves constitute crossroad protagonists in the negotiation of relations between politics, the state, the military, and society. Since many veterans bear the mental and physical scars of war, they could, in fact, be considered as "living monuments" (Jordan, 2011) who confront domestic societies with the consequences of the wars that those very societies sent them to fight. The responsibility of these societies is therefore fundamental (Bulmer and Jackson, 2015, p. 27; Grimell, 2018b).

Military service, particularly the service of combat soldiers, may pose a variety of threats and hence may inflict damage on both body and mind, with the literature on combat trauma indicating that combat does indeed leave a lasting impression on individual's minds (van der Kolk, 2012; Homan et al., 2019; Fogle et al., 2020; Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, 2020). After military service, former military personnel may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other related psychiatric conditions, which may impair their adaptation to a new post-military, civilian life (Grimell, 2018a, p. 193). These challenges involve physical, mental and moral elements (Shay, 1994; Grimell, 2018b; Molendijk, 2018; Grimell and Nilsson, 2020; p. 380). A study on United States combat veterans vs. non-combat veterans revealed that combat veterans are more than three times as likely to screen positive for lifetime PTSD (Thomas et al., 2017). To date, the experiences of men combatants have constituted the main focus of studies on the psychological trauma of combatants, including combat trauma, PTSD, and symptoms of distress following combat. In contrast, research on the combat trauma of women soldiers has been sidelined out of the mainstream of trauma studies, in that it deals mainly with military sexual trauma (MST) and its affects, thereby relegating women, once again, to the category of the victim or the powerless. In this respect, trauma studies are thus gender biased (Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev, 2017; Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, 2020; Kubovich, 2021).

As we note in earlier research, within the larger debate on military conscription, the dominant gender images of war have been relatively fixed for centuries: men are the militarists, women are the pacifists and/or victims. Men are warriors marching into battle, whereas women allegedly march for peace (Elshtain, 1995). Moreover, men's participation in armed conflicts is viewed as a necessary component of citizenship, ethnicity, and communal belonging, whereas women's participation in armed conflicts is not generally interpreted in such terms (Cooke, 1993; Enloe, 2007). And when women are involved in the battlefield, their contribution is typically underestimated. Nonetheless, more and more women are beginning to occupy different roles in militaries worldwide, thereby posing various challenges for these institutions (Goldstein, 2001; Eichler, 2013, 2021; Badaró, 2015). To counteract some of the conventional wisdoms about war and militaries (Cooke, 1993, p. 177), we regarded it crucial to provide a forum for women veterans to be heard on the subject of women's presence and engagement at the front and hence engaged in the study reported here.

Against the above background, we, as a multidisciplinary research team of social scientists in the fields of health, trauma and security studies, sought to gain insight into the various scars of war through listening to the ways in which female combat soldiers presented their experiences (including traumatic experiences) in the military when they viewed their service retrospectively and when they discussed the problems facing them several years after their release from service. While we were well aware of the importance of providing quantitative data about veterans and manifestations of harm to veterans' minds and bodies, we were equally curious to learn, on a qualitative level, about the nature of the experiences of these women and the threats and difficulties that they faced—and are still facing. In this sense, we believe that we have made a start on opening the way to address the criticisms aimed at studies that focus on binary categories. Critical military studies, for example, suggest that much of the quantitative research about combat trauma routinely objectifies veterans and their experiences and engages in "diagnostic competition over soldiers' psyches" (Howell, 2011, p. 115). In addition, conventional quantitative methods used in research relating to veterans, such as surveys and questionnaires, might at times be inadequate, because categories might abstract, pathologize, and fragment a "wide array of soldier's modes of post-combat being" (Wool, 2013, p. 406) and impose specific diagnostic categories. They might also fail to allow the veterans' community to generate its own research questions or participate in the interpretation of the data gathered about veterans (Bulmer and Jackson, 2015, p. 29). Such a failure would be in keeping with the suggestion of van der Kolk (2012) that without truly listening to veterans we are not able to comprehend what actually ails them.

As women now serve in combat in larger and larger numbers, we chose to bring the narratives of women military veterans from both the United States military and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to the forefront of research about the trauma of combat soldiers and the transition processes experienced by military veterans with the aim to generate additional knowledge about their perspectives and difficulties. Since veterans are situated at the intersection of the military, the polity, and society, we felt that their narratives could inform the literature on combat and traumatic events from the view point of their "in-between" positionality. Here it should be remembered that

military veterans should not be considered as homogeneous group, since veterans from various geographical and social climates and different genders may experience combat and post-combat difficulties in different ways. We thus approached this research from a multidisciplinary perspective and with intellectual curiosity about veterans' experiences, stories, and challenges rather than viewing veterans as a "setback to be fixed." The aim of this study was to explore the main elements that preoccupy female military combat veterans of the Israeli and the United States militaries when they view their service retrospectively, with emphasis on the veterans' descriptions, in their own words, about their difficulties and successes during their military service and their transition to civilian life. By listening carefully to their stories, we aimed to trace the main issues that trouble them and to evaluate these issues comparatively in these two militaries and societies and thereby to shed new light on their experiences. We paid equally close attention what the veterans told us and how they told it. Through this methodology, the stories and narratives of the women combat veterans have thus become the supporting data for our study's conclusions but, perhaps more importantly, they also provide insight into their experiences and struggles (Bagby et al., 2015; Molendijk, 2018).

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE CONTEXTS AND CHALLENGES DUE TO MILITARY SERVICE

United States and Israeli Militaries

The United States military has relied on an all-volunteer force for nearly four decades, with 0.4% of the United States population being on active duty (Reynolds, 2018). Women represent about 16% of enlisted forces (CFR.org Editors, 2020) and constituted about 10% of the deployed force during recent conflicts (Murdoch et al., 2014). In contrast, the IDF relies on mandatory conscription for both men and women, and about 50% of citizens over the age of 18 years are enlisted (Ultra-Orthodox Jewish and most Arab-Palestinian citizens are exempt). Women represent 33% of the military personnel, with 9% of women soldiers holding combat positions. After a long struggle, all roles in the United States military have been opened to women, whereas not all combat roles are open to women in the IDF (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, 2020). As may be gleaned from the above introductory sentences, our aim in selecting these two militaries was to present examples from an all-volunteer military vs. a mandatory-service-based military. In the United States case, women's presence in the military is limited, whereas in Israel the proportion of women serving in the military is very much higher. In addition, the nature and the length of the deployment in combat service are usually very different in the two countries: in the United States military (and in many other large militaries), soldiers may be deployed for several months or even a year at a time to locations far away from home, whereas in the IDF, soldiers are typically deployed relatively close to home and for periods of up to 3 or 4 weeks.

Combat Exposure to Trauma and Conflict in a War Zone

There is no question that military service is high on the list of potentially traumatic experiences (PTE) and qualifies as a criterion for the diagnosis of PTSD according to DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013; Lander et al., 2019). Although there are indeed studies describing stress and the consequences of combat exposure among both United States (e.g., Whaley Eager, 2014; Doran et al., 2021) and IDF (e.g., Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev, 2017) women soldiers, and traumatic experiences are indeed frequent among soldiers, society tends to shy away from detailed stories about trauma and from digging into moral injury (Shay, 1994), preferring laundered language and statistics about combat trauma (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, 2020, p. 69). Moreover, soldiers' experiences of war are often shrouded in secrecy, as—historically—war veterans rarely describe closely what happens in the battlefield. On the surface, there may appear to be good reasons for this lack of candor, such as shielding partners, the wider family, and communities from the horrors of war (Wertsch, 1991). Yet, drawing a veil over the atrocities of war by not talking about them should not be taken to mean that these experiences are forgotten—"out of sight" does not mean "out of mind." This point is well expressed by van der Kolk (2014) when he describes the devastating consequences for combat veterans of living with trauma—and with stories they cannot share. These consequences may include profound isolation, shame, guilt, aggression or violence, amnesia, disassociation, flashbacks, and reenactment. Symptoms like these, van der Kolk observes, are often met with inappropriate mental health care and a lack of understanding from others. Equally troubling is the reluctance of some clinicians to delve too deeply into the experiences of returning veterans (van der Kolk, 2014; Carless and Douglas, 2016, p. 375). Therefore, veterans with post-traumatic stress often experience difficulties in trusting others—be they clinicians, physicians, therapists, or government officials—and in maintaining emotional intimacy with loved ones, in large part because they feel misunderstood and isolated (Shay, 1994; Usry, 2019). Therefore, truly listening to and creating trust among veterans is of the outmost importance.

Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Among Combat Soldiers and Combat Support Soldiers

Studies show that, globally, women in the military are in double jeopardy. They face the conventional dangers of being killed or wounded by the enemy during combat, in accidents, or in other ways (Jeffreys, 2007), and they also face the danger of sexual violence and harassment from their colleagues. Such events have a marked influence of their health (Castro et al., 2015; Brownstone et al., 2018).

Sexual harassment is prevalent in the United States military (Whaley Eager, 2014; Moreau et al., 2020) and also occurs, but to a lesser extent, in the IDF (Lomsky-Feder and Sasson-Levy, 2019; Shoval, 2021). In practice, women in professional militaries suffer more sexual assaults (Lomsky-Feder and Sasson-Levy, 2019, p. 13), and women in non-combat roles are more

prone to be assaulted. Differences between United States and Israeli combatants may be partly is explained by the differences in the nature of the deployment in the United States military and the IDF, as described above. Estimates of sexual assaults during military service in the United States range from 9.5 to 49% among women (Castro et al., 2015; Wilson, 2018; Moreau et al., 2020). In Israel, numbers of complaints of sexual assaults in the IDF vary between 900 and 1,950 cases per year, which is less than 3% of women in the military per year (The Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel [ARCCI], 2020), but one suspects that these numbers are higher in practice, as some cases are not reported. Nonetheless, as a result of the above publications, we have some idea of the extent of the phenomenon, but qualitative data about MST is lacking. This lacuna is partly due to the fact that conducting interviews about sexual assaults, in general, is extremely difficult (Johnstone, 2016). Although it is known that MST is prevalent, ethical and methodological challenges make research using qualitative methods to examine sexual assaults rare (in comparison to quantitative research). Yet, knowledge from narratives is crucial for the development of a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon that goes beyond categorization and the statistics of the assault and categorization of the aftermath implications. A recent study (Cortina and Areguin, 2021), in particular, provides important insights about the necessity for qualitative research, in that it allows the reader to grasp the lived experience of harassment.

Military-to-Civilian Transition

State interest in veterans and the experiences of veterans has varied historically and geographically, depending on national and social contexts (Burkhart and Hogan, 2015; Bulmer and Eichler, 2017). In Western countries, such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, the transition from military to civilian life is now recognized as a key social concern. Western countries are thus increasingly trying to support military-to-civilian transition through a suite of services and benefits delivered by military, state, the third sector and private providers. As long ago as 2014, Ashcroft (2014, p. 7) argued that good transition is important for the country (the United Kingdom in this case), because having invested in the training of military personnel, good transition can "ensure that those individuals are in a position to be net contributors to society." According to Bulmer and Eichler (2017), it is "clear that the transition from military to civilian life has become a core project of Western governments in the early twenty-first century." Governments recognize this "project" as important not only to mitigate the effects of war and military service, but to ensure the broader legitimacy of the armed forces and thus continued recruitment and retention. This suggests that the transition to civilian life is integral to the production of military force (Pellegrino and Hoggan, 2015; Bulmer and Eichler, 2017). On the personal level, veterans and service personnel must navigate a complex cultural transition when moving between the two environments (Cooper et al., 2018), and difficulties in the transition of both men and women have been reported (Rozanova et al., 2016; Bulmer and Eichler, 2017). In addition to the immense challenges each veteran faces—from PTSD to physical injuries (Harpaz-Rotem and Rosenheck, 2011; Burkhart and Hogan, 2015) —the additional stress of transitioning from military to home and civilian life could be immense (Grimell, 2017; Lander et al., 2019).

The military-to-civilian transition differs somewhat in the two countries. In the United States, the transition from active duty to civilian life has been documented as constituting a significant challenge (Kamal, 2021), particularly since only a minority of the population serves in the military. Upon their release, most men veterans feel misunderstood and confused when re-entering civilian life, and women veterans even more so (Decker et al., 2013), particularly as a substantial percentage of women veterans suffer from higher unemployment rates than their male counterparts (Greer, 2017). In Israel, the military-to-civilian transition is influenced by an earlier transition in the opposite direction: the close and institutionalized link between the transition to adulthood and entry into military service, due to the mandatory draft, is one of the central social mechanisms that normalizes military service within the life course and makes it seem "natural" (Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari(eds), 1999). Similarly, the societal norms that have been established may ease, to some extent, the reverse transition, in particular, the fact that the majority of young adult Israelis, women and men alike, follow the similar path of military service–time out–tertiary education might serve as a supporting mechanism for transitioning veterans (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, 2020). Research about the transitioning of Israeli combat women to civilian life has indicated the transition to be stressful for some, particularly due to a loss of the sense of their significance and importance in participating in the most crucial of state endeavors (Lomsky-Feder and Sasson-Levy, 2019, p. 77). Other Israeli women veterans reported that they moved naturally – occasionally with some minor "shock" – into their civilian lives upon completing their mandatory service (for some, with the additional year of service for officers), but for all, a feeling of competency when moving to civilian life was evident (Lomsky-Feder and Sasson-Levy, 2019, p. 78).

Qualitative research about transition processes from military to civilian life is acknowledged to be appropriate and adequate when taking into account narrative and storytelling of veterans in the complex phase of transition (Lomsky-Feder, 2004; Grimell, 2017, 2018a,b). We therefore felt the methodology of listening to the narratives of transition of women from different societies and militaries to be a valid means of informing ourselves about these transition processes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Feminist Narrative Analysis

Through narrative analysis, scholars can see the interviewees as characters that are constructed as navigating between dilemmas and as expressing their own agency (Bamberg, 2020, p. 262). Moreover, as Gilligan has suggested: "The creation of trust is essential to people's ability and willingness to speak truthfully about their experience, and listening in a way that creates trust thus becomes integral to psychological inquiry" (Gilligan, 2015,

p. 75). This notion is particularly relevant to the study of veterans who are reluctant to share their vulnerability and difficulties due to the fear of stigmatization (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, 2020). Narrative analysis thus provides inductive knowledge (non-hypothesis testing), allowing subjectivity and experience into research (Levitt et al., 2018; Bamberg, 2020). The above ideas encouraged us to choose personal interviews and narrative analysis as our research tools; more specifically, we chose to use feminist narrative analysis to enable us to trace both spoken and unheard voices regarding the interviewees' personal perspectives in specific socio-political contexts. In applying this methodology, we "listen to the plot," as Gilligan guides us, by listening closely to the narratives. According to Gilligan (2015, p. 71), this listening "directs the researcher's attention to the landscape of the interview or text (who is there, who or what is missing, are there repeated words, salient themes, striking metaphors or symbols, emotional hot-spots, gaps, or ruptures) and to the stories that are told." This methodology thus enables us to disaggregate the personal and the political and to challenge the often taken-for-granted concepts that preserve hegemonic and/or patriarchal power relations (Gilligan, 2015; Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, 2016; Arnd-Linder et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2018; Gilligan and Eddy, 2021; Vaandering and Reimer, 2021).

In keeping with feminist narrative research that seeks to uncover previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience, we thus used narrative analysis to process the material. Listening to the women's narratives enable us to gain a deeper understanding of the various interpretations of agency, in line with the notion that there are various narratives of knowledge among women (Ackerly et al., 2006; Stern, 2006; Enloe, 2014; Fenster, 2016; Ackerly and True, 2018). In narrative analysis, scholars typically direct their research to working with narrative and on narrative (Bamberg, 2012). In working first with narrative, knowledge is constructed in a bottom-up direction. In the second phase, on narrative, scholars analyze the interviewees' narratives, according to their theoretical framework and research questions, by paying special attention to the ways in which individuals conform to and confirm existing orders (Wibben, 2011). In that sense, the scholars distinguish the meta-level (talking about experiences) from the content-level (experiences themselves). On the policy level, data from narrative analysis of interviews with veterans in combat roles in the military could constitute evolving knowledge about veterans' well-being, exposure to threats and challenges, and coping mechanisms, and could thus inform policy recommendations.

Research Population

The participants were 20 female military veterans, 10 Americans and 10 Israelis, who had completed combat or combat support service in the United States military or the IDF. All participants had been released from their service several years before the interviews were conducted (up to 10 years). The rationale for including combat support soldiers derived from studies showing that combat support soldiers suffer from PTSD in similar percentages to combat soldiers (Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev, 2017). Thus, combat support soldiers were included in this study, since they had also witnessed extraordinary violence and had been exposed to battlefields and war zones. The United States veterans were recruited via flyers placed at a large VA Medical Centers and in the community. The Israeli veterans were recruited via social networks.

Ethical Considerations

The research received the approval of the IRBs of the Conflict Management and Resolution Program, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (2017-02) and at the VA CT Healthcare System. Two of the authors are therapists, and the interviewees were notified that if there were any symptoms of distress following the interview, they could contact the relevant author directly. The participants were also informed about the background of the project (i.e., a need to gain knowledge about the process of military experiences and challenges, including transition to civil lives), the purpose of the project, the measures to maintain anonymity, and other formalities.

The Interview Design

The interviews of the United States veterans were held in English, and those with the Israeli veterans, in Hebrew. The interviewers were of the same nationality and culture as the interviewees (American interviewer for American interviewees, and Israeli interviewers for Israeli interviewees). Semi-structured interviews, lasting 1–2 h were conducted with each participant. The interviewees were asked open questions about their deployment, their service, their exposure to violence and armed conflicts, their achievements and their lives after concluding their military service. They were all asked the same questions. To assure confidentiality, each veteran was identified by a pseudonym. With the participants' consent, each interview was audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis was then applied to the interview transcripts (Wibben, 2010; Caddick, 2011). Each researcher listened separately to the audio recordings and read the transcripts of the interviews. In listening attentively to the narratives, the researchers' aim was to learn about the combatants' experiences and insecurities and to unravel the unique ways in which they formed meaning in their own experiences in an environment defined by violence, constant threats, high-risk situations, and armed conflicts. The researchers and the research assistant, all fluent in Hebrew and English, also analyzed the data separately. They read the entire transcripts, made tentative interpretations, and marked the central ideas scattered throughout the narratives. The interviews that were held in Hebrew were analyzed in Hebrew and the interviews of the United States soldiers were analyzed in English. Then, the researchers and the research assistant met to discuss the findings and their responses to the interviews. They integrated the interpretative analysis of the dominant topics that were brought in the interviews and compared their conceptualization and analysis of the findings. The researchers then continued to theorize the interpretations and re-evaluate the findings to re-assess the main narratives that emerged in the interviews (Lev-Wiesel, 2007). In preparation for

the publication of the article, several quotes from the Hebrew transcripts were translated into English.

RESULTS

The contexts and narratives necessarily converge into each other and are not isolated one from the other (Stern, 2005), but several important findings may be summarized: While listening to the plot of the interviews, we revealed what Gilligan termed as "the landscape" of the interviews, combining the personal and the political (Gilligan, 2015; Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, 2016). Salient themes were exposed in the stories that were told. Three themes were dominant in the soldiers' narratives—combat trauma, MST, and the transition to civilian life, including the lack of understanding of – and real listening to – their experiences (by society and the relevant state institutions). These themes appeared in a socio-political context in which the soldiers emphasized their capabilities and their struggles to fit in within the military in traditionally masculine roles. Before moving on to the main themes revealed in the interviews, this section briefly sets the scene – as Gilligan (2015) suggested regarding implementation of feminist narrative analysis – by presenting the settings of the participants' experiences in which they expose their everyday military lives. In 'setting the scene,' it is indispensable to note that we acknowledged and revealed, while listening to their stories, that they are experiencing all these aspects of the military service as combatants while struggling to integrate into these roles.

The Battle to Integrate and to Prove Themselves

The interviews were taken place in a socio-political context in which women are included in combat roles in militaries worldwide for a few decades, and still, the findings emphasize women's constant and ongoing struggle to prove themselves worthy of serving in combat roles both in terms of personal capabilities and of wider gender struggles. It was evident in both the American and Israeli narratives – as the women described in detail their actions and capabilities – that most of the women had faced a struggle to prove themselves. For example:

Olivia (United States military), who served in Kabul, Afghanistan, stated:

> The females have to try harder to be better and stronger and faster than the males just to be considered even equal.

Harper (United States military) was even more direct in saying:

> The biggest difficulty is that I didn't have a penis; my male counterparts treated me like garbage.

Emma (United States military), who served in Kuwait, elaborated on the challenges facing a woman in combat:

> I think in the military, in general, it was just more males than females. I think it was harder because you, as a female, you always have to kind of prove yourself to say that you can do the job, just because you're not a male you can still do it regardless. You can still do the pushups. You can still do the run. You can still do the sit ups. You can still make rank. You could still push yourself. You can still go out there and complete these different obstacles as well as the males. I think that was the biggest thing. . .. I was proving myself there and here, 'cause I had to prove to them that I could make it, regardless of what people were saying. . . the happiest moment for me in my career as a soldier after everything I went through in the military, I made it all the way to the sergeant.

In the same manner, their Israeli peers, tackled similar challenges. For example, Suzanna (IDF) emphasized the challenges of women in combat roles in the IDF:

> It's not only that I had to overcome these obstacles and courses, and to go through the navigation training, I had to prove that I could handle that well; I had to prove that I could make it, physically and mentally. Physically, I was tiny. What you need to take on your back weighs half your body weight. For a man – it is quite obvious that he can be a combatant, since being a combatant for a man it is not something out of the ordinary here [in Israel]. I felt very weird . . . I was really tiny, it was more difficult for me than for the rest of them.. . . And yet, I just loved it . . .. Physically, you're not like a man, and you need to prove yourself . . ..

Zipora (IDF) affirmed a similar state of mind:

> Still, you feel that in some way you need to prove yourself more than others [more than men]; since you are a woman in this place . . . this thought of how they will accept a woman in this place. You need to be very tough, to be very strict about every detail.

Christina (IDF) described her combat service as very complex and demanding, and added:

> Both for ourselves and for others, we had to prove that we are worthy and deserve this role and we are strong and capable, they were watching us – we had to do everything perfectly, and not screw up. If you have to climb a wall, you climb a wall, and if you need to climb with a rope, you climb with a rope. If we don't succeed, it will give them ammunition.

These above-described elements of the women veterans' need to prove themselves and to show that they were equal to – and even better than – combat men, were frequently expressed, together with full descriptions of their capabilities and abilities. Although the socio-political context of the service derives from different societies and different militaries – volunteer versus mandatory conscription – their struggles to integrate, and to prove themselves worthy, were evident and dominant. Moreover, along with their description of their actions during service, we traced a strong sense of agency—an ability to choose and to overcome obstacles. Frequently mentioned in their stories and narratives was a sense of the ability to choose, to act, and to be good at the job.

Evelyn (United States military) described her challenging roles as combat medic and as a pilot:

> Well, I mean I've done a lot.. . .I really loved being a medic. . .. I gained a lot of experience that played into my civilian life. . . being a pilot was so cool, flying helicopters. So, that had just a big impact on, like, [my] self-confidence. But yeah, I guess the deployments were probably like the most impactful. . .. I've been

> in a lot of leadership positions. . .. That was the big empowering things, because I went to officer school. I flew helicopters. I did all sorts of like big boy stuff, but it was always that. That was always really what made me feel good.

Evelyn was satisfied with her functioning and was gratified to gave been given the opportunity to do "men's roles" in the military. Charlotte (United States military) talked about her abilities and satisfaction of serving in a very difficult role and under difficult conditions in her role in the army in Iraq:

> I can do that, I get to do that, the whole physical activities. . . and I think that's – that was very rewarding and empowering.

Similarly, the IDF soldiers discussed their abilities and assertiveness after fulfilling challenging roles, as well as the pride and satisfaction of being assigned to so-called "masculine roles". Yulia (IDF) explained:

> The major chose me as his radio operational officer in the field, he chose me and not others, there is a lot to it. You feel that you are empowered, you learn things about yourself, that you can be trusted, that others believe in you; it was right for me.

Britney (IDF) added insight into the unique position of a woman in a masculine role, and the admiration others felt for her role:

> I carried a missile launcher connected to my M16 rifle. The orders are that you can't leave it on the base, so I would take it home on the weekends. When people look at you. . . I can compare it to a woman with a very big cleavage . . . you see guys looking at me and saying to one another 'wow, look at her missile launcher'. . .. It's an honor to be in the role of operator of a missile launcher, and when a woman walks around with it – it's not ordinary. I remember a bunch of male combatants looking at me at the central bus station, and saying 'wow! look at her.'

In the narratives of veterans from both militaries, the gratitude for the ability to serve in these roles and the satisfaction derived from them were evident in all interviews. Along with the sense of agency, the women were aware of their indispensable added value, and ability to act and to fulfill their mission in the best way that they could. It was also evident that many years after women were first incorporated into combat roles, they still feel grateful to serve in these roles. After introducing the above narratives relating to the women's struggle to fit in and the satisfaction they derived from their abilities, we can now discuss the three main themes that emerged from listening to the plot of the narratives.

Exposure to Traumatic Events and Combat Trauma

The analysis indicates that most veterans were exposed to at least some combat violence, regardless of their assigned duties. When asked to describe their primary duties, only about 50% of veterans reported that they had been assigned completely or mainly to combat duty, yet all reported moderate to heavy exposure to combat violence while serving. The scope of the traumatic events was varied, and several representative narratives that emphasize the trauma of the women's experiences are presented below. Listening to the narratives and re-reading the transcripts about the veterans' military service enabled us to grasp their experiences and to obtain a strong sense of what it means to be in surroundings of war and armed conflicts.

Camila (United States military) stated:

> The war. . .it was. . .. The only thing that scared me so bad, was. . .. I was extremely scared for the whole six and a half months of SCUD missiles [in Iraq]. . .. So, we saw the SCUD missiles, the alarms went off for chemicals. We had to get into our MOPP gear and go. . .down to underground bunkers.

Indeed, the combatants were often exposed to danger, stress, and injury. Charlotte (United States military) reported:

> I almost died myself, so I – it was close, very close. . .. And that was very significant. And . . . because this very significant person [her commander] was killed in action. . .. it was just a shock to me.. . . I still don't believe it that he's gone and it's been long time ago.

The narratives of Camila and Charlotte indicated fear for themselves, but other narratives of traumatic events related to death or injury of peers. Evelyn (United States military) related:

> I mean, of course, working as a medic there was a lot of traumatic stuff that you saw, so, sort of like rationalizing that and working with people that were sick, that were injured, and seeing. . . those immediate life changes, a lot of that was, it was really crazy.

Another experience of the horrors of war and violence during insurgency, was expressed by Harper (United States military):

> The most influential experience ever in my life, ever, was the bombing of the United Nations building in Iraq; this had a lasting impact on my entire life. I can't get it out of my head. I can't make it better. I can't make it stop replaying it in my dreams. Do you know what I mean? This was on my first deployment in Baghdad. I had already seen terrible things, terrible things, but this took the cake of terrible. The people that were bombed were just there to do humanitarian work. All they wanted to do was help the people of Iraq, mainly Baghdad, and they were blown away, and this to me, was an immense tragedy.

Similarly, their Israeli peers expressed parallel experiences of exposure to death, injury, stress and direct combat. Reut (IDF), who served as an operations sergeant on the Gaza front, described her response to a traumatic event during her service, and then reflected on the need to be detached as well as on the need to subsequently reconnect.

> I arrived as an operations sergeant in the operations room near Gaza. During my second or third shift, a mortar bomb fell in the base. The noise was incredible. . .and then straight away that mortar bomb. . .[exploded] and the noise. . .just. . .the noise completely shocked me. It was the first time I had personally confronted anything like this. . .. It was the first time I had to confront something as stressful as this, and I was stressed out; under extreme stress. . .. I had some horrible shifts in that operations room. . .there was a time when all the biggest incidents happened to us. But when it happens. . .you detach yourself. You detach yourself not from emotions but from processing what happens. You just do your work. . . Afterward, you digest and understand what happened.

Reut mentioned how she encountered the fear of death and the stress of armed conflict for the first time. She was not prepared to experience such feelings and had to detach herself. Often, the veterans felt embarrassed and ashamed to admit their vulnerabilities and efforts to cope with trauma. Some of them felt that it is illegitimate to express these feelings.

Another example that gives insight into the veterans' experiences is embodied by Betty (IDF), who was released from her service, having been diagnosed with PTSD, and was fighting to receive recognition from the Defense Ministry's Rehabilitation Department. When asked about the difficulties of her military service, Betty described the adverse health effects of trauma:

> You ask me if it was difficult. . .. If it was difficult to run? If it was difficult to jump or roll or to lie down in an ambush? No, it wasn't. It wasn't difficult to command a troop. These are the things that made me calm. The daily military life was stressful. The patrolling [on the border]. . .you are by yourself. . .sitting in this post for 4 h. . .it [the danger] is in your head and one thing leads to another. The emotional stress caused me physical injury, such as stomach aches and hyperventilation. It comes from nowhere, from my psyche.

Betty described the effects of the persistent threat that pervaded her everyday life in the military, serving on an active border and bearing huge responsibility. She was exposed to the threat of injury in every routine activity required by her role in field security and border security. The literature does indeed acknowledge the ways in which trauma is a burden on the psyche and the body, including weakening of the immune system and triggering the development of illnesses (Scaer, 2014), just as Betty had described.

Alexandra (IDF), when asked about difficulties during her military service, was not reluctant to admit her emotional vulnerability and the physical and mental effects of her exposure to stress, fear, and traumatic events:

> I had a meaningful service and as a combat medic I did an excellent job, but. . .I remember fear. . .There were noises as if there were people digging in tunnels underneath our base, and the [men] soldiers told us: 'there is nothing here, relax'; now everyone knows it was true, they were actually digging. . .. I slept next to my weapon. . .there was a sense of fear. . .. Later, one of the women combat-support soldiers got killed. . .. Even long after I was released [from the military], I was very sensitive to loud noises and voices, after all these missiles and shootings. It was where the alarm doesn't give you enough time to hide or go into the shelter, there is an alarm and an immediate boom (rocket falling).

One of the most troubling elements of Alexandra's trauma was the fact that her evaluation of danger and her risk assessment of terrorist activities was disregarded. Overall, all the combat soldiers and combat-support soldiers, in both militaries, were exposed to traumatic events – including injury to themselves and to others – and remembered them in detail, long after their release from the military. Attentive listening to the detailed narratives of the combatants does indeed provide vivid evidence of combat trauma and coping. But the listeners, too, are people, and listening to stories of traumatic experiences of female combat soldiers can be difficult and even devastating. Nonetheless, scholars of trauma have an obligation to listen closely to the detailed narratives and acknowledge them and should not be reluctant to listen.

Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assaults of Combat Women

The study revealed a substantial difference between the cases of sexual harassment in the two militaries. The narratives of MST of United States soldiers were frequent, and the severity of the assaults described by the combatants was extreme. The cases of MST reported by the Israeli combatants were rare and less severe. Below are representative narratives from their interviews:

Elizabeth (United States military) who served in Iraq, said:

> The male soldiers were just like losing their minds. On other camps we heard about it too. Like, there was like a rapist who was waiting and attacking women and stuff on the other camp. Until like one chick like caught him and stuff. . ..

Elizabeth's description was not an exception, MST was dominant in the narratives of the American veterans about the nature of their service. The soldiers reported that MST was very frequent and that they and their peers suffered from this phenomenon; for instance, Isabella (United States military), a sniper, shared:

> As a commander, I had a soldier who was sexually assaulted multiple times.

While Elizabeth and Isabella talked about assaults of others, Olivia (United States military), who served in Kabul, Afghanistan, shared her own sexual assault, within an environment that allowed these incidents to happen, both to women and to men:

> Apparently, that was a big thing and most of the guys that I was over there with had a hard time dealing with females being in their unit because they were deployed, they had spouses or whatever back home that they didn't get to see and apparently sex is a huge thing for guys more than females apparently and yeah, there were some issues. I was drugged and raped while we were over there by one of our troops. . .. I told the chaplain, I did not want to report it officially because it would have made it harder for the other females in the unit, as well as myself because I was pretty much the only person that could go out on combat missions because everybody else was either broken or couldn't wear their battle rattle or whatever. So it would have made it impossible for them to succeed in their mission. But I did tell the chaplain that if this kid says anything to me whatsoever, I'm going to beat him to death and the Chaplin said he would hold him down for me. And then I found out like 4 weeks later or so that I was pregnant. And I told the chaplain what was going on, and then my grandmother passed away and he successfully got me emergency leave to come home. I came home, went to Planned Parenthood and had it taken care of. And the next day I was on a plane back to Afghanistan.

From Olivia's narrative, we can realize how she justified the violent acts of some of the male combat men, since sex was a big deal for them during the long deployments. She also exposed how the system allowed her not to complain formally and to keep it as a secret within the unit, since she didn't want to hurt the other women in the unit. She felt responsible for the representation of

women in the battlefield. Olivia continued and explained about sexual assaults of men as well:

> I think the guys had a hard time as well because I do know a few of them. . .that were raped while they were in the towers. And that was really hard because it's hard for a guy to tell a female that they were sexually assaulted. It's hard for a guy to tell anybody that because they feel victimized and vulnerable. But it happens.

She exposed how men are allegedly supposed to show less vulnerability and hence how these situations are extremely difficult for them as well. In her narrative, she described her rapist as a 'kid' and referred with empathy to male soldiers around her, saying how they, too, were often victims.

Emma (United States military) also shared her own painful experience of being assaulted and raped:

> I was a victim of sexual harassment. . .. But I didn't really—I don't really see that in the beginning. . .. I didn't really see it as sexual harassment. He was like that with me and my friends. I never really said nothing, because we were going to be deployed, and we have to be around him this whole time, and like he was a staff sergeant, and this was before I got my rank; even when I got my rank, he still outranked both of us. . .how can you say something about somebody that outranked you? He came from a another unit, but he deployed with us. So, who was really going to believe us?. . .. When you're in a reserve unit, you only meet these people once a month. . .we talked to each other about it. He is married. He shouldn't be doing stuff like that, but after he left our unit, and we came back from deployment, he ended up raping another—like he ended up raping somebody from his unit, so he ended up going to jail and everything. . .. So, I felt like if I had said something, maybe that wouldn't have happened to her.

Emma was describing a painful rape, she shared with us how she was silent about it. At the same time, defining it as "sexual harassment" while clearly it was a case of a severe assault. What emerges from the above narratives is a common attempt to silence these incidences and not to expose them on a personal level, on a unit level or on the military system level.

The findings revealed that the Israeli narratives presented quite a different picture to the United States narratives. In the narratives that we analyzed, verbal harassments were frequent, but assaults were rare.

Rakefet (IDF) said, in response to our question about harassment and assaults in the military:

> There were couples, not harassments; I can't remember anything specific; there were always inappropriate comments by a certain male, but not anything drastic.

Silan (IDF) commented:

I was never harassed in the military. I didn't see harassments, I heard of the case of this brigadier general. I heard of it but didn't know them closely. The military does not tolerate such things, and the limits are strict and clear. The Israeli military system demands much more, in terms of values, than any other institution that I know.

Rosa (IDF) said that she first experienced sexual harassment in the military only when she became a reservist:

> In my reserve service there was a guy who harassed me, and I stopped it. I didn't complain formally because he has a family and children, so [instead] I opened it up with my officers. I said: 'You either move him or me, I won't stay in a place where I don't feel safe.' They handled it perfectly. They moved him to a different unit. They understood. From my perspective, it was a meaningful and a good solution.

The narratives of sexual harassment of the Israeli women soldiers in our study suggest that the experience of verbal harassments was frequent and uncomfortable and that the women typically handled such situations either on their own or with the support of their direct commanders. Yet, similarly to the United States narratives described above, these incidents, however, rare, were not treated through the appropriate legal mechanisms, and were settled within the unit.

Rosa continued:

> In most of my mandatory service, I didn't feel any sexual harassments. Sometimes men were hitting on me, and when I like it – then OK, and when I didn't, I said no, and it was fine, as it should be. Most of my peers are my best friends until today. And they respected me and knew their limits.

Alexandra (IDF) recounted that mostly no assaults or harassment were documented, except for one incident:

> There was a guy on the base, [he was] disgusting, and I was the only woman on the base. I was so naïve. . .. I was nice [to him], and he interpreted it as a reason to touch me. He was so disgusting. Since then, every time he came near me, I would go into the room and close the door. . .. Until I finally told him to fuck off. He was repulsive, he was a jerk, he went too far.

In summary, the narratives of the veterans indicated that verbal sexual harassments were frequent in the Israeli military and sexual assaults were relatively rare, although we can assume that some incidents had been silenced and not exposed. In the United States military, sexual assaults were much more frequent. The American veterans spoke about being insecure in instances in which men in their immediate surroundings acted violently or were abusive.

Transition to Civilian Life

The experiences of combat women transitioning to civilian lives after their discharge from the military varied from interviewee to interviewee. While the overwhelming majority of interviewees expressed the feeling that their military service had been a beneficial and positive experience, nuances of difficulties could be read between the lines. Here, too, a difference was found between the two militaries. The transition for the American soldiers to civilian life was much more difficult, although they acknowledged that skills acquired in the military combat remain with them in civilian life:

Charlotte (United States military), managed to lead a normative civil life, to give birth to two daughters and pursue academic studies, yet she said:

> Until today when I feel like I'm breaking into pieces [laughing]. . . I'm like, okay, I can do this, all that training that you had

> that sticks with you forever. . ., it [the military service] stays with you forever.

Charlotte admitted her vulnerability and laughed about it with embarrassment, yet she felt sense of agency due to her military training. Isabella (United States military) felt awkward about being a veteran and was not sure about her position among non-veteran students:

> The actual transition out of military was to come here and start medical school. I'd say the toughest things has been like trying to figure out like when I tell people I'm a veteran or like how it even comes up in conversation. Is this something like I advertise? Because I can kind of blend in with the other students, and people who just assume I'm a lot younger than I am. . ..

In contrast to the positions of Charlotte and Isabella, who underwent the transition to civilian life via their subsequent successful academic studies, other transition processes to civilian life were much more difficult and traumatic. For example, Elizabeth (United States military) said that during her transition to civilian life she did everything that she could in order to avoid people:

> I think when I finally got out of the army, I was like, I'm not coming outside. I would really like going to grocery shop merely in gas stations, like anywhere I could go and grab milk and something. Or go to drive-thru's.

Olivia (United States military) described additional difficulties in her transition process, including difficulties in academic studies:

> I was discharged and then they gave me a rating of 90% disabled. I can't relate to civilians. The lack of motivation, the lack of focus, the lack of determination, the lack of leadership, the lack of honor, integrity, you name it, it pisses me off. I worked as a restaurant manager for a very short period of time and yeah, I wanted to kill some of the people I worked with because it's just ridiculous. . .. I'm in my first-year grad program. So it's going all right, I guess. My first paper was a complete disaster. I'm not sleeping because of insomnia, so it's really hard to focus.

Emma (United States military) added about her frustration with the system that is not helping her to adjust to civil life:

> My transition was very hard. I didn't have a lot of help. I didn't have—it was just like okay. They told you about the services that they have. It was like they didn't help me try to find a job. They didn't help me try to get a job. They didn't help me. They didn't point me in the right direction. They didn't assign somebody to me to help me get a job. . .. I didn't want to talk about me being different now, because I wasn't the same person. Life had—in the military had changed who I was, like it was a lot of different bad things. . .bad things changed who I was now. I wasn't what I was before I went into the military. I wasn't the same person. You can't tell your friends here that, because they're not going to understand.

Elizabeth, Olivia and Emma gave voice to the idea that the society that had sent them into battle and into military service was not doing enough to assist them in their civilian lives. In their interviews, they indirectly criticized the system for not taking responsibility for the consequences of the processes that had changed their lives, and called for attentive and proactive action to assist them to adjust to their civilian lives.

Similarly, Amelia (United States military) reported difficulties in her daily life:

> I had a really hard time relating to people who didn't come with me. I had a hard time driving. I would swerve when things were in the road and not even think about what the other cars around me—like it was just a hard time going under bridges. . .but things that still trigger me are fireworks, noises. . .. So, noises, I'm still very jumpy, and it may not even be someone's voice, but like just a loud noise because we were constantly mortared.

Harper (United States military) further explained about her military afterlife:

> Thank you for asking this. I don't really know how to be a civilian, so what do I do? I go to college, because I don't know how to be a civilian. So I was like, well, I'll just go to college. I'll finally do that, and I didn't really do that. I mean, I excelled at going to college, but I didn't really go to college well. I couldn't handle being around people who were younger and so naïve. Oh man, I just couldn't handle it. I don't think I've ever really transitioned to being a civilian. I've not been able to hold down a job. I haven't had a job since, really.

The interviewees exposed their vulnerabilities, difficulties, and pain in their struggle to cope with moving from being a soldier to becoming a civilian; they felt that they did not receive the appropriate tools or the appropriate guidance to successfully cope with all the difficulties of the transition and they felt alone in their struggles to cope.

In contrast to the United States military women, who are a minority in the society that they are serving, many Israelis serve in the military, and the fact that a large proportion of society goes through a similar process could be considered as a supporting mechanism, since military service is regarded as a normal step in "growing up." The difference between the two societies was striking and was reflected in the narratives:

Ruhama (IDF) stated:

> It is a bit shock, at the beginning, that you are not in this system, that you wake up every morning and there is the routine that you know what to do. Actually, I was happy to move on with my life since I was immigrated to Israel and the military was a part of it, but I always knew it is a part of life and then you move on to academic studying; this is another part of your life.

Betty (IDF) reported:

> In the beginning, it was like a dream, I was happy to be at home, I wanted my family all around me, I didn't have to go to the base for 3 weeks; no one was nagging me and telling me what to do. And people were asking – wow, were you released already? You were a combatant in Caracal [a coed infantry battalion in the IDF]? Wow!! Impressive, good job. And I didn't really know what to say, because it was great, but I also was hurt emotionally and physically from the military.

Rosa (IDF) spoke about her transition:

> I was released and immediately drafted to reserve service, so I was busy and the transition was quite smooth. The transition to civilian life was good. In the service as a combat commander I was responsible for 500 or 700 soldiers and it is a huge responsibility. I had such a complex and sensitive role, and then poof. You are at home. It took me a long time to learn about how to put things in proportion. In the military everything is super important; and in civilian life there are things that are less important. I was used to the fact that timing is sacred; I remember that I arrived at a job interview 30 min ahead of time and they asked me: 'why are you here so early?' It took me a while to understand how to understand the proportions and the priorities in civilian life, but I learned to get used to the fact that not everything that I do has top priority and national security importance. It is nice.

Some of the women were still coping with traumas at the time of the interviews and faced difficulties in their dealings with state institutions. It was thus not surprising that some of the narratives about transition to civilian life included references to frustration with the military system and its affiliated civil institutions, as well as complaints about that fact that the "system" did not really "get them right."

Emma (United States military), an automated logistics specialist, who served in Kuwait, explained:

> I receive mental health services here. I think that if people feel that they need it, they should get it. I don't think that medication is always the best option. . .. I stopped coming for a long time, because—I mean the provider wasn't—we didn't—so I stopped coming for a long time. . ..

Emma felt that her treatment was not adequate or helpful for her and it caused her to decide to quit her treatment. Similarly, Amelia (United States military), a medical specialist and pharmacy technician, who served in Iraq, discussed her experiences with counselling:

> Well, I know like for myself it's scary to go [to therapy], it's scary to talk about the things that you want to avoid. So, I know in my experience, you know, the way that I deal with things is avoiding them, and then I go to counseling, and they want me to talk about my experiences, and then I'm sitting there thinking okay, well, I'm talking about this experience. How the heck is this going to help me? I mean, I feel like maybe there is a tool so, or even like with, even if they prescribe me something because I'm having this symptom, I'm like really like how's that going to help me if you just put a Band-Aid on it like—I'm not looking to be medicated. I'm looking to find the solution so I don't have to be medicated, and then so, I kind of feel at a loss. I think that I would jump to counseling more if I knew that they really had the tools that I needed for the situations I come up against. . . I think maybe even asking me what I think might help, so that I have to sit down and really think about what it is.

Harper (United States military) explained a problem of mistrust of therapists and health care services among veterans, who feel that the health care system is not really attentive and is often patronizing. For example, she emphasized the frequent problematics of prescription medication to veterans:

> You just say some fancy word, and then I don't know what that means. I think that gives a lot of veterans a lot of anxiety. Maybe they're not going to take that medication, because they don't know what that means. . . veterans have this touch of mistrust, like you're going to give me a substance, and say here's this fancy word thing, it'll make you feel better. But what is it really going to do?

Harper concluded her narrative and interview by saying to her interviewer "thank you for hearing my voice," indicating how important it was for her was to share her experiences and to feel that someone cares about her and her difficulties following her military service.

The above perspectives presented by United States veterans caused us to reflect about the solutions offered to veterans and led us think about the possibility of enhancing and promoting joint peer groups that could share their experiences together (we discuss this option below).

Among the Israeli veterans that was interviewed in this study, Betty was the only one who complained about the level of attentiveness in the part of the military system and the relevant offices, Betty (IDF) said:

> When you asked me about the transition and the military system, it is really paradoxical for me, since on the one hand I really loved the service and I really wanted this combat role. I wanted to be a combatant in Caracal and I wanted a meaningful service, as all my male friends. I have great memories and I gained so much; but since I was wounded when I was released, I sensed that the system was not receptive and not understanding and I had to fight for recognition of my PTSD and my medical problems. That was really disappointing. So there are two sides to my story – on the one hand the service was really awesome, but on the other, disappointment at the lack of understanding and the lack of responsibility for my suffering. So, it is this and that combined.

Among the Israeli combat soldiers, each one said that the interview with us was the first time anyone had asked them about their experiences and their transition, and that they had not really shared the experiences with anyone but their peers. Betty was the only one of the ten who felt betrayed in a way, since the military acknowledged her medical problems only a few years after the end of her service and only after a long battle, so she felt she had not been heard.

In summary, as in previous research, the participants expressed appreciation for their training and pride in their abilities and in the opportunity to serve their country and to contribute to their society.

DISCUSSION

Military veterans should not be seen as a homogenous group, both within the group of veterans from each country and among veterans from the two different countries—their perspectives are diverse. Yet, some trends could be identified in their narratives regarding their sense of security and insecurity. As mentioned above, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the aim of allowing the respondents to give an account of their experiences in the military and their transition from military to civilian life in their own words in a flexible and dynamic manner (Smith and Osborn, 2007; Grimell, 2018a). During the interview process, the combatants discussed

adjustment to life within the military, meaningful experiences and difficult experiences in the military, resettlement support, and adjustment issues upon discharge from the military. The recurring theme in most of the interviews in both militaries was that although the veterans were very proud of their abilities and achievements, they all experienced struggles to prove themselves worthy as women who were positioned in prestigious roles of combat and combat support. The interpretation of their experiences, narratives and stories should be understood in that context.

There appeared to be an overwhelming feeling on the part of the interviewees that their experiences in the military were not important or interesting to the military itself or to society at large. They sensed that they themselves acknowledged the importance of their roles and contribution to national security and to the protection of the state, but that the 'system' was not always appreciative and – worse still – not always attuned to their perspectives and needs. As in other studies (Brooks et al., 2016), several interviewees voiced frustration in enrolling in and understanding veterans' health care systems, particularly regarding the recognition of disabilities and compensation. This was true for the Israeli narratives, but very much more so for the American narratives.

In both groups of veterans, the interviewees thanked us directly and indirectly for the opportunity to be heard and to share their stories. In the United States narratives, most interviewees voiced the opinion that their therapists were not really capable of understanding what they had been through and were therefore not fully equipped to undertake their care, since the therapists had no military experiences or personal experience of combat trauma (Atuel and Castro, 2018). In the Israeli narratives, most soldiers admitted that this was the first time they had shared their experiences in such a comprehensive manner and that they had not really been asked about the service or post-service periods of their lives. For most interviewees – in both militaries – the service had been meaningful, but at the same time it had exposed them to combat trauma on a regular basis. Indeed, they were exposed to it while trying to prove themselves adequate for their roles. Research has indicated that military cultural norms may stigmatize psychological injury as "weakness" and prevent individuals from seeking help (Stanley and Larsen, 2019); this outlook was indeed evident in the current research. This finding led us to think further that both scholars and interviewers who are working with veterans should be either have gone through similar processes, or – if not – should intimately learn the particularities of the military culture and military nuances to enable them to learn to be attentive listeners. A further interesting finding was the need to be heard, which connects the meta-level (talking about specific experiences) and the content-level (the experiences themselves). The female soldiers repeatedly mentioned that their experiences were not interesting to others or that they felt misunderstood by therapists and others. Mentoring programs of veterans could be beneficial, both in enabling the veterans' agency and in normalizing their experiences.

The most marked differences in the narratives were those relating to sexual assaults in the military and to the military-to-civilian transition. In the United States military, sexual assaults are frequent, and the treatment of MST incidents includes many cover-ups that are harmful to those who have been assaulted. In contrast, in the Israeli group, descriptions of assaults were rare. However, in both groups, military sexual harassment was frequent. The low prevalence of sexual assaults in the IDF (3%) is surprising in comparison to the figures for the United States military, in which sexual assaults are as frequent as a pandemic. This difference might be explained by the fact that in professional armies, rates of assault are higher than those in mandatory service, since reporting often prompts retaliation. In addition, the nature of the deployment is different in the two armies, being much longer in the United States military. Nonetheless, more research is needed to explore these phenomena, and steps should be taken to create a safer environment for women in the militaries of both states.

As mentioned above, the transition to civilian life also differed in the two countries, with the transition in the United States being extremely traumatic for most interviewees. In contrast, the Israeli interviewees reported experiencing only minor shock; in particular, they did not feel isolated from society, since many of their friends and relatives were going through, or had gone through, a similar process (Friedman-Peleg and Bilu, 2011). This led us think about further steps that should be taken in both militaries in order to ease the transition, we present these ideas later in the article.

Let us now examine what can be gained from listening to soldiers' authentic narratives (Hicks, 2011). Such narratives can shed light on veterans' multidimensional experiences during their service, not merely as subjects that have experienced traumatic events, but particularly as those who have the agency and ability to function, to fight, and to feel a variety of emotions. In keeping with this idea, Gilligan (2015, p. 75) has warned researchers away from what she terms as "binning," where binning is "taking someone's words and sticking them into mental bins, [which] signifies a mode of listening that is not really listening but rather assimilating the experience of another to what one already believes. It is a way of asserting dominance and also an expression of disrespect." Our aim was thus to trace the soldiers' main narratives and to disaggregate them, while at the same time acknowledging the veterans' complex, multidimensional and diverse experiences. Furthermore, Gilligan and Eddy (2017, 2021), in their recent study, indicate that health professionals have begun to research and to write about how doctors, nurses and therapists can listen to their patients more effectively, and this study thus forms part of this new corpus of research. It is our hope that we have managed to listen sufficiently closely to the veterans' stories and that this research will alert societies, therapists, and military institutions to the fact that they are not always listening closely to veterans' experiences and are not always really interested in what actually ails them.

While a number of studies examine the reasons why veterans defer care (e.g., Brooks et al., 2016), including stigmatization, this

study offers another layer underlying this situation, namely, the perception on the part of the veterans that they are not being heard and not being truly understood or listened to. Doran et al. (2021), in listening to veterans in therapy, identified multiple barriers to treatment completion and provided insight into the veterans' thoughts and feelings during the treatment protocol. As in other studies about veterans, the participants in our study, particularly those in the United States, indicated that they felt that the therapists did not fully understand their needs and concerns, since they had not experienced the military in any way. In Israel, the idea of combat service is known to all and experienced by many, so therapists and veterans do have a common background, but one interviewee said the military did not take responsibility for her injury. This was also true for the case of Saidyan that was mentioned at the beginning of this article.

The above findings indicate that several levels of listening are needed and that society ought to listen, since it sends its youth to the military and therefore is obligated to pay attention to the consequences of military service. Another layer of listening is related to the fact that the combat soldiers are exposed to difficult experiences and traumatic events, and even if they do not develop symptoms of distress, they deserve to be heard and to express their voices. Ashcroft (2014) stated that mainstream academic and policy research routinely objectifies veterans as "problems to be solved" rather than as a substantial part of the society that were defending. It seems that societies and states should be obligated to protect their veterans and to acknowledge the heavy toll of the fighting. As the current study suggests, just as the military invests effort in the training of combatants and in the selection process for assigning soldiers to particular roles, so is the military similarly obligated to make an effort to guide veterans back to civilian lives while taking care of their wellbeing.

Perhaps one of the solutions to the dilemmas raised in the narratives of the veterans could be found by focusing on detailed descriptions of traumatic experiences, challenges and difficulties, instead of moving directly to diagnosis of symptoms of distress, PTSD, and psychopathology. Moreover, it should be remembered that women who enter combat roles have to cope with both physical and mental difficulties, deriving from their exposure to life-threatening events, death, and other traumatic events. In addition, they have to cope with gender inequality and hegemonic masculinity in the military, as well as sexual harassments, and in some cases, abuse. We suggest that professional closed group discussions with women combatants who are about to be released from service should be held on a regular basis, not merely to identify PTSD, but also to allow the soldiers to share their feelings, emotions, traumas and experiences, thereby making them visible, heard and thanked for their contributions and actions. These group discussions could provide support for the soldiers by giving them a framework to feel that they are not different and not alone and could also allow therapists to identify vulnerabilities and risks for developing symptoms of distress. The framework could also be leveraged to acknowledge the female soldiers' abilities and agency.

The current study has several limitations, most prominently the small sample size. Obtaining qualitative data is labor intensive and hence by its very nature necessitates smaller samples, but for drawing more definite and far-reaching conclusions it is necessary to conduct further studies of larger, more diverse, and more representative samples of veterans. Another limitation is the vast differences between the societies and the militaries that could also affect the differences in trends among female soldiers in both militaries. We chose specifically these two contextually different groups particularly in order to explore the similarities and the differences.

Despite its limitations, this qualitative study does provide a multifaceted analysis of the narratives of female combat and combat support soldiers who served in the United States and the Israeli militaries. In so doing, it attempts to avoid what may be termed as the "the danger of misrepresentation" that exists in some studies about veterans, because in speaking for or about others, one typically claims to have understood something about them (Caddick et al., 2017, p. 15). By bringing the detailed narratives of the soldiers to the forefront of the article and presenting them to our readers, we aim not to speak for the veterans but to offer their retrospective perspective of their service. In this way, we hope that by informing and extending the social conversation about veterans and veterans' issues, this project will assist in easing their transition to civilian lives and provide tools for healthcare professionals.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have shown the main issues that the soldiers are required to cope with, what their most vivid memories are, and what topics were dominant in their military service and still prevail in their lives, years after their release. Two of the dominant recurring themes in the interviews with veterans of both militaries was the need to be heard and the fact that societies, therapists, and military institutions do not always truly listen to veterans' experiences and are not interested in what actually ails them. Our research suggests that conventional methods used in research relating to veterans might at times be inadequate, because categorization can abstract, pathologize, and fragment a wide array of soldiers' modes of post-combat being. We suggest adding more research frameworks that would allow the veterans to be active participants in generating knowledge about themselves. We further suggest activities that enhance their agency in their entrance back to civil life.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the IRBs of the Conflict

Management and Resolution Program, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (2017-02) and at the VA CT Healthcare System. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication. All authors contributed equally to this article.

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Nurses' Perceptions of the Quality of Perinatal Care Provided to Lesbian Women

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Aim: Based on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), we examined whether attitudes of nurses from different ethnic groups, subjective norms, behavioral intentions, assessments of relationships and communication were associated with their perceptions of the quality of perinatal care provided to lesbian women.

Background: Nurses administer healthcare, provide pertinent information and consultation to lesbians from pregnancy planning through birth.

Introduction: During the past few decades, worldwide, there has been a rise in lesbian-parenting. Despite the changes in Israeli society's public and legal reality, intolerance and discrimination to the homosexual population is still prevalent in Israel's healthcare system.

Methods: A cross-sectional study conducted between 12/2015-4/2016. Of the 270 nurses approached, 184 completed a self-report anonymous questionnaire (a response rate of 74%).

Findings: This is an important and timely study reflecting nurses' perceptions of the quality of perinatal care provided to lesbians. The study findings reflect that attitudes, subjective norms, behavioral intentions, assessments of relationships and communication of nurses from different ethnic groups are associated with their perceptions of the quality of perinatal care provided to the lesbians. The hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that attitudes, subjective norms, behavioral intentions, assessments of relationships and communication of nurses contributed 56% to the variance of nurses' perception of their own quality of perinatal care.

Discussion: TRA conceptualization predicted the quality of care of nurses from different ethnic groups treating lesbians in a perinatal setting.

Conclusion: TRA provides a useful framework for understanding and predicting the motivational effect of health care personnel with the lesbian population, being at risk for stigmatization and receiving less quality perinatal care.

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Implications for nursing and heath policy: Our findings revealed the importance of formulating a recognized policy in the field of LGBT medicine at the national level. Further training of nurses as to the lesbians' unique health needs, might improve the nurses' relationships and communication as well as the quality of perinatal nursing care.

Keywords: attitudes, behavioral intentions, lesbians, perceptions of care, TRA

INTRODUCTION

During the past few decades, same-sex parenthood in many countries has increased. In Israel, there are more than 2,500 lesbians raising children (Rosenblum and Peleg, 2007). Studies conducted in Israel and worldwide reveal that most lesbians choose to conceive through sperm donation (Bucholz, 2000; Ben-Ari and Livni, 2006). Consequently, these women undergo fertility treatments and receive perinatal health care at women's health centers in the community. Nurses usually accompany the lesbian patients from the pregnancy planning stage through birth and the postpartum period and are available for consultation (Spidsberg, 2007; Spidsberg and Sorlie, 2012).

Despite the changes in social and political outlooks regarding sexual minorities and in the representation and participation of sexual minority members in the public sphere, labeling, intolerance, and discrimination toward the homosexual population is still common in society (Kama, 2014). It may be assumed that health professionals are not immune to these attitudes and messages. In Israel, the likelihood of lesbians receiving equitable perinatal nursing care ethically and medically has yet to be investigated. This issue is being considered in this study.

Background

Social barriers have led to discrimination when accessing healthcare services, inadequate social programs for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) patients, and a dearth of knowledgeable caregivers (Sabin et al., 2015). Eliasson and colleagues noted that homophobia and heterosexualism are part of the socialization processes of health professionals (Eliason et al., 2011).

Hence, accepted institutional norms and values may obstruct this population's pursuit of equality in the healthcare system and may also affect nurses' perceived quality of care (Tzur Peled et al., 2019).

Negative attitudes toward lesbians are prevalent in the health care system (Dahl et al., 2013). In several studies, negative attitudes toward LGBT patients were found associated with the nurses' unwillingness to provide care to this population. Nurses were apprehensive of saying or doing something wrong. These attitudes influenced their perceptions of quality of care to LGBT patients (Stonewall, 2015; Carabez and Scott, 2016; Dorsen and Van Devanter, 2016). Furthermore, a previous study indicated that the nurses' perceptions of quality of care were affected by their attitudes toward perinatal care of LGBT patients. Nurses were prejudiced toward LGBTs during pregnancy, which biased their perceptions of the quality of care (Singer et al., 2019).

Behavioral intentions refer to the entire range of motivational factors reflecting how motivated the individual is to act (Ajzen, 1988). Behavioral intentions of caregivers toward sexual minorities have been examined in a qualitative study. Nurses noted that they were attentive to not harm LGBT patients (Beagan et al., 2012). Assessing nurses' relationships and communication with lesbians may affect their satisfaction with the quality of care. For instance, in a study that evaluated the ability of 248 medical students to provide quality health care to LGBT patients, good communication between students and the LGBT patients was correlated with a higher level of treatment, expressed by obtaining a more generalized anamnesis (Sanchez et al., 2006).

The Theoretical Framework

The present study was based on conceptualizations and components developed by Ajzen and Fishbein in their Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). This theory provides a framework for understanding and predicting the motivational effects on actual social behavior. TRA defines the associations between *beliefs, attitudes, norms, intentions, and behavior*, stating that a person's behavior is determined by his or her behavioral intention of performing a certain behavior. The intention itself is determined by the person's attitudes and subjective norms toward that behavior. More specifically, according to the TRA, interpersonal behavior is directly derived from behavioral intentions. Intention is the sum of all motivational factors that reflect the extent to which the individual displays action and how much effort that person is willing to invest (Ajzen, 1988). The intention itself evolves from the individual's attitudes toward a certain behavior combined with his or her subjective norms (Ajzen, 1991).

Attitudes constitute one's judgment regarding conducting a behavior and overall assessment of the same behavior. These attitudes are influenced by beliefs about the outcomes associated with the performance of a behavior and the value attributed to these outcomes (Ajzen, 1988; Gillmore et al., 2002).

The subjective norms of an individual represent his or her perception of the social environment's attitudes toward that behavior (Colman, 2015). In other words the subjective norms are the result of his or her beliefs as to the extent to which "significant others" think that they must perform a certain behavior and the motivation to act according to their opinion (Colman, 2015; Glanz et al., 2015).

Studies where the TRA has been applied across contexts and disciplines such as health behavior (Rosemary et al., 2016), communication (Karnowski et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2020) and consumer behavior (Cobum and Farhar, 2004) provided support for our proposed research model, however, conceptualizations

and variables derived from the TRA theory have yet not been used in studies dealing with nurses' perceptions of the quality of perinatal health care offered to lesbians at women's health centers. Therefore, our research question was: among are nurses from different ethnic groups perceptions of the quality of perinatal nursing care for lesbians related to their attitudes, subjective norms, behavioral intentions and assessment of relationships and communication?

Study Purpose

It is important to note, that previous articles published in the context of the present study focused on the association between the nurses' knowledge and attitudes toward lesbians receiving perinatal care (Tzur-Peled et al., 2019), the associations between the nurses' professional and personal characteristics and their perceptions of their relationships and communication with lesbians seeking perinatal care (Tzur Peled et al., 2019).

Based on the TRA, our aims were to examine the associations between (a) nurses' attitudes toward lesbians; (b) nurses' attitudes relating to the care of lesbians; (c) nurses' subjective norms; (d) nurses' behavioral intentions to provide equal care; and (e) nurses' assessment of relationships and communication as well as perceptions of the quality of perinatal care for lesbians amongst nurses from different ethnic groups.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

A cross-sectional study performed at women's healthcare centers in Israel.

Ethics Approval and Considerations

The study was approved by two Institutional Review Boards (Helsinki Committees) of Clalit Health Services (File number 0094-13-COM), Maccabi Health Services (File number 2015-10) and by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel (File number 2014-13).

The authors either emailed the questionnaires to nurses working in women's healthcare centers or distributed them at staff meetings. An information sheet explaining the nature and importance of the study was attached to the questionnaire. Respondents were fully informed of the aims of the study and their right to refuse to participate or not answer any questions which made them feel uncomfortable.

Population and Sample

All nurses (n = 270) who provided perinatal care to lesbians at different women's healthcare centers in the community comprised the research population. Participants were recruited from all districts of the two largest health organizations in Israel. Of the 270 nurses approached, 184 completed a self-report questionnaire (a response rate of 74%). A similar response rate was reported in a previous study conducted amongst nurses in Israel (Kogan and Tabak, 2008). Possible reasons for not participating in the study were lack of time and unwillingness to collaborate with this type of study that might reveal rigid perceptions, homophobia, labeling and prejudice toward the lesbian community.

Data Collection

Data were collected from nurses working at women's health centers throughout Israel between December 2015 and April 2016. To avoid a potential selection bias, the researcher sent an email to the nursing staffs at the women's health centers in all districts spread across the country of the Clalit Health Services and Maccabi Health Services.

One of the researchers (STP) attended staff meetings at the women's health centers throughout the country, thus, ensuring that the sample obtained represented the intended population. Likewise, methodologically, it was necessary to overcome the possibility of biasing the findings due to social and professional desirability that make it difficult for health professionals to label, discriminate, and judge the LBGT population.

Therefore, we chose to examine the issue of behavioral intentions to provide equitable perinatal care to lesbians, the quality which would be comparable to the treatment that heterosexual women would receive, both directly and indirectly, by asking two questions: a direct question was "If you treat a lesbian woman in the future, do you think you will provide her with the same level of perinatal care that you provide to a heterosexual woman?" and an indirect question was "If another nurse on the staff were to treat a lesbian woman in the future, would you think she would provide her with the same level of perinatal care she provides to heterosexual women?" We believe this approach reduced the impact of the social and professional desirability of nurses to be perceived as providing uniform and equal care to all.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria included registered nurses who provide direct perinatal care to women at Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs). Exclusion criteria were lack of knowledge of Hebrew and employed at a women's healthcare centre for less than a year.

Instrument Description

A pilot study was conducted amongst 42 well baby clinics nurses, to determine the reliability of the research instrument and the research process. The reliability of the questionnaires was found to be good (0.8–0.96).

Nurses' Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men's Scale-ATLG (Herek, 1988)

The original questionnaire included 20 items: (a) 10 different attitudes toward gays (ATG); (b) 10 different attitudes toward lesbians (ATL). In our study, we used a sub-scale focusing on attitudes toward lesbians. Each item was answered using a four-point Likert scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree"). The overall score ranged from 10 to 40. A high score indicated negative attitudes. Based on this measurement tool, a

dichotomous variable was constructed. A score of 10 indicated positive attitudes, scores > 10 indicated negative attitudes.

The Gay Affirmative Practice Scale (Crisp, 2006)

Nurses' attitudes toward the health care of homosexuals were measured by a 15-item questionnaire. Sample item: "In their practice with gay/lesbian clients, practitioners should support the different family structure of gay/lesbian families". The overall score ranged from 15 to 60. A higher score indicated attitudes favoring positive action toward homosexuals. Based on this measurement tool, a dichotomous variable was created. A score ≥ 60 indicated positive attitudes and a score < 60 indicated negative attitudes.

Subjective Norms

Our formulated questionnaire was based on the TRA (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), a tool for measuring the social impact on nurses in the context of providing care to lesbians. The questionnaire contained 12 statements. Each item was answered using a four-point Likert scale from 1 ("not at all") to 4 ("strongly agree"). A high score indicated a great influence of significant others (e.g., family members, co-workers, and supervisors) in the nurse's environment in the context of providing quality perinatal care to lesbians.

Nurses' Behavioral Intention to Provide Equal Perinatal Health Care to Lesbians

Based on Ben Natan and colleagues' research (Ben Natan et al., 2009), direct behavioral intention was measured by the question: "Do you think you can commit to providing care to lesbians comparable to the standard care provided to heterosexual women?" To examine the nurses' indirect behavioral intention, the same question was asked as to the potential care of lesbians by another staff nurse. Replies were provided on a five-grade Likert scale from 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "strongly agree". The overall score ranged from 2 to 10. A high score indicated the behavioral intention of the nurse to provide lesbians the same quality care given to a heterosexual woman. A dichotomous variable was constructed regarding this variable, those who marked 5 = strongly agree, as opposed to those who marked 1–4 = disagree.

A Nurse-Patient Relationship-Communication Assessment Tool (NPR-CAT) (Finch, 2006)

This 18-item questionnaire estimated the nurses' perceptions of their relationships and communication with lesbian patients regarding six aspects: dominance, formality, exposure, availability, containment, and egalitarianism. The overall score ranged from 18 to 90. A high score indicated perceptions of good relationships and communication between the nurse and the patients.

Socio-Demographic and Professional Background

This questionnaire comprised basic socio-demographic and professional background questions pertaining to age, ethnicity, level of religiosity, marital status, education, academic education, professional status, and residential area.

Statistical Analysis

We hypothesized that positive associations would be found in the respondents' attitudes toward lesbians regarding (a) their care, (b) subjective norms, (c) behavioral intentions, (d) assessment of relationships and communication, and (e) and perceptions of the quality of perinatal nursing care. The data were analyzed by the SPSS 21 program. Descriptive and inferential statistics and Pearson correlations examined the correlations among the study measures. A hierarchical multiple regression analyzed the data and identified the predictors of perceptions of the quality of perinatal nursing care for lesbians using the following independent variables: attitudes toward lesbians and their care, subjective norms, behavioral intentions, assessments of relationships and communication. *T*-tests were performed for sections "a," "b," "c," and "d" to examine the differences in the average perceptions of the quality of perinatal care provided to the lesbians according to the independent variables. Pearson correlation examined the statistical correlation between section "e" and the nurses' perceptions of the quality of perinatal care provided to the lesbians.

RESULTS

The participants' mean age was 44.6 (SD = 9.66) and their mean nursing experience was 19 years (SD = 9.93). Demographics and participants' characteristics are summarized in **Table 1**. The nursing population comprised Ashkenazi Jews of European origin (58%), secular (56%) and those residing in the centre of the country (51%). Most were married (86%) and were registered nurses with an academic degree in nursing (82.1%). Of those with a degree in nursing, 68% possessed a BA, 32% graduate degrees (MA and PhD) and 57% were graduates of post-basic nursing courses. Most (72%) worked in clinics and the remainder served as nursing directors at the clinics (**Table 1**).

Approximately 75% were acquainted with a lesbian. Of all the participants, only 17.9% indicated that they had undergone vocational training as to the health, psychological, and social characteristics of lesbians. Of these, 66.7% thought that they had been provided with professional tools for working and treating lesbians. Of the nurses who participated in the study, 60.4% disagreed or were uncertain that exposure to the sexual orientation of the patients was important when treating the women (**Table 2**).

Most of the nurses (76.1%) held negative attitudes toward lesbians and negative attitudes toward the care of lesbians (83.2%). Approximately half the nurses had a low subjective norm advocating for the provision of unequal perinatal care to lesbians and 64% responded that they fully agree with the principle of equal care for lesbian patients (**Table 3**).

TABLE 1 | Personal and professional characteristics of the participants: categorical variables (*N* = 184).

Characteristic	Categories	Number	%
Ethnic origin	Ashkenazi Jews of European	107	58.2
	origin	59	32
	Sephardic Jews of Islamic origin	18	9.8
	Arab sector		
Religiosity	Secular	104	56.5
	Traditional	32	17.4
	Religious including ultra-Orthodox	48	26.1
Marital status	Unmarried	25	13.6
	Married	159	86.4
Residential area	Central Israel	89	48.4
	Other areas (South, North, Jerusalem)	95	51.6
Education	Registered nurse	33	17.9
	Postgraduate registered nurse	151	82.1
Academic education	BA	107	68.2
	MA	50	31.8
Post basic course	Yes	109	59.3
	No	75	40.7
Professional status	Nurse director	51	27.8
	Clinic nurse	133	72.2

TABLE 2 | Nurses' acquaintance with lesbians: categorical variables (*N* = 184).

Characteristic	Categories	Number	%
Personal acquaintance with lesbians	Low	44	23.9
	Moderate	62	33.7
	High	73	39.7
	Unknown	5	2.7
Professional training	Yes	10	5.4
	No	151	82.1
	Uncertain	21	11.4
	Unknown	2	1.1
Continuing education program	Yes	33	17.9
	No	142	77.2
	Uncertain	7	3.8
	Unknown	2	1.1
Professional tools	Yes	22	66.7
	No	6	18.2
	Uncertain	5	15.1
Importance of exposure to patient's orientation	Agree	71	38.6
	Disagree	59	32.1
	Uncertain	52	28.3
	Unknown	2	1.0

TABLE 3 | Attitudes, subjective norms, and nurses' behavior intention-frequencies and percentages (*N* = 184).

Characteristic	Categories	Number	%
Nurses' attitudes toward lesbians	Positive attitudes	44	23.9
	Negative attitudes	140	76.1
Nurses' attitudes toward lesbians' care	Positive attitudes	31	16.8
	Negative attitudes	153	83.2
Subjective norms regarding the perinatal nursing care of lesbians	High norms	88	47.8
	Low norms	95	52.2
Behavioral intention	No	61	35.9
	Strongly agree	118	64.1

TABLE 4 | Pearson correlation coefficient between study variables (*N* = 184).

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Nurses' attitudes toward lesbians' care						
2	Nurses' attitudes toward lesbians	0.40***					
3	Subjective norms	0.34***	0.33***				
4	Behavioral intention	0.11	0.18*	0.08			
5	Relationships and communication	0.51***	0.57***	0.31***	0.02		
6	Perceptions of quality of care	0.50***	0.45***	0.37***	3.0	0.73***	

*$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.001$.

To examine the research model and as a basis for hierarchical regression analysis, an initial examination of relationships between the various research variables was performed using the Pearson correlation (**Table 4**).

Table 4 shows a positive correlation between nurses' attitudes toward lesbians' care and their attitudes toward lesbians. Thus, the more positive the nurses' attitudes toward lesbians' care, the more positive their attitudes toward lesbians. Likewise, significant correlations were found between nurses' attitudes toward lesbians' care and the subjective norm, relationships, communication, and perceptions of the quality of care. Namely, the more positive the nurses' attitudes toward lesbians' care, the higher the subjective norm, the relationship, communication, and the perception of quality of care. Furthermore, regarding the nurses' attitudes toward lesbians, significant positive correlations were found between subjective norm, behavioral intention, relationship, communication, and perception of quality of care. The correlation between subjective norm and behavioral intention is significant, yet, lower compared to other correlations. Therefore, the higher the nurses' attitudes toward lesbians, the higher the subjective norms, behavioral intention, relationships, communication, and perception of quality of care. Finally, a high positive correlation was found between relationships, communication and perception of quality of care. Specifically, the better the quality of the relationship and communication, the higher the quality of care perceived by the nurses. Herein, using a multiple hierarchical regression model, we examined the contribution of the variables found significant in the univariate analysis explaining the differences in perceptions of quality of care. The following variables were included in the multiple hierarchical regression model: ethnic origin, religiosity, acquaintance, attitudes toward lesbians' care, attitudes toward lesbians, subjective norms, and relationships and communication (**Table 5**).

TABLE 5 | Hierarchical multiple regression analysis explaining the variability of perception of quality of perinatal nursing care the nurses provided the lesbians (N = 184).

Step	Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	ΔR^2	R^2
1					0.08**	0.08**
	Ashkenazi Jews of European origin	4.53	2.35	0.25*		
	Sephardic Jews of Islamic origin	1.15	2.44	0.06		
	Religiosity	−1.33	0.69	−0.15*		
2					0.04**	0.12***
	Ashkenazi Jews of European origin	2.01	2.50	0.11		
	Sephardic Jews of Islamic origin	−1.66	2.60	−0.09		
	Religiosity	−0.75	0.70	−0.08		
	Acquaintance	2.63	0.92	0.23*		
3					21***.	0.33***
	Ashkenazi Jews of European origin	−1.87	2.30	−0.10		
	Sephardic Jews of Islamic origin	−4.83	2.40	−0.25*		
	Religiosity	0.97	0.70	0.11		
	Acquaintance	1.23	0.83	0.11		
	Attitudes toward lesbians' care	5.0	0.99	0.35**		
	Attitudes toward lesbians	0.49	0.12	0.32**		
4					0.00	0.33***
	Ashkenazi Jews of European origin	−1.91	2.32	−0.11		
	Sephardic Jews of Islamic origin	−4.80	2.40	−0.25*		
	Religiosity	0.10	0.71	0.11		
	Acquaintance	1.21	0.83	0.11		
	Attitudes toward lesbians' care	5.03	1.07	0.35		
	Attitudes toward lesbians	0.47	0.13	0.31**		
	Subjective norm	0.36	0.98	0.03		
5					0.23***	0.56***
	Ashkenazi Jews of European origin	−1.60	1.90	−0.09		
	Sephardic Jews of Islamic origin	−3.44	1.10	−0.18		
	Religiosity	1.18	0.57	0.13*		
	Acquaintance	0.78	0.68	0.07		
	Attitudes toward lesbians' care	2.10	0.92	0.15*		
	Attitudes toward lesbians	0.07	0.12	0.050		
	Subjective norm relationships and	0.93	0.80	0.070		
	communication	9.92	1.07	0.63**		

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 5 presents the hierarchical regression model explaining the variability in nurses' perceptions of quality of care provided to lesbians the table demonstrates that the various indices together contributed 56% to the explanation of the variance in the perception of quality of care. Initially, the indices of origin and religiosity were introduced, explaining 8% of the variance. A significant beta was found for participants of Ashkenazi origin, consequently, amongst these nurses the perception of the quality of care was better compared with the nurses of Sephardic and Islamic origin. In addition, a negative and significant beta coefficient was found for religiosity, therefore, amongst the secular nurses, the perception of quality of care was higher. Secondly, the nurses were familiarized with the lesbians' index which contributed an additional 4% explanation of the variance. The beta coefficient of this index was positive, therefore, the higher the acquaintance, the better the nurses' perception of the quality of care. Thirdly, two attitude indices were introduced, i.e., attitudes toward lesbians' care and attitudes toward lesbians, contributing 21% to explain the variance. The beta coefficients of these attitudes were positive, therefore, the more positive the nurses' attitudes, the better their perception of quality of care. Fourthly, the subjective norm index was introduced, yet did not contribute to the explanation of the variance. In the fifth and final step, the variable perception of relationships and communication was introduced. This variable contributed another 23% to explain the variance. The beta coefficient was positive, so the better the relationship and communication, the better the nurses' perception of the quality of care.

It appears that although in the third and fourth steps, a significant contribution to the independent variable was found for the two attitudes, the beta coefficients of these attitude variables were reduced and became insignificant at the fifth step, when the variable of relationship and communication was introduced. This finding suggests the possibility of mediation, i.e., that the quality of the relationship and communication mediated between attitudes toward lesbians' care and toward lesbians; and nurses' perception of the quality of care provided to the lesbians. Consequently, the more positive the nurses' attitudes, the more positive their perception of the relationships and communication leading to an improvement in the perception of quality of care. As mentioned, the fifth step explained 56% of the variability in the perception of relationships and communication.

The first hypothesis: nurses' attitudes toward lesbians and their perceptions of quality of care were examined by a t-test. The perceptions of quality of care were significantly higher amongst nurses with positive attitudes toward lesbians than those with negative attitudes (t = 3.07; df = 182; p = 0.000).

The second hypothesis: nurses' attitudes toward perinatal care of lesbians, and their perceptions of quality of care were tested by a t-test. The perceptions of quality of care were significantly higher amongst nurses with positive attitudes toward perinatal care of lesbians than those with negative attitudes (t = 4.51; df = 182; p = 0.000).

The third hypothesis: nurses' subjective norm concerning perinatal care for lesbians, and their perceptions of quality of care were tested by a t-test. The perceptions of quality of care were significantly higher amongst nurses with a high subjective norm concerning perinatal care for lesbians compared to those with a low subjective norm in relation to perinatal health care for lesbians (t = 5.23; df = 181; p = 0.000).

The fourth hypothesis: nurses' behavioral intention to provide equal perinatal care to lesbians and their perceptions of quality of care were tested by a t-test. The mean perception of the quality of perinatal care provided to lesbians was significantly higher amongst nurses with a high behavioral intention to provide equal perinatal care to lesbians than those with low behavioral intentions (t = 3.50; df = 177; p = 0.004).

The fifth hypothesis: nurses' assessment of their relationships and communication with lesbians and their perceptions of quality of care were tested using the Pearson correlation. A high correlation (0.73, $p < 0.001$) was found between the nurses' assessment of their relationship and communication with lesbians and their perception of quality of care. Specifically, the more likely that the relationship and communication with the lesbian patients are evaluated, the better the perception of quality of care.

DISCUSSION

Our research question was reinforced by our findings. The analysis revealed that attitudes of nursing staff members from different ethnic groups, subjective norms, behavioral intentions, assessments of relationships and communication were linked with their perceptions of the quality of perinatal care provided to lesbians. To assess the research model and as a basis for the hierarchical regression analysis, an initial examination of correlations between the various research variables was performed, using the Pearson correlation coefficient. The hierarchical regression analysis demons that several indices together contributed 56% to the variability in the nurses' perception of quality of care. The relationship and communication assessment variable contributed 23% for predicting the perception of quality of care. Other variables that contributed for predicting the perception of quality of care were nurses' ethnic origin and degree of religiosity (8%), acquaintance (4%) and nurses' attitudes toward lesbians' care and toward lesbians (21%). A possible explanation for the significant contribution of the variable relationship and communication for predicting the perception of quality of care is that quality care provided to lesbians is based on relationships and communication, characterized by openness, sensitivity, involvement, and support (Erlandsson et al., 2010).

The use of conceptualizations and variables of the TRA in understanding nursing staff members' attitudes, subjective norms, behavioral intentions, assessment of their relationships, communication and perceptions of the quality of perinatal care provided to lesbians is innovative and thus far, no studies have examined these correlations. Furthermore, the variables of the TRA were found to predict nurses' perceptions of the quality of care. Likewise, the results of the present study add an important layer to the strong correlation between the nurses' assessment of their relationships and communication with lesbians and their perceptions of the quality of perinatal nursing care. It appears that the assessment of the relationships and communication with lesbians plays a significant role in the nurses' perceptions of the quality of perinatal care provided to lesbians.

Nurses' Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Their Perceptions of Quality of Care

Nurses with positive attitudes toward lesbians reported a significantly higher quality of care than nurses with negative attitudes. This finding is consistent with several previous studies which demonstrated that the nurses' attitudes to lesbians influenced their perceptions of the quality of caregiving (Albuquerque et al., 2016). The literature notes that nurses have often demonstrated disdain for LGBT patients (Dorsen and Van Devanter, 2016). Tzur Peled et al. (2019) found that some of the nurses felt conflicted and dissonant with their attitudes toward lesbians, and the need and desire to be tolerant in the context of perinatal care for these patients. In other studies, the negative attitudes of nurses toward LGBTs were correlated with their unwillingness to provide health care to members of this community (Marques et al., 2015). These attitudes influenced the nurses' perceptions of the quality of care they provided (Carabez and Scott, 2016).

Nurses' Attitudes Toward Perinatal Health Care of Lesbians, and Their Perceptions of Quality of Care

A previous study has shown that the nurses' perceptions of quality of care were affected by their attitudes toward perinatal care of LGBTs. The participants expressed misconceptions, prejudice, insensitive language, and lack of normativity regarding LGBT pregnant patients, which biased their perceptions of the quality of care they had provided (Singer et al., 2019). On the other hand, a qualitative study examining the attitudes of specialist nurses from the United States regarding the care given to gays and lesbians, found that some of the nurses displayed positive attitudes and others reported ambivalence toward the health needs of this population. In their assessment, their attitudes cast a shadow on their perceptions of quality of care (Dorsen and Van Devanter, 2016). However, in a qualitative study, the nurses found that their patients' sexuality was irrelevant to them and that they believed that the care provided to all their patients was qualitative and egalitarian (Beagan et al., 2012). These studies indicate a lack of uniformity which may be due to differences in factors such as the type of population, work settings and countries.

Nurses' Subjective Norms as to Perinatal Care for Lesbians and Their Perceptions of Quality of Care

The perceptions of quality of care were significantly higher amongst nurses with a high subjective norm as to perinatal care for lesbians compared to nurses with a low subjective norm. This finding underscores the meaningful impact of significant others (e.g., family members, co-workers, and supervisors) in the nurse's environment on the averages of perceptions of the quality of perinatal care for lesbians. This finding is consistent with previous studies. The presence of heterosexual norms in the caregiver system contributed to discomfort and even influenced the perceptions of quality of care amongst the nurses (Dahl et al., 2013).

Nurses' Behavioral Intention to Provide Equal Perinatal Health Care to Lesbians and Their Perceptions of Quality of Care

The mean score for perceptions of the quality of perinatal health care for lesbians was significantly higher amongst nurses with a high behavioral intention to provide equal perinatal health care to lesbians than amongst nurses with a low behavioral intention. This finding is consistent with a previous study in which the intention of the hospital nursing staffs to provide quality care to drug addicts, predicted high quality perceptions (Albuquerque et al., 2016). A possible explanation of the current study's finding is that disproportionate attitudes amongst the treating staff may lead to unequal care expressed by hostility and interpersonal distance from lesbians. It is possible that some of the nurses were conflicted between their personal tendency to take a judicial

approach, and the demands of the nursing role, derived from the moral value system that characterizes the nursing profession. This conflict may have impaired the nurses' perception of quality of care (Tillman et al., 2016).

Nurses' Assessment of Their Relationship and Communication With Lesbians and Their Perceptions of Quality of Care

The nurses' assessment of their relationships and communication with lesbians was correlated with their perceptions of the quality of perinatal nursing care. Namely, the higher the scores when evaluating the relationships and communication with lesbian patients, the higher the prevalence of the nurses' perceptions of the quality of perinatal care for lesbians. This finding was supported by Radix and Maingi who found that when nurses felt uncertain as to the proper way to address lesbian patients, their discomfort affected relationships and communication as well as their perceptions of the quality of care (Radix and Maingi, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study is innovative as it investigated a sensitive topic in Israeli society. The results advance important policy implications. The study revealed that there are nurses providing perinatal care in community clinics in Israel who retain negative attitudes toward lesbians and their care. There are increasing numbers of parents of the same sex who deserve to be cared for by health professionals who convey an attitude of equality. We showed that there is still a great distance to go to achieve this equality. The importance of this study is that it highlights the fact that even professionals must invest in improving their awareness of their own prejudices and become more aware of the limitations of their power and responsibility in accepting minorities. The authors, therefore, stress the importance of formulating a formal policy in the field of LGBT medicine in Israel.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

There are several important implications of this study. On a theoretical level, this pioneer study, for the first time, assesses the perceptions of nurses working in women's health centers as to the quality of the perinatal care provided to lesbians, thus, contributing to the body of knowledge in terms of lesbians' visibility in the health system.

The use of concepts and variables from the TRA to examine the correlations between personal characteristics, attitudes, subjective norms, behavioral intentions, and nurses' perception of the quality of care provided to lesbians, is innovative and adds an important layer to the original model of the theory (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Additional research is vital in order to better understand the status of lesbians in the healthcare system. Furthermore, it is extremely important to change stereotypic perceptions of the lesbian population and to improve their communication skills when providing healthcare. This can be achieved by providing educational programs dealing with the unique biopsychosocial needs of lesbians to all staff nurses and nursing students. Similarly, we hope that this study will assist in raising the awareness of healthcare authorities as to the special health needs of this population.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the study does not provide a strong justification for the TRA for the theoretical underpinning of the model, although in the existing literature TRA/TPB have been applied across contexts and disciplines and have provided support for our proposed model (Ramkissoon et al., 2012, 2013; Megeirhi et al., 2020; Ramkissoon, 2020, 2021).

The second limitation lies in the research tool used to measure the behavioral intention to provide equal perinatal care to lesbians. The mean score of our behavioral questionnaire was very high; 4.60 out of a 1–5 score range. Specifically, the behavioral intention variance was limited. It is possible that the nurses who participated in the study were reluctant to respond honestly and acknowledge behavior that is not professionally acceptable, e.g., providing inequitable care for all. The third limitation relates to the type of study which was cross-sectional. It is possible that longitudinal research at several points of time would have yielded data that would have broadened the understanding of the nurses' perceptions of the quality of care. The fourth limitation is the fact that the research population did not include the lesbians themselves, relying only on the nursing staff reports without exploring the experiences of the lesbian patients.

The small size of the sample and furthermore, the fact that it included only two health organizations are also limitations of this study. We were also unaware as to whether lesbians were amongst the nurses themselves. Finally, only subjective variables were included with no hard data from an objective source.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the study was approved by two Institutional Review Boards (Helsinki Committees) of Clalit Health Services (File number 0094-13-COM), Maccabi Health Services (File number 2015-10) and by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel (File number 2014-13). The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

ST-P, TK, and OS: study design, data analysis, manuscript writing, and critical revisions for important intellectual content. ST-P: data collection. TK and OS: study supervision. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Mother's Parenting Stress and Marital Satisfaction During the Parenting Period: Examining the Role of Depression, Solitude, and Time Alone

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This study examines the mechanism of maternal parenting stress on marital satisfaction based on the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model (VSAM), and draws on the needs theory to explore the role of alone time in marital relationships under different solitude preferences. The marital satisfaction Scale, Self-rating Depression Scale (SDS), Parenting Stress Scale (PSS), Preference for Solitude Scale (PSS), and alone time scale were used to conduct a questionnaire survey of 1,387 Chinese mothers in their parenting stage. The results found that: (1) in the overall group and the high and low solitude preference level group, depression plays a significant mediating role between parenting stress and marital satisfaction. (2) For mothers who prefer solitude, alone time can reduce the positive impact of parenting stress on depression, and but it cannot alleviate the negative impact of parenting stress and depression on marital satisfaction. (3) In the low solitude preference level group, alone time can aggravate the positive impact of parenting stress on depression and the negative impact of parenting stress on marital satisfaction.

Keywords: mother's parenting stress, depression, solitude, marital satisfaction, alone time

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, due to rapid economic development and changes in people's values, the divorce rate worldwide is increasing significantly. In Western society, marriage breakdown is an increasingly common phenomenon. Approximately 1 million families divorce in Europe each year, and more than 60% of divorced families have children (Rodríguez and Martínez-Aedoy Rojo, 2018). Since 2003, China's divorce rate has gradually increased for 15 consecutive years (Zhang, 2020). According to data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs in China, the divorce rate in the country has risen from 2.8% in 2015 to 3.1% in 2020, and 40% of divorced couples have been married within 3 years (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020). In view of these facts, China's rising divorce rate has also prompted scholars to start investigating its underlying causes.

Early studies on marriage took economic stress and work stress as the main factors affecting the quality of marriage (Krokoff et al., 1989; Conger et al., 1999). In recent years, parenting stress

has been regarded as the direct source of stress for fathers and mothers (Ostberg and Hagekull, 2000), and the resulting dissatisfaction with the quality of marriage is an important reason for this relationship's breakdown (Fincham et al., 1989). The increase in the divorce rate during parenting can be attributed to various factors. The mothers' pressure accumulation in the process of parenting has also become a factor that cannot be ignored in the decline of marital satisfaction. Individuals with high stress tend to have a higher intention to divorce, and it even directly reduces the individual's marital happiness index (Li et al., 2014). However, the pressure of parenting is multifaceted and includes the degree of father's participation in parenting, the type of mother's occupation, and family structure. In particular, in contemporary Chinese families, mothers are still the main providers of childcare, which requires significant time and energy. In addition to being under higher parental pressure, mothers have to face a huge contradiction between childcare and professional development (Cohler and Musick, 2018). Previous studies have also confirmed that the quality of a couple's marriage will decline with the birth of a child (Glenn and Mclanahan, 1982; Cowan et al., 2000). Moreover, husbands and wives need to bear the responsibilities of both supporting their respective parents and educating their children. Whether these tasks can be successfully completed directly affects the success of the entire married life. If these expectations are not met, it may lead to a decline in the quality of the marriage and even the relationship's end (Leonard and Roberts, 1998).

However, for many parents who have experienced the same parenting stress, the quality of their marriage did not get affected, and some even show higher family functions (Tedeschi et al., 1998; Lavee and Ben-Ari, 2008). This point is worthy of our attention; that is, is there a protective factor in the marriage relationship? Is this raising factor useful just to help parents relieve the pressure of parenting during the parenting period? What about the key resources to maintain marriage relationships? Given these questions, one of the main goals of this research is to explore restorative factors that have a positive impact on marriage quality. As Beach and Stanley (2007) proposed, current marriage research should focus on marriage relationships. There are positive factors that have a repairing effect in the process, and the role of this factor may provide more valuable theoretical significance for related research on marriage quality (Beach and Stanley, 2007).

In recent years, solitude has attracted increasing attention in the field of psychology, especially for its positive effects such as reducing overall emotional negativity, promoting mental health, integrating self, and restoring emotions (Chua and Koestner, 2008; Lay et al., 2020). The needs theory of Buchholz (1997) pointed out that it is fundamental to establish intimacy with people, but being alone is also equally important in a person's growth needs. Long-term theoretical arguments have supported the importance of "solitude" in daily life (Coplan et al., 2018), because it entails self-exploration (Goossens, 2014) and self-renewal (Korpela and Staats, 2014), as well as important development background. Research on intimacy indicates that mature adults can spending time alone to resolve negative emotions such as anxiety caused by stress and can rebuild emotional balance and improve emotional connection with their partners (Rook, 1987).

Mediating Model Linking Mother's Parenting Stress, Marital Satisfaction, and Depression

Parenting stress refers to the stress caused by parents in the process of raising their children, including negative emotional experiences and states such as anxiety, fear, self-loss, and fatigue (Tachibana et al., 2012). Parenting stress is significantly related to individual mental health and happiness in life (Skok et al., 2006; Extremera et al., 2009). There is clear evidence that high parental stress can undermine personal well-being and the quality of intimate relationships (Coyne and Downey, 1991; Cohan and Bradbury, 1997; Karney and Bradbury, 1997). During childcare, mothers usually experience higher stress (Raikes and Thompson, 2005; Cousino and Hazen, 2013), and family relationships get affected by this kind of environment, which will lead to a sharp decline in marital satisfaction (Beach et al., 1998; Dong et al., 2022).

In addition, we believe that the stress of parenting will indirectly affect the marital satisfaction of women during parenting through depression. Scholars have successively proposed a number of theories to explain the impact of stress on marital relations, such as the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (VSAM) (Karney and Bradbury, 1997), model of the impact of stress events on marital function (Bodenmann and Cina, 2006), and crisis theory (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). Among them, VSAM is mostly used in the research of marital quality and stability (Karney and Bradbury, 1997; Williamson et al., 2013).

The VSAM model points out that fluctuations in the quality of marriage relationships can be understood through partners' existing, stable fragility (unique qualities, experiences, and dispositions of the individual that affect their ability to function effectively within the relationship), stressful events (external stressors and strains), and adaptive processes (thoughts and behaviors enacted by partners that promote relationship positivity or reduce relationship negativity). Adaptive processes represent interactions between spouses that evolve as couples respond to stress and are conceptualized as behavioral exchanges that may be positive or negative in valence (e.g., conflict management skills, partner support). In short, those couples who experience higher levels of stress, greater vulnerability, or adopt improper methods to adapt to negative events may have higher levels of negative emotions. Further, parenting stress often plays a "booster" role in the formation of anxiety, depression, and other psychological problems. This close relationship between individual stress and depression is also supported by a large number of empirical studies (Whitley et al., 1994; Bech et al., 2005; Yu et al., 2020). The accumulation of stress seriously endangers the mother's mental health and increases the incidence of depression (Tachibana et al., 2012). Under long-term depression, mothers are more likely to have negative coping lifestyles and harmful approaches to marriage relationships, and produce over-sensitive stress responses, leading to lower marital

satisfaction (Cicchetti et al., 1998; Henderson et al., 2003). Based on the above research, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Parenting stress is negatively associated with marital satisfaction.

H2: Parenting stress can reduce marital satisfaction by increasing depression; that is, depression plays a mediating role between parenting stress and marital satisfaction.

Moderating Effect of Solitude

Larson defines solitude as "a state in which the individual's consciousness is separated from the consciousness of others, and the individual has no information or emotional communication with others, that is, a state in which there is no relationship with the outside world on the psychological and behavioral level" (Larson, 1990). Some scholars regard solitude as an important factor in improving individual mental health (Maslow, 1970; Storr, 1988). For example, being alone can be used to get rid of external pressure and to reconnect with one's own personal values and interests. Both adolescents and adults report that they feel more focused and happier after spending time with themselves. Adolescents who spent much time with themselves seem to be more likely to adapt to life than those who spend less time by themselves (Larson, 1990). Maslow found that the need for solitude is one of the characteristics of self-actualizing people. He also noticed that these subjects also show high interpersonal warmth and have deep relationships with their close friends (Maslow, 1970). However, some scholars regard solitude as social avoidance or loneliness, and associate solitude with a strong sense of loneliness and pain, emphasizing the side effects of solitude (Kashdan et al., 2006).

When explaining this difference in solitude, some scholars regard the individual's solitude preference as a key factor, because subjective willingness may be the main factor that determines the balance between the positive and negative experiences of being alone (Galanaki, 2004). As stated in self-determined theory, self-determined solitude is often accompanied by positive emotional experiences and is positively correlated with good intimacy (Hammitt and Madden, 1989; Thomas and Azmitia, 2018). These seemingly contradictory findings about solitude reveal its complex nature; that is, the difference in the impact of solitude on individuals may be the result of the combined effect of spending time alone and solitude preference. Individuals who are more eager to be alone (with high solitude preference) need much time to meet their solitude needs. On the contrary, for individuals with low solitude preference, the increase in time can lead to negative results such as depression, anxiety, and breakdown of interpersonal relationships.

Importantly, in this study we considered the connection between solitude and emotion pointed out in previous studies. This is in accordance with Burger (1995) who put forward that individuals who desire to be alone are more likely to actively experience the beauty of solitude than individuals who do not care for it. In fact, those individuals who can effectively use their time by themselves are usually better able to recover from stressful situations, thus promoting the harmony between the self and the outside world, when solitude is often accompanied by positive emotional experience. In contrast, for individuals with low solitude preferences, a large amount of their alone time has been shown to be related to depression (Devries et al., 1992).

However, there is an unresolved issue in the current research on solitude, which is the connection between solitude and intimacy. Few studies currently directly discuss the effect of being alone on intimate relationships. One of the studies has shown that when an individual is overly stressed or has problems with intimacy, he/she may adopt solitude as a coping mechanism, in order to better adjust his/her emotions and avoid behaviors that undermine the relationship between the two parties (Chen and Zhou, 2012). Another study pointed out that solitude enables individuals to find different processes for understanding and accepting the existence of themselves and others, enhancing our ability to love others, and therefore making intimate and interpersonal relationships more effective (Moustakas, 1972). These results provide relevant theoretical support for our research on solitude's effects on marriage relationships. Therefore, this research explores the moderating effect of solitary time on the relationship between parenting stress and marital satisfaction based on the individual's solitude preference. Based on this, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3a: For parenting mothers with a high preference for solitude, time alone can alleviate the effect of parenting stress on depression and the decrease of marital satisfaction.

H3b: For parenting mothers who have a low preference for solitude, time alone may increase the effect of parenting stress on depression and reduce marital satisfaction.

Overview of Studies

For women, parenting stress not only damages the mental health of mothers, but also affects the quality of marriage between couples. Under the background of low fertility rate and rising divorce rate in China, how to improve the mental health of women during child-rearing period and improve marital satisfaction has important practical significance. One of the aims of our study was to examine the mediating relationship of depression between maternal parenting stress and marital satisfaction. While being alone as part of everyday life is considered a self-reinforcing function, little is known about the differences between individuals with different preferences for solitude. Therefore, based on the individual's solitude preference, exploring the moderating role of alone time in the mediating pathway is our second research purpose.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and Procedures

The data used in this study came from a 4-month field survey from July to November 2021. Six psychology undergraduates and postgraduates had received training as research assistants, and they were mainly responsible for data collection. Participants were determined based on the residential area of the researcher and research assistant. We recruited a total of 1,473 parenting

mothers in the southwest part of China (including Chongqing, Chengdu, and Yibin). We invited mothers to fill in the scales for childcare stress, depression, marital satisfaction, time alone, and preference for solitude. To ensure the accuracy of the research results, we screened out 4 severe depression samples, and eliminated 82 missing and unmatched data. A total of 1,387 valid questionnaires for mothers were obtained. The mothers were aged between 21 and 36 years (M = 26.498, SD = 2.258), children were between 0 and 6 years old (M = 3.217 SD = 1.722). The Socioeconomic Status (SES) for these samples is between 1 and 5 (M = 2.650 SD = 0.775). To ensure the applicability of the study as much as possible, we actively accommodated the participants' time. Therefore, a part of the questionnaire was answered through the online platform.

This study was approved by the ethics committee of the first author's university. All participants obtained informed consent. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could terminate participation anytime they wanted. Participants received no rewards for their participation and were told that the data would be used for academic purposes only and would be kept confidential.

Measures

Parenting Stress

The parenting stress of mothers was measured using the parenting stress scale (PSS) compiled by Berry and Jones (1995), which was translated into Chinese by Cheung (2000). There are 18 questions on the scale, including "I feel overwhelmed by my responsibilities as a parent," "having children deprives me of many choices and autonomy in my life," and "I sometimes worry about whether I'm doing enough for my children." This scale uses a 6-point scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 6 representing "strongly agree." The higher the score, the greater the parenting stress. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.914.

Depression

Regarding depression, we used the Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS) compiled by Zung et al. (1965). The scale has a total of 20 items, including "I feel depressed," "I feel tired for no reason," and other questions, and uses a 4-level self-rating scale, including never, sometimes, often, and continuous. The scale is calculated by adding up the scores of 20 items, then multiplying by 1.25 and rounding up to get the standard score. According to the results of the Chinese norm, the cut-off value of the SDS standard score is 53 points, of which 53–62 are classified as mild depression, 63–72 are classified as moderate depression, and more than 73 are classified as severe depression (Zhu et al., 2021). In this study, the scale's Cronbach's alpha was 0.865.

Marital Satisfaction

For this variable, the marital satisfaction test of David H. Olson (2000) was adopted, with a total of 10 items, including "I am very satisfied with the responsibilities of both spouses in marriage," "I am very satisfied with our leisure activities and the spouses spent together Time," and others. The Chinese version of the scale has been validated (Zhang et al., 2021). This scale uses a 5-point score, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The higher the total score of the scale, the higher the marital satisfaction. This scale's Cronbach's alpha was 0.797.

Preference for Solitude

The Solitude Preference Scale (PSS) was created by Burger, an American psychologist, in 1995. It is specifically used to measure a person's solitude preference. The scale contains 12 items, and subjects are required to make choices by means of forced selection. Each item provides two mutually exclusive options, such as "I enjoy being with people/I enjoy being alone," "I like to go to places with a lot of people and activities/I like to be in quiet places with few people," and so on. Participants are asked to choose the one that best suits their situation from the two options. If they choose items related to solitude, 1 point is scored. The higher the score, the higher the preference for solitude. The Chinese version of this scale was translated and revised by Chen. (2012). The revised scale has high reliability. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.711.

In order to calculate the mother's solitude preference, we calculated the total score of each respondent's solitude preference scale and separated the high and low solitude preference by the mean. We introduced the dummy variable "Solitude Preference" to express the mother's solitude preference. When the total score of the solitude preference scale is greater than the average value, it is recorded as high solitude preference, and the "Solitude Preference" is assigned a value of 1, which, otherwise, is 0.

Time Spent Alone

Regarding for spent time alone, participants answered two questions related to being alone last week. In this question, we referred to Burger (1995) and others' definition of solitude, which is, "to be alone or to do something alone—not including sleeping" (Burger, 1995; Coplan et al., 2019). The first question asked how much times they were alone in the last week for a period lasting at least 15 min (from 1 = "Not at all" to 6 = "more than 3 times a day"). The second asked how many total hours they spent alone in the last week [from 1 = " < 1 h (< 15 min per day)" to 6 = "More than 15 h (more than 2 h per day)]." These two results together constitute the time spent alone score for the previous week. In this study, the scale's Cronbach's alpha was 0.716.

The reverse scoring of the above scale has been forwarded. In addition, we conducted a variance inflation factor (VIF) test, and after the VIF test, the VIF value of each variable was far below the critical value of 10, indicating that there is no serious multicollinearity between the regression models.

Statistical Analyses

In the present study, statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 22.0. Data processing included the following steps. First, we calculated the descriptive statistics for the variables and then the Pearson Correlation Coefficient among these variables. Second, in order to explore the different results that may depend on different solitude preferences, we divided the samples into the high solitude preference group and the low solitude preference group based on the mean value of the preference for solitude scale, and the overall group was used as a benchmark

regression in mediating model. Third, we used the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4) to investigate the mediating effect of depression in the relationship between parenting stress and marital satisfaction (Hayes, 2013). Finally, in the high and low group of preference solitude, we used the PROCESS Model 59 to investigate the moderating effect of time spent alone in the direct pathway and some indirect pathway between parenting stress and marital satisfaction. Besides, child age and family SES (socioeconomic status) as the covariate were included in the mediation and moderation analyses.

The bias-corrected percentile bootstrap method based on 5,000 samples and 95% confidence intervals (95% CIs) was applied to determine whether the indirect effect was significant at the 0.05 level. All variables were standardized before testing for the mediating and moderating effects.

RESULTS

Bivariate Analyses

The descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients were presented in **Table 1**. The results showed that mothers who scored high levels of marriage satisfaction were more likely to have low levels of parenting stress ($b = -0.294$, $p < 0.01$) and depression ($b = -0.345$, $p < 0.01$). Besides, parenting stress was positively associated with depression ($b = 0.340$, $p < 0.01$). As mentioned before, time spent alone may have different effects on people with different solitude preference. Therefore, from the overall sample, the correlation between time spent alone and other variables will become very unstable, so we will not discuss too much here.

Testing for the Mediating Effect of Depression

Hypothesis 1 predicted that parenting stress would decrease marriage satisfaction, and Hypothesis 2 predicted that depression would play a mediating role in the relationship between parenting stress and marriage satisfaction. We used Model 4 of the PROCESS macro to examine these hypothesis (Hayes, 2013), and the results were presented in **Table 2**.

The results of all groups showed that parenting stress was positively associated with depression (βoverall = 0.340, $p < 0.001$; βhigh = 0.375, $p < 0.001$; βlow = 0.312, $p < 0.001$). Next, when parenting stress and depression are regressed to marriage satisfaction, the three groups all show similar results. Specifically, parenting stress has a significant negative correlation with marriage satisfaction (βoverall = −0.199, $p < 0.001$; βhigh = −0.284, $p < 0.001$; βlow = −0.132, $p < 0.001$), so Hypothesis 1 has supported. Further, depression has a significant negative correlation with marriage satisfaction (βoverall = −0.277, $p < 0.001$; βhigh = −0.296, $p < 0.001$; βlow = −0.260, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the results of bias-corrected percentile bootstrap method has shown that the 95% BootCI in each group does not contain zero [95% BootCIoverall = (−0.118, −0.072); 95% BootCIhigh = (−0.152, −0.074); 95% BootCIlow = (−0.112, −0.053)]. This result further confirmed that depression has a significant mediating effect in each group. So Hypothesis 2 has supported.

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Marital satisfaction	3.901	0.663	1				
2. Parenting Stress	3.137	0.791	−0.294**	1			
3. Depression	35.872	8.489	−0.345**	0.340**	1		
4. Alone Time	2.972	1.040	0.053*	−0.035	−0.015	1	
5. Solitude Preference	5.146	2.904	0.036	−0.003	−0.032	−0.021	1

***Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*
**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*
SD, standard deviation.

Testing for the Moderating Effect of Time Alone

Hypothesis 3a and 3b predict that under different solitude preference, time alone would moderate the direct and some indirect pathway between parenting stress and marital satisfaction, and the results of the moderating might be different. We used Model 59 of PROCESS macro to examine this hypothesis (Hayes, 2013). The results of regression were presented in **Table 3**, and we also conducted simple slope tests to plot the results.

In the High solitude preference level group, time alone significantly moderated the relationship between parenting stress and depression (β = −0.189, $p < 0.05$). According to a simple slope calculation, it can be seen that mothers with a higher preference for being solitude when she have much time to solitude (Mean + 1SD), the positive effect of parenting stress on depression (βsimple = 0.299) is significantly weaker than that of mothers who have less time alone (Mean − 1SD) (βsimple = 0.397) (see **Figure 1**). But in the path of parenting stress and depression's influence on marriage satisfaction, time spent alone did not show a significant moderating effect. Further, according to Bootstrap test, the mediating effect of depression was −0.082 [95%BootCI = (−0.121, −0.043)] when alone time was high (Mean + 1SD), and it was −0.088 [95%BootCI = (−0.151, −0.035)] when alone time was low (Mean − 1SD). So Hypothesis 3a has supported.

In addition, in the Low solitude preference level group, time alone also significantly moderated the relationship between parenting stress and depression (β = 0.112, $p < 000$). For mothers with low solitude preference level, after having much time alone (Mean + 1SD), the positive effect of parenting stress on depression (βsimple = 0.402) was significantly stronger than that of mothers who having less time alone (Mean − 1SD) (βsimple = 0.178) (see **Figure 2**). Further speaking, time alone also significantly moderated the relationship between parenting stress and marriage satisfaction (β = −0.099, $p < 0.01$), that is to say, mothers with lower solitude preference spending much time alone (Mean + 1SD), the negative impact of parenting stress on marriage satisfaction (βsimple = −0.239)

TABLE 2 | Testing the mediation effect of depression.

Group	Overall Group(n = 1387)		High solitude preference (n = 578)		Low solitude preference (n = 809)	
	Depression	Marriage satisfaction	Depression	Marriage satisfaction	Depression	Marriage satisfaction
Parenting stress	0.340 *** (0.025)	−0.199*** (0.026)	0.375*** (0.039)	−0.284*** (0.040)	0.312*** (0.034)	−0.132*** (0.035)
Depression		−0.277*** (0.026)		−0.296*** (0.040)		−0.260*** (0.035)
Child age	−0.008 (0.015)	−0.003 (0.014)	−0.020 (0.022)	−0.009 (0.021)	0.003 (0.020)	−0.001 (0.020)
SES	0.001 (0.033)	−0.004 (0.032)	0.012 (0.049)	0.013 (0.046)	−0.006 (0.044)	−0.021 (0.044)
R^2	0.116	0.154	0.144	0.230	0.097	0.107
F	60.523***	63.006***	42.820***	30.722***	28.813***	24.102***

****P < 0.001.*

is higher than that of mothers who have less time alone (Mean − 1SD) (βsimple = −0.041) (see **Figure 3**). Further, according to Bootstrap's test results, the mediating effect of depression was −0.084 [95%BootCI = (−0.134, −0.043)] when alone time was higher (Mean + 1SD), while it was lower at alone time (Mean − 1SD) is −0.047 [95%BootCI = (−0.083, −0.012)]. Further, according to Bootstrap test, the mediating effect of depression was −0.084 [95%BootCI = (−0.134, −0.043)] when alone time was high (Mean + 1SD), and it was −0.047 [95%BootCI = (−0.083, −0.012)] when alone time was low (Mean − 1SD). So Hypothesis 3b has supported.

DISCUSSION

Women bear the pressure of the parenting period, which is usually accompanied by lower marital satisfaction. In the context of the gradual decline in China's fertility rate and the gradual increase in divorce rate, how to improve the mental health of women in parenting period and improve their marital satisfaction bears great practical significance. Many scholars have carried out meaningful discussions on this proposition, but the mechanism of parental stress and its effects on marital satisfaction has not been fully developed. This study first used the mediation model to explore the mechanism of depression and related influence on parenting stress and marital satisfaction. In addition, recent studies on the relationship between husbands and wives consider solitude as a trick to enhance couples' emotions and improve marital satisfaction. However, because each person's perception of solitude is different, passive solitude may actually cause harm in certain cases. Therefore, when a husband tries to improve the satisfaction of the other party's marriage by giving his wife much time to be alone, he must understand the wife's solitude preference as a prerequisite. Based on this, our research further explores the regulating effect of solitary time

TABLE 3 | Testing the moderating effect of alone time.

Group	High solitude preference (n = 578)		Low solitude preference (n = 809)	
	Depression	Marriage satisfaction	Depression	Marriage satisfaction
Parenting stress	0.313*** (0.041)	−0.245*** (0.042)	0.290*** (0.034)	−0.140*** (0.036)
Depression		−0.289*** (0.040)		−0.236*** (0.036)
Alone Time	−0.189*** (0.042)	0.113*** (0.041)	0.138*** (0.034)	−0.052 (0.035)
Int1	−0.084* (0.035)	0.009 (0.038)	0.112*** (0.031)	−0.099** (0.032)
Int2		−0.068 (0.036)		0.026 (0.032)
Child age	−0.019 (0.022)	−0.011 (0.021)	0.006 (0.019)	−0.004 (0.019)
SES	0.017 (0.048)	0.008 (0.046)	0.002 (0.044)	−0.024 (0.044)
R^2	0.178	0.246	0.128	0.119
F	24.751***	26.559***	23.519***	15.523***

****P < 0.001; **P < 0.01; *P < 0.05; Int1: Alone time × Parenting stress; Int2: Alone time × Depression.*

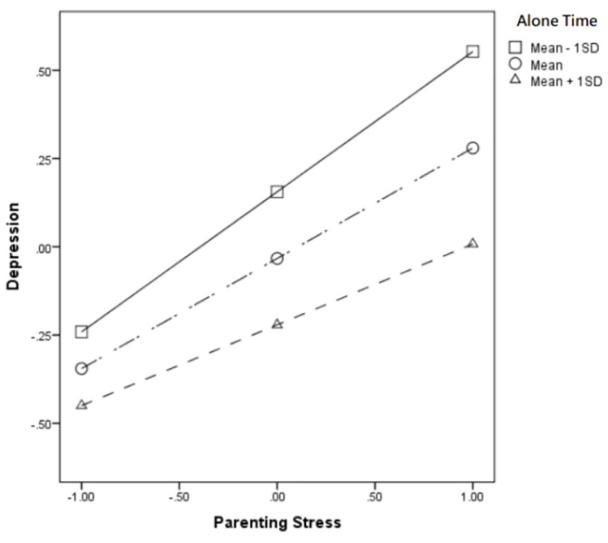

FIGURE 1 | Alone time moderated the relationship between parenting stress and depression in the high solitude preference group.

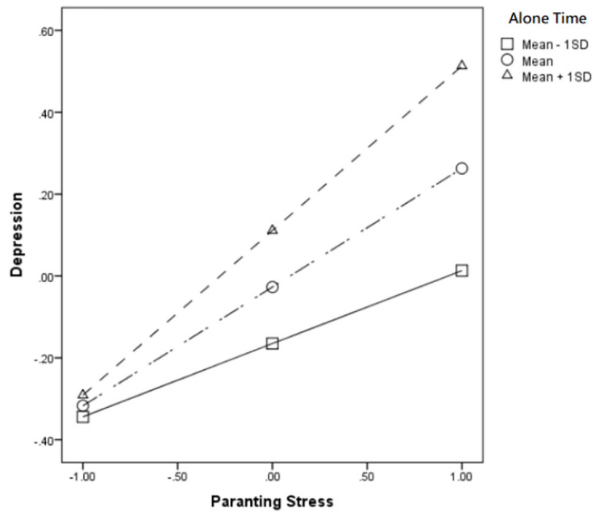

FIGURE 2 | Alone time moderated the relationship between parenting stress and depression in the low solitude preference group.

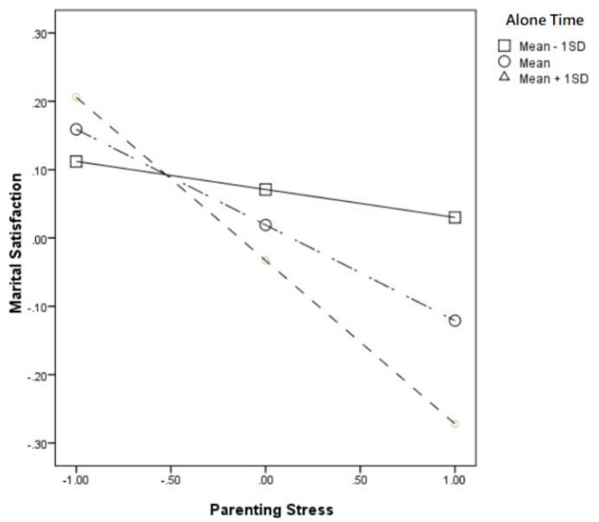

FIGURE 3 | Alone time moderated the relationship between parenting stress and marriage satisfaction in the low solitude preference group.

on women's psychological processes after stressful situations. Overall, this study clarified a moderating mediation model to understand the impact of female parenting stress on their marital satisfaction. This mode of adjustment and mediation makes it possible to formulate targeted prevention and intervention plans to improve women's mental and marital health when faced with the stress of parenting.

The Mediating Effect of Depression

First, we found that mothers in parenting period may experience increased depression and decreased marital satisfaction in a stressful environment. And depression has a mediating effect in the relationship between parenting stress and marital satisfaction. Due to changes in hormone levels in the body, some women experience depression after giving birth (Brummelte and Galea, 2010). However, this understanding often leads us to ignore the importance of postpartum depression in women and to believe that this psychological change will gradually disappear with the rebalancing of hormone levels. However, this study confirms that in the parenting period following childbirth, the parenting stress that new mothers will face may cause their depression to aggravate as well, if simply attributed to hormone levels, which may cause us to neglect that other factors that possibly caused depression. For instance, due to the traditional division of labor in the family and the professionalization of modern women, during the parenting period, mothers get pressure from both life and work, such as "work-family conflict," "personal-family conflict," and "parenting stress." The depression caused by these pressures makes mothers more likely to have negative cognitive styles about life and interpersonal relationships, and produce excessively sensitive or stressful reactions, which further leads to lower marital satisfaction (Cicchetti et al., 1998; Henderson et al., 2003).

The Moderating Effect of Solitude

Another important goal of this research is to investigate the influence of solitude on mothers' psychological and emotional changes based on the mother's preference to be solitude. Studies have found that, under different solitude preference, time alone has a moderating effect. This effect is reflected in two paths: one is the direct path of parenting stress and marital satisfaction; the other is the indirect path of depression between them. As hypothesized, there are significant differences in the moderating effect of time alone on mothers with different solitude preferences. Specifically, in the high solitude preference group, much spending time alone alleviated the positive effect of stress on depression; while in the low solitude preference group, much spending time alone increased the positive effect of parenting stress on depression and the negative effect of parenting stress on marital satisfaction.

For mothers with a high preference to be solitude, active solitude is beneficial to alleviate the negative impact on their physical and mental health after being under pressure during the parenting period. This result is consistent with Fiske's (1980) view on solitude and loneliness. Fiske (1980) believes that the possibility of undisturbed freedom and concentration when an individual is alone provides a unique opportunity to examine a person's current stress and life situation. This view believes that being by oneself provides an opportunity to assess and relieve stress, and its effect can be comparable to the role of social support (Cohen and Hoberman, 1983). In addition, according to the "quality-stress interaction model," whether an individual has psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety after encountering a negative life event mainly depends on two factors, namely, the attributes of the event itself and the subject's psychological susceptibility. Ideal solitude has been proven to help individuals' self-exploration (Goossens, 2014) and self-renewal (Korpela and Staats, 2014). At the same time, individuals may seek solitude in order to escape or

relax, cultivate emotional renewal, and arouse positive emotions and self-awareness more (Larson et al., 1982; Larson, 1990; Burger, 1995; Lay et al., 2020). Therefore, mothers with higher levels of solitude can reduce their psychological susceptibility through active solitude after gaining much spending time alone, thereby reducing their negative reactions to stressful events. In addition, we found that the relationship between parenting stress and marital satisfaction is not significantly moderated by spending time alone. It may be because the evaluation of marital satisfaction focuses on the intimate relationship between the husband and wife, while being alone is more a process of self-exploration and renewal.

For mothers who have low solitude preference, passive solitude will aggravate their negative psychological changes after being stressed. Previous studies have confirmed that for individuals, too much time alone may be related to depression (deVries et al., 1987), and may also increase individual negative emotions and feelings of loneliness (Larson et al., 1985; Chui et al., 2014; Nguyen et al., 2017; Lay et al., 2020). In a marriage relationship, excessive passive loneliness may make mothers feel alienated and neglected by their husbands. At the same time, the boredom of being alone can also lead to the accumulation of negative emotions. Therefore, for mothers with lower propensity to be alone, more involuntary solitude during the parenting process will make parenting mothers with lower willingness to be alone become more frustrated after stress, and at the same time lead to lower marriage satisfaction. In addition, Chinese children generally enter a full-time kindergarten at the age of 3, and the time for mothers to take care of their children will be greatly reduced, and the opportunities and time for mothers to be alone will also be increased. However, for mothers who have a low preference for being alone, on the one hand, the sudden increase in spending time alone needs to adapt. On the other hand, spending less time with children may also produce feelings of emptiness and loss, which may aggravate negative psychological reactions after stress. Therefore, the mental health of mothers at this stage needs to be paid attention to.

In summary, the results of this study are significant in understanding the role of parental stress and solitude experience in the mental health of Chinese mothers, as well as the effects on the quality of their marriage. It is inevitable for mothers to endure pressure during childbirth. Therefore, it is fundamental to find ways to reduce mothers' depression levels and increase marital satisfaction after such a stressful experience. In addition, it is particularly important for mothers to use positive coping styles to deal with stress of various nature. If family members cannot provide enough support, mothers who lack time for themselves are more likely to fall into the endless childrearing-work chores and find no way of self-realization and meaning in life. However, for individuals with a low preference for solitude, family members should provide more active verbal and action support. Through companionship and communication, they can help mothers get out of stressful dilemmas, and guide mothers away from negative stress coping styles. This is to help them ease their burdens during parenting. In case of stressors, the promotion of mental health and healthy marital relationships is essential.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study reveal the internal mechanism and consequent effects of parental stress on marital satisfaction. First, we examined the mediating role of depression in the relationship between mothers' parenting stress and marital satisfaction. Second, we explored the moderating effect of time alone on the relationship between parenting stress, depression, and marital satisfaction for mothers with different solitude preferences. The results of the study show that depression has a significant mediating effect between mother's parenting stress and marital satisfaction. In addition, for mothers with a high preference for solitude, time alone can buffer the negative impact of parenting stress on depression. However, for mothers with a low preference for solitude, the increase in spending time alone aggravated the impact of parenting stress on depression and reduced marital satisfaction. Therefore, mothers may have higher depressive symptoms when under parenting stress, leading to lower marital satisfaction.

Limitations and Further Research Directions

The current study has several limitations that warrant further consideration. First, the data in this study were obtained from a cross-sectional survey, so causality cannot be established. Meanwhile, one of the goals of this study was to understand the impact of maternal stress during parenting on marital satisfaction and protective factors in marriage. However, our analysis is not comprehensive enough and does not extend to the whole country. In the future, a large-scale, in-depth longitudinal study of parents in child-rearing period is needed, especially parents in different child-rearing periods, to explore the difference in the impact of parental stress on marriage quality, so as to test the applicability of this study's results. Second, the factors that influence parenting stress are extremely complex. In addition to the mother's own factors, work pressure, economic situation, stressful life events, and other factors will also affect the psychology of both parents and, to a certain extent, affect the parenting stress. Therefore, future studies need to separate the overlapping effects of parental stress and other potential stressors in the parents' lives. Finally, our results show the influence of solitude preference and time alone. However, in addition to the solitude preference, the type of solitude, personality differences, and other factors also affect the quality of marriage. Therefore, we need further in-depth research in the future.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethics Committee of Chongqing University of Posts

and Telecommunications. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SD contributed to the experimental design and execution of the study, modification of the experimental design, and data analysis and guided the writing of the manuscript. QD and HC completed data analysis and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. SY participated in the experimental design and analysis of experimental results. All authors contributed to revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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"I Kind of Want to Want": Women Who Are Undecided About Becoming Mothers

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This study focuses on women who define themselves as being undecided about becoming mothers. It addresses the question of how these women navigate their lives between two main conflicting cultural directives and perceptions: pronatalism and familism entwined in perception of linear time on one hand; and individualism and its counterpart, the notion of flexible liquid society, on the other. The research is based on group meetings designated for these women, which were facilitated by the first author. Ten women participated in the study—of whom, most were heterosexual, half were single, and half were partnered. Data were collected using (1) questionnaires completed during individual interviews that preceded the group encounter; (2) transcripts of the discussions held during the ten group sessions; and (3) questions regarding the status of the women's doubts about motherhood asked 4 years after participating in the group. Our findings expand the existing typology of women's reproductive decision-making, and demonstrate how categories that are commonly perceived as binary intersect when one challenges the rigid classifications of "active decisions" and "passive decisions"; "motherhood" and "non-motherhood," and "want to be a mother" and "do not want to be a mother." The findings also suggest that after becoming mothers, women can change their maternal status from "non-mother" to "mother," yet still continue to view themselves as indecisive regarding motherhood. Based on our findings, we will argue that while indecisiveness about motherhood derives from individualized neoliberal rhetoric, it simultaneously undermines that same rhetoric and contradicts the injunction to "know, to decide, to strive." It opposes the expectation in post-feminist discourse, that women will make choices about their bodies and exert them, while also opposing the pronatalist rhetoric, and the temporal linear discourse positing that women should "move forward" toward motherhood along with the ticking of the "biological clock." Whereas some women sought to resolve their indecisiveness, other women found that the indecisiveness leaves all options open in a manner that expands their boundaries of autonomy in a society that seeks to limit it.

Keywords: women, reproduction decision-making, indecisiveness, motherhood, Israel

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, in many countries worldwide, there have been declines in fertility and in the percentages of women who give birth and are interested in becoming mothers (Rowland, 2007; OECD, 2019). Yet, for many women, motherhood is still considered the default. Women commonly ponder questions, such as "When will I be a mother?," "How many children do I want to have?," and "Do I want a boy or a girl?," while rarely considering or discussing the questions of "Do I want to be a mother?" and "If so, why?." This is due to the broader ideology of a heteronormative and pronatalist society, where the pinnacle of femininity is still conflated with the birth and rearing of biological children (De Beauvoir, 1949/1970; Tietjens-Meyers, 2001), and in which cultural images link motherhood with "normality," along with depictions of the "biological clock" that pressures women to make such decisions "on time" (Tietjens-Meyers, 2001; Amir, 2005; Lahad, 2012). This common assumption that all women want to become mothers hardly allows them to deliberate and be indecisive toward motherhood.

The declining fertility rates at a time when prevailing perspectives still praise motherhood has prompted growing research interest in the structural contexts and factors associated with the fertility decline (e.g., Donath, 2011; Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017). Additionally, an expanding micro-level scholarship is focused on the intentions, reasons, and desires involved in women's decisions to become—and, more recently, also to not become—mothers (e.g., Settle and Brumley, 2014).

The literature describes various typologies with regard to women who decide not to become mothers and those who express uncertainty about motherhood. For example, following the pioneer research of Veevers (1980), Houseknecht (1979), and Tietjens-Meyers (2001) highlight two distinct groups among women who are not interested in becoming mothers: the **early articulators**, and the **postponers**. The "early articulators" are those who knew from an early age that they would never want to be mothers. The "postponers" are those who have not yet decided, and they can be divided into two subgroups: those who always imagined that they would be mothers but who postponed doing so due to their life circumstances (e.g., lack of stable relationships, lack of stable income, and health-physical situation), and those who have always felt undecided about motherhood.

Gillespie (2003) and Settle and Brumley (2014) propose an additional typology based on their studies on women who are not interested in becoming mothers: "active deciders" vs. "passive deciders." These researchers define active deciders as women who are determined not to pursue motherhood. Some of the active deciders made this decision at an early stage of their lives, while others believed they would eventually become mothers but changed their minds later. "Passive deciders" are also divided into two groups: women who are indecisive about motherhood, and women who desire to become mothers but do not pursue motherhood due to their life circumstances. The alternative term "fence sitters" was proposed by participants in Nandy's (2017) study of women in India who were undecided about motherhood, while Martin (2021) referred to these women as "debaters."

Women who are uncertain and are still deliberating about motherhood have not attracted much research attention. Two studies have addressed this unique group of women as a part of the larger category of 'not having children' alongside other subcategories: delaying motherhood, deciding against it, and not being able to do it (Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Martin, 2021). As such, they do not provide sufficient insight into the inner world of the "debaters." Two additional studies have specifically focused on women who are undecided about motherhood, yet both were still limited in their scope. One is a personal account of Kelly Guyotte (2018), who explored her own ambivalence about motherhood. The other study (Barnett, 2016), conducted in England, investigated the experience of five women in their late thirties who are undecided about motherhood. This study shows that both participants' age, which marked their decreasing fertility, and societal attitudes toward motherhood played a key role in shaping their experience. There is a need for research that focuses on the experience of younger women living in different sociocultural contexts who are indecisive about motherhood. Our study seeks to address this void. Also, little scholarly attention has been paid to the wider social, cultural, and ideological contexts, including contradictions and incongruences, within which women's views, desires, and deliberation are embedded. We believe that these contexts are crucial for understanding them and, therefore, they stand at the heart of our study.

Women who are deliberating about motherhood have also received little attention in the public discourse. In the media, women who become mothers are frequently represented as the normative model that is taken for granted, and women who are not mothers and do not want to be mothers have been appearing with increasing frequency, although they are still a curiosity that is more appropriate for colorful write-ups. Meanwhile, the voices of women who are undecided about motherhood have hardly been represented in the popular and social media. One exception is a book published in 2016, *Motherhood: Is it for Me? Your Step-by-Step Guide to Clarity*. One of the authors of this book holds online group sessions for women who are indecisive about becoming mothers (Carlini and Davidman, 2016).

In the present article, we seek to expand the limited available knowledge by focusing on women who are undecided and introspective about their motherhood desires. This state of being undecided provides a unique lens through which to view some of the cultural principles that organize women's lives and perspectives regarding family and reproduction—including linear time, social flexibility, and individualism on one hand, and pronatalism and familism on the other. Women's uncertainty regarding motherhood is particularly interesting in the Israeli context, wherein alongside processes of individualization, familism and pronatalism maintain centrality at both the individual and collective levels (Lavee and Katz, 2003; Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2020). The current article addresses the question "How do women in Israel who are undecided about motherhood navigate their lives between these conflicting cultural perceptions as they maneuver among them, taking some into account and opposing others, all at the same time?"

More concretely, the article presents a study focused on a group—the first of its kind in Israel—that was designated for women who define themselves as being indecisive toward motherhood. This group, facilitated by the first author, was formed to achieve three main goals: (1) to provide an introspective space for the women at both the individual and group levels, in which they would be able to examine the meaning of their uncertainty, as a means of assisting them in their reproductive decision-making process; (2) to create a new body of knowledge regarding women's uncertainty about motherhood in the current sociocultural context; and (3) to make space for and provide legitimacy to indecisiveness about motherhood in Israeli society, where a women's desire for motherhood is currently presented as unequivocal and comprehensive.

Based on the findings, we will argue that whereas the decision to forgo having children challenges the pronatalist hegemony (which lauds parenthood, especially motherhood, and reproduction), being in a state of indecision, ambivalence, and inactiveness with regard to reproduction challenges both the pronatalist social order and the neoliberal model (which emphasizes individuals' freedom to choose and to act according to their wishes). We will also claim that indecisiveness toward motherhood, which involves taking one's time, undermines the linear view of time that emphasizes the importance of moving forward and "developing" according to a culturally mandated biographical schedule (Lahad, 2016; Israeli-Nevo, 2017).

In other words, in this article, we propose a sociological discussion of the ways in which indecisiveness regarding motherhood relies on a neoliberal and an individualistic rhetoric, while simultaneously undermining such rhetoric and exposing the power of pronatalist and heteronormative social arrangements from an alternative perspective.

Changing Family Institution and Reproductive Patterns

In contrast to the conceptualization of contemporary society as maintaining its rigid patriarchal and gendered structure, some contend that the social institutions, including the family, are fluid and constantly changing (Bauman, 2013). Traditional forms of the family have collapsed and been replaced by a multiplicity of forms (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), including the possibility of opting out of any form of a family.

One major factor underlying these changes is the process of individualization that prioritizes the individual's interest and needs in the name of "freedom of choice"—including the ability to choose a type of family that can guarantee self-actualization, intimacy, and freedom (Illouz, 2008), and the ability to leave relationships once they no longer satisfy one's emotional needs and to pursue new relationships (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Illouz, 2007, 2008; Garrett et al., 2016). Along with the individualization process, we can discern the emergence of the logics of capitalism and neoliberal free-market logics of action that have penetrated and dominated other areas of life, including the personal and family domains (Rose, 1996; Brown, 2003). These include the availability of contraceptive methods; increased women's education; employment-related considerations; and challenges to previous social perspectives of "intimacy," "familism," and "femininity" (Maher and Saugeres, 2007; Bell, 2019).

Demographic statistics also attest to the changing face of the family. Alongside increased divorce rates, we also witness declining marriage rates, increased ages at first marriage and at the birth of one's first child, and increased rates of paid employment among women from various social groups. These changes, combined with new reproductive technologies, have created new patterns of parenthood, as well as diverse family forms that are not contingent on the presence of a married or a cohabiting couple or of opposite-sex parental figures (e.g., Cliquet, 2003; Fincham and Beach, 2010).

Concomitant with the above-mentioned developments, we are also witnessing declining birth rates in many countries worldwide (Miettinen et al., 2015; OECD, 2019). Due to differences in broader institutional, cultural, and economic contexts, studies have also documented variations in fertility rates among different countries (Miettinen et al., 2015; Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017). Given the rising number of young people who are not sure whether they want to become parents, it is assumed that the fertility rates will further decline (Sobotka and Testa, 2008). The recent use of the term "childfree," which has replaced the term "childless," reflects the current social perspective that one may make an intentional active decision to be a non-parent. Blackstone and Stewart (2012) relate to the distinction between the framework of "childless" and "childfree," stressing that the former, which was prevalent in early research, had a negative connotation. Later work has created a shift to a "childless-by-choice" or "childfree" framework, emphasizing that for some, not being parents is an explicit and intentional decision rather than "an accident" and, therefore, the term "childfree" is a more accurate expression of the choice it describes.

Although "childless" and "childfree" are the common terms used to address subjects who do not want to be parents, in this article we intentionally use the framework of "women who do not want to be mothers," when relating to participants who have considered the option of remaining non-mothers, as part of their deliberations. We used this framework for two main reasons: First, our aim is to stress that at the center of the debate resides the indecisiveness about motherhood and not about children in themselves. Second, while there are women who are emotionally uninterested in being mothers and who would prefer to avoid any relationship or quotidian interaction with children, there are also women who do not wish to be mothers but *are* interested in the company of children and, therefore, turn to therapeutic or educational professions in which they can work with children, or spend time with nephews, nieces, or other children within their families as well as with their friends' children (Donath, 2013). These diverse relationships with children without giving birth to them nor raising them as their mothers, raise the question of whether "childfree" is the accurate terminology, as they do have children involved in their lives. This issue should be further elaborated in future studies.

The Politics of Indecisiveness About Fertility and Motherhood

In light of, and as part of, the above-described changes, many women have continued to become mothers while being impacted by a closed ideological circle—in which the view of transition to motherhood moves from a biological-deterministic matter of fate that inevitably "programs" females to desire motherhood, to a matter of free will where women are the sole masters of their fate, and are internally and personally motivated to become mothers.

Feminist writers and activists have proposed a critical reading of the biological-determinist perspective (i.e., De Beauvoir, 1949/1970; Firestone, 1970; Gillespie, 1999; Donath, 2015a; Morison et al., 2015; Bell, 2019). However, the other interpretation—which reflects the spirit of the neoliberal capitalist era, and argues that a woman's lifestyle is determined freely and that women are gaining increasing control over their lives and bodies—is not sufficient. This interpretation disregards the fact that the transition to motherhood is shaped by social, ideological, and hierarchical structures that limit many women's spaces of autonomy (Himmelweit, 1988; Rothman, 1989/2000; Ginsburg and Rapp, 1991; Snitow, 1992; Tietjens-Meyers, 2001). These structures reproduce the equation of femininity with motherhood, thus ingraining the view that establishing a family through childbirth/adoption is the only and most meaningful rite of passage for societal recognition, and an almost exclusive metric for the quality of a woman and her life (Tietjens-Meyers, 2001).

Women's limited reproductive autonomy—including their limited autonomy to identify their presence of absence of desire for motherhood—has also been manifested in social responses that denounce non-motherhood. Although these responses have been diminishing over recent years, they still exist and still tarnish the personalities and lives of women who do not want to be mothers. Many women who are not interested in becoming mothers are still viewed as "unreal women"; as selfish and childish; as "strange birds"; as damaged, hedonist, and pathetic; as betraying their families; as objects to be pitied; and as failing to achieve the most valuable accomplishment of women in this world (Rich, 1976; Gillespie, 1999; Donath, 2011; Morison et al., 2015). Within this context, even if more and more women from various social groups have greater autonomy over reproductive decision-making, many may continue to have vague attitudes toward motherhood, lacking the possibility to explore their own desires and capabilities and to accordingly reach a decision regarding motherhood.

The social opposition to uncertainty regarding motherhood, and women's limited ability to identify their motherhood-related desires, are the outcomes of an ideological mix that combines pronatalism and heteronormativity with other social logics related to neoliberalism and individualism, social perceptions of time, and subjectivity, among other components.

Neoliberalism and Individualism

The concept of the individual self is central to the neoliberal perspective, in which the individual is the ideal proponent of autonomy. In this perspective, individuals are considered to have free will with regard to their chosen paths of life; are perceived as rational and calculating and exclusively responsible for the outcomes of their choices; and are expected to fulfill their needs and desires (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

While the life course was previously based on anticipated transitions from one stage to another, this has been replaced with what Beck (1992) refers to as "choice biography," which should allow a person to "be themself" and "realize their potential," as indicated by Rose (1990, 1996). Without clear and obligatory rules for the arrangement of life stages and the transitions between them, there are more and more junctures at which people must make decisions and construct their biographies, which Woodman (2009) referred to as the "do-it-yourself biography." Ideally, people who can optimally function within a biography arranged in this manner are the neoliberal subjects—the "subjects who choose," the "subjects who know their goals, who are aware of their preferences, who are able to make rational decisions, and who act in accordance with their decisions" (Gill, 2008; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Rottenberg, 2018).

Within the integration of pronatalism with neoliberalism and individualism ideologies—in the name of neoliberal rhetoric, where "humans are masters of their fate and write their own biographies"—there are many social arenas that foster skills for creating autonomy, that help people practice those skills, and that grant them the legitimacy to use those skills, through breaking down and reconstructing social perspectives, and through personal and collective social perspectives. However, this autonomy is relatively limited in the realms of reproduction and childbirth. Despite the growing number of women who have decided not to pursue motherhood, they remain a relatively small group. OECD data indicate that the percentage of these women ranges from 10 to 20% and is even less than 10% in quite a few countries (OECD, 2019). This may suggest that most women do not engage in an actual decision-making process on the subject of motherhood.

Time and Subjectivity

The fertility and birth arena has usually been addressed as part of the discourse on the rhythm of a "ticking clock." Young women learn that there is a "biological clock" that limits their time span for becoming mothers and that they are expected to unhesitatingly organize their lives according to the schedules of this clock.

As shown earlier, along with these "natural" timelines, women are required to follow additional timelines in a social reality dominated by the discourses of individualism, neoliberalism, and capitalism, and in which the ethos of "conquest," "attaining goals," and "decision-making" prevail in the immediate term. All of these clocks lead to the standardization and homogenization of a road map of the "natural and proper way of life," which includes specific stations that people must pass through over time: from educational attainment, to employment, to marriage, and to parenthood (Amir, 2005; Elchardus and Smits, 2006; Lahad, 2009).

According to Davies (1990), this kind of time perception divides human experience into discrete and consecutive units, where a person "progresses" from one unit to another. This logic also determines the "proper" life course, and what one must do to follow it, at the right time and the right pace, in order to develop in the "right" linear direction (Amir, 2005; Lahad, 2009). Roth (1963) argued that most people ensure their movement at the correct pace and in the correct direction based on a normative timeline established by a group, which serves as a measure of their progress. Through comparison with that norm, people can interpret their progress and determine whether they are lagging or progressing appropriately, as well as how they should feel in order to keep up the pace and fall into line.

Within this social reality, women's indecisiveness about motherhood can be interpreted as a blatant violation of timelines—both "natural" and social—and as an unwarranted delay. Irrespective of issues related to reproduction and motherhood, research indicates that waiting tends to be associated with characteristics of hopelessness, lack of strength, lack of productivity, being stuck, distress, and vulnerability. Waiting is also viewed as a sign of inactivity and as passively being at the mercy of time, which will "already do what it wants with us," or as resulting from an expectation that "something is about to happen" (Lahad, 2016; Israeli-Nevo, 2017). These characteristics contradict the ethos of individualism, neoliberalism, and capitalism, according to which humans are active agents who are supposed to write their own biographies and take their fate into their own hands, to navigate their lives with confidence and tenacity toward the "right goal" at the "right pace."

Clearly, there are contradictions and tension between the logics of neoliberalism and individualism and the logics of linear time. The first logic conveys the message that "everything is fluid and open" for the neoliberal subject. In contrast, the second logic sets limitations, stations, and timelines, which restrict the subject's freedom of movement and the amount of time spent at each "station" when writing one's own biography.

The Israeli Context: Autonomy Is Especially Limited

As mentioned earlier, Israeli society provides a particularly interesting context in which to examine reproductive decisions. This is because along with the processes of individualization and the significant changes witnessed with respect to family patterns during the past few decades, Israeli society has remained a familistic and pronatalist society that lauds motherhood (Fogiel-Bijaoui and Rutlinger-Reiner, 2013; Berkovitch and Manor, 2022).

The high level of familism in Israeli society is reflected in its higher marriage rates, lower rates of divorce and non-marital births, and lower age at marriage compared to most OECD countries (Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 2020). Israel has the highest fertility rate among all 35 OECD countries, as well as among a large number of developing countries and many Middle Eastern countries (Weinreb et al., 2018). This high fertility rate is related to cultural forces that praise children, as revealed in a study showing that the vast majority of the Israeli public considers children to be a source of happiness and blessings, and a major contributor to meaning in life. Notably, over 50% of the respondents believed that the lives of people who have never had children are empty and meaningless (Glickman et al., 2003).

The high fertility rate in Israel is also related to the country's status as a superpower of assisted reproduction, which imposes very few limitations on the availability and subsidized use of these technologies (Shalev and Gooldin, 2006; Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2016). The availability of assisted reproduction technologies enables many women—including those who have postponed their first birth to later ages—to become mothers and fulfill the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply." The Ideological validity of this Biblical commandment among both Orthodox and secular Jews is usually attributed to the traumas of the Holocaust as well as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Herzog, 2004; Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2016), accompanied by fear of undermining the demographic balance vis-à-vis the Palestinians. Within this context, reproduction has become a tool in the national struggle (Berkovitch, 1997; Shalev and Gooldin, 2006). As such, it has been mobilized as justification of women's right to demand state funding of fertility treatments to achieve motherhood (Gooldin, 2008).

Nonetheless, as mentioned, Israeli society has been undergoing processes of individualization and neoliberalization (Filc and Ram, 2004; Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2005; Goodman and Tavori, 2010; Ram, 2013). These processes are reflected in the family institution among most social groups. Family roles have become blurred and are more subject to interpretation than they were in the past, and people are less bound to traditional arrangements and collective considerations as they choose the path and pace of family life that are appropriate for them (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2020).[1]

In contrast to in other societies, the processes of individualization in Israeli society do not necessarily contradict family and familism but have rather become another means of strengthening these aspects (Berkovitch and Manor, 2022). For example, the intensive struggles of gay men and lesbians to become part of mainstream society have focused on recognizing their rights to couplehood and a family, particularly their right to parenthood (Kama, 2011). Family and birth have maintained their status not only for collective reasons but also for individualistic reasons related to the neoliberal discourse on rights or, more specifically, on the "emotional right to happiness." In that context, Sigal Gooldin (2008) argued that family life in general and parenthood are currently perceived as the key to happiness and self-fulfillment.

The processes of neoliberalism in Israeli society, similar to the processes of individualism, do not weaken the institution of the family nor do they challenge the centrality of motherhood. This is reflected in research investigating how low-income mothers in Israel maneuver between seemingly contradictory dictates of neoliberalism and motherhood between care work and paid work. The findings reveal the ways by which these

[1]However, note that Fogiel-Bijaoui (2020) points out that this process varies according to social group; hence she called it 'differentiated individualism.'

mothers mobilize elements of the neoliberal discourse and at the same time challenge it by entwining it with the maternal discourse to create their own model of the good mother (e.g., Lavee, 2016; Meler, 2016; Sa'ar, 2016; Herbst-Debby, 2018).

The Current Study

In the current study, we sought to explore the experience of indecisiveness toward motherhood within the context of the above-described contemporary cultural perceptions. We, therefore, used a phenomenological approach, which focuses on the meanings ascribed by a particular group of people to the experience under study (Grossoehme, 2014). The specific aims of the study were to enhance our understanding of the issues and dilemmas involved in Israeli women's uncertainty about motherhood and to examine the meanings and experiences of participation in the presently studied pioneer group.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Procedure

After obtaining ethical approval from the departmental ethics committee at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, a call for participation was published, announcing the opening of a group designated for women who are indecisive about motherhood, with meetings planned to be held at the university. Within this call for participation, it was emphasized that the group was not intended to provide "right" answers to the issue of motherhood, but rather to enable each participant to identify the option most suitable for her. It was also noted that the group was a part of a research project that would be based on material derived from the group sessions. In addition, it was specified that identifying details of the group participants would remain confidential and that the women would be able to discontinue their participation in the group at any stage they chose.

Following publication of the call for participation, 20 women inquired about the group. After receiving additional information, 11 women expressed willingness to participate in the group. As part of the pre-group preparation process, during the weeks preceding the first group session, individual interviews were scheduled with the 11 women who expressed willingness to join the group. During these interviews, all women signed consent forms. One woman discontinued her participation after the first group session. All of the group sessions were videotaped, with the participants' permission, and fully transcribed.

Data Collection and Analysis

The 10 group sessions attended by the participants served as the main source of data collection. This method is similar to a group interview. While individual interviews adopt an overly individualistic approach, which isolates individuals and examines attitudes and behavior outside of a social context, group interviews create a shared social space for people to communicate with each other (Montell, 1999). This space allows for observation of dynamic negotiations and of the process of constructing shared meanings and narratives deriving from participants' reactions to each other (Lavie-Ajayi, 2014; Kook et al., 2019).

Data collection was also based on three additional components. First, a questionnaire, consisting of demographic questions and three open questions, was completed by the participants during the individual interviews conducted prior to the group sessions. After completing the demographic questions, the women were asked to write down their answers to three open-ended questions that were intended to help plan the group sessions: (1) How is a group dealing with indecisiveness about motherhood relevant to you?; (2) What are your expectations from participation in this group?; and (3) What will make your participation in the group meaningful for you? Second, at the end of the last group session, the women were asked to complete a feedback questionnaire designed to explore the meaning of participation in the group for the participants and to learn whether and how group attendance had helped them understand and/or feel their indecisiveness differently than they did in the past. Third, to examine the status of participants' indecisiveness from a time perspective, at 4 years after group termination, the group facilitator contacted all participants by e-mail and asked them to indicate their current family status and self-defined status regarding their indecisiveness toward motherhood. The participants were aware that their e-mails would form part of the data collection and gave their consent to it.

The data reported in this article are based on three components (e.g., written answers to the three open-ended questions, transcripts of group discussions, and e-mail correspondences) and were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the first stage, the authors read and re-read all the group interview transcripts and the participants' written responses to the questions noted above in order to become familiar with the various aspects of the data and to identify initial ideas for coding. In the second stage, initial codes were created and matched with data extracts. In the third stage, the initial codes were sorted into potential themes and relevant coded data extracts were collated within each potential theme. In the fourth stage, all the identified themes were reviewed and were examined in relation to both the coded extracts and the whole data set. Finally, all themes were defined and named.

In the current article, we will present the three major themes that emerged from our analysis: (1) Motivations for participating in the group; (2) Typologies of indecisiveness; and (3) Advantages and disadvantages of remaining in a state of indecisiveness about motherhood.

Participants

The participants were ten women who attended at least nine of the ten group sessions. These women were recruited through a call for participation that was distributed *via* the authors' university website, online forums for women, the first authors' blog, and through therapists working in the southern region where the group was held.

The participants ranged from 25 to 41 years of age. All were Israeli-born Jewish women. Three were of Middle Eastern or North African origin ("Mizrahi"), six were of European or American origin, and one was of mixed origin ("Ashkenazi"). At the time

the group sessions were held, five of the women were single, three were cohabitating, and two were married. Among the ten participants, two lived in a kind of commune as part of a shared group dealing with education. Five participants defined themselves as secular, one as atheist, one as religious, and three chose not to define themselves in that context. Eight of the women defined their sexual identity as heterosexual and one as asexual, and one mentioned that she does not have a definitive identity.[2]

Before writing the article, all participants were invited to choose the name under which their quotes would appear. Several of them asked to be quoted under their real name, others chose a pseudonym.

Description of the Group Sessions

In total, ten group sessions were held: one group session once a week, for 10 weeks, each lasting about 90 min. The first session was devoted to helping participants get to know each other, and to creating a group contract based on participants' expectations of the group. Sessions 2–9 begun with an "open space" within which the participants were invited to bring up issues that concerned them and/or to share the experiences they encountered since the last group session. After this part of the session—which lasted 10–20 min, the rest of the session was devoted to discussions among the participants about topics selected by the group facilitator, based on her research findings regarding reproduction and (non)motherhood (Donath, 2011, 2015b) as well as on participants' answers to the open-ended questions they addressed during the individual interviews. These topics dealt with issues inherent to indecisiveness about motherhood—such as fear of how one's surroundings will respond to one's decision to be a non-mother and possible ways of coping with that fear; regrets about remaining a non-mother and regrets about the transition to motherhood; and the distinction between "wanting" and "consenting" regarding reproduction and motherhood. Although these sections were structured, there was room for the participants to take the issues discussed to different directions in the discussions. The last group session was devoted to summarizing the previous sessions, as well as to various aspects related to parting from the group—both from the perspective of indecisiveness and from the perspective of the sessions themselves.

Ethical Consideration

In light of the pronatalist ideology characterizing Israeli society, the group establishment was accompanied by an ethical issue—namely, what does it mean that the group facilitator was a woman who does not want to be a mother, and who publicly identifies with that position? It can be reasonably assumed that if the group facilitator had been a mother, she would not have been "suspected" of spreading pro-birth propaganda among the group members. In contrast, a facilitator who is not a mother herself can easily be suspected of disseminating propaganda. In light of this, the facilitator confronted the group members with this issue during the individual interviews, as well as during the first group session, in which participants' expectations of the group were discussed and it was emphasized that the group sessions would not serve as a forum to preach against motherhood. It was further clarified to the participants that the aim of the group was not to create uniformity among the women, but rather to acknowledge the diversity within the group. Nonetheless, the sessions were held with the facilitator's constant awareness of her personal and public positions and their potential to influence the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Motivations for Participating in the Group: "I Do Not Know Anyone Like Me Except Myself"

As mentioned earlier, during the individual interviews, participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire in which one of the questions was: "How is a group dealing with indecisiveness about motherhood relevant to you?" The following are some of the offered responses:

> **Dalit (age 31, single):** *I put the question of motherhood aside for a long time. It wasn't clear to me whether I wanted to be a mother. I reopened the question one or two years ago, and I'm still uncertain about it today. I've been trying to distinguish what I want to do from the things that I'm influenced by in society, but they really can't be distinguished.*

> **Abigail (age 34, married):** *I've been indecisive for years […] Outside of the web, there's no place for uncertainty… It's either virtual, or at home with your partner.*

> **Noga (age 32, married):** *I'm interested in talking to or hearing other women who might share my views on motherhood. At the moment, I do not know anyone like me except myself.*

> **Inbal (age 27, partnered):** *I'm currently debating about that very question [question regarding motherhood], and most of the women that I know hold a specific opinion about this issue. I'm interested in participating in a framework that objectively examines the issue.*

The importance of a group dealing with indecisiveness about motherhood also emerged in the group sessions. For example, during the first group session—in which participants were invited to share their expectations of themselves, the group process, the group members, and the facilitator—Inbal and Rotem said the following:

> **Inbal (age 27, partnered):** *On the whole, my expectation is that contrary to the opinions I've been hearing from my*

[2]While heterosexuality was not criteria for selection, the vast majority of the women who approached this group were heterosexual. Additional groups that were conducted between the years 2016–2021included also women who identified themselves as lesbians or bisexuals. These groups were not included in the current analysis and will be addressed elsewhere.

friends—who hold very specific opinions that I am familiar with—I will be hearing here many different opinions and that I will understand where you come from…. Maybe something that one of you will say will provide me with a tool and direct me in a direction that is more appropriate for me. Just to hear as many of you as possible, and that you will be as open and sincere as possible…. I believe this will help me and all of us, and that it will lead to positive outcomes in general…

Rotem (age 30, single): *I feel that most of the pressure—at least the pressure that I face—regarding pregnancy is from the "women's tribe." Especially among Mizrahim [those whose origin is in the Middle East and North Africa] and among those in the middle class to which I belong, and it's very good for me to see the wide variety here.*[3]

The above quotes demonstrate how the hegemonic discourse, which tends to isolate women from one another, led many participants to believe that they were the only ones who were uncertain regarding their will to become mothers. Consequently, they may have been strongly influenced by their partners or by society, while downplaying their own desires and needs. It appears that participants' willingness to participate in the group derived partly from the realization that there were other women debating motherhood, and the hope that by meeting these women and hearing their perspectives, they might better understand the questions that they were asking themselves.

Based on the participants' statements regarding their motivations for participating in the group sessions, we can understand that the heteronormative and pronatalist discourse—similar to other hegemonic discourses—operates by "naturalizing" the "standard" life course, as well as the transition from one stage to the next. In the current context, the transition to motherhood is perceived as a natural step that does not require thought or discretion because women are naturally endowed with a "maternal instinct," and with "feminine traits" that are associated with caring for others. Thus, even if many of the participants did not express opposition to motherhood, they did oppose the notion that motherhood is a command that does not have to be decided on and that does not require thought, deliberation, or discussion among women themselves.

Naomi (age 27, partnered) made the following statement: *"I define myself as a woman who is not interested in having children. Over time, my partner has begun to think differently than me, and I'm afraid that I will eventually be persuaded by him without giving the matter serious thought."* This also reflected the concerns of other participants—that regardless of what they ultimately decided, they mainly sought to ensure that they were not naturally swept into motherhood. Rather, they wanted to make sure that they—as we term it—"turned every stone over" before making a decision. The meaning of "turning over every stone" differs according to the lens through which it is viewed. Through a neoliberal lens, participants' determination to "turn over every stone" may be perceived as a reflection of the neoliberal subject who is capable of fulfilling her autonomous choices and of taking full responsibility for her wellbeing (Rottenberg, 2018). However, through a pronatalist lens, the women's intention to "turn over every stone" in their reproductive decision-making may be perceived as challenging the societal expectations that they will "automatically" become mothers, given that as "females," they are inherently coded with a desire to give birth and raise children. This does not leave women an option to view the transition to motherhood as a decision (Donath, 2015a,b). By making the "right" decision, they will be simultaneously following these two conflicting cultural stances, as they will be preserving the pronatalist directive in the neoliberal era. Nevertheless, as we will demonstrate later, the participants' state of indecisiveness about motherhood undermines both of these cultural directives—as they are expected to reach a decision and to do so immediately.

Typologies of Indecisiveness: "I Do Not Want to Be a Mother, But I'm Still Debating Whether or Not to Become a Mother"

Our findings suggest that the participants did not reject and/or were not undecided about motherhood as a social institution. Rather, they were in a state of indecisiveness about their own mothering. Although they sometimes oscillated between the two modes, they mainly referred to their own reproductive deliberations and wishes.

During the sixth session, it became clear that women face complex possibilities. At this point, the group members were well aware of the meaning that each participant attributed to her unique experience of indecisiveness. From the group discussion conducted in this session, emerged a typology that differs from those proposed in the literature:

(1)**I know that I want to be a mother, but am still debating/considering whether or not to do so** (e.g., due to fears about the implications of motherhood and due to life circumstances that the woman does not perceive as optimal for raising children)
(2)**I know that I do not want to be a mother, but am still debating/considering whether or not to become a mother** (e.g., due to pressure from the woman's surroundings, the stigma of non-motherhood, fear of feeling alienated, and uncertainty regarding old age)
(3)**I do not know if I want to be a mother or remain a non-mother.**

The participants formulated these possibilities following a statement by Noga (age 32, married): *"I feel like I do not want [to be a mother]. Completely. And yet I'm still undecided."* This statement became even clearer in the ninth group session, when the following discussion took place:

Noga (age 32, married): *I want to ask you something because I'm so confused now. I recently understood that I am no longer uncertain. I understood that I do not want*

[3]The words in bold signify that the woman herself raised her voice or stressed certain words.

[to be a mother]. But then I understood that this is not the issue that I am debating. I am debating two: whether or not I want to be a mother—and I've decided that I do not want to. But I'm still debating whether or not I'm going to do it [become a mother] [there are voices in the room saying "Wow," and heads are nodding]. I may go through with it even though I've decided that I do not want to. So now I do not know how to answer all those questions.

Rotem (age 30, single): *You just cracked us up!*

Abigail (age 34, married): ***You are saying*** *the same thing Nitzan said.*

Nitzan (age 33, partnered): *Yes. Totally.*

Group Facilitator: *It appears that indecisiveness includes quite a few layers.*

One word that is based on many layers. Nitzan, I noticed that Noga's words helped you organize your thoughts.

Nitzan (age 33, partnered): *It sent a "ting" through me [she makes a hand motion indicating that she finally understood what was going on].*

Inbal (age 27, partnered): *I really identified with what Noga said, that I do not want [to be a mother], but it's still possible that I will go through with it. It was interesting to listen.*

A week later, in the last group session, the following statements were made:

Nitzan (age 33, partnered): *I went all last week with a giant light on my head. Ting! I was asked three times during this week, "Well, what about children?" And then I mentioned the conclusion I had reached and felt very good about myself. Generally, what I said was that I know I do not want [to be a mother] but now I'm debating whether to do it anyway.*

Dalit (age 31, single): *That's what you said when people asked you?*

Nitzan: *I really, really feel that it's … it's just a great answer.*

Facilitator: *How did they react?*

Nitzan: *Of course, the first thing I have to do is apologize, and explain, and expand … and they should not pity you for doing something you do not want to do and all that, but … I say that it really releases me. I think that this answer gives me a lot of freedom.*

Abigail (age 34, married): *It would be really interesting to know whether the people around you think it's preferable that you will do something you do not want to do [become a mother]. To what extent is the condition that one must have children a strong one?*

Nitzan (age 33, partnered): *Ah, it depends on who you ask.*

Abigail: *Has anyone said to you: "Great!" [she claps her hands] "Way to go!?"*

Nitzan: *No one will say "Great!" It's mainly "Oy." It's a matter of "Oy, why do not you want children?," but on the other hand, it's "Oy that you are going to maybe do something you do not want to do." It's "Oy" in any case, as far as people are concerned.*

These above quotes demonstrate how participants had negotiated the meanings of their indecisiveness and constructed their individual narrative of indecisiveness during group discussions. The quotes call for deeper examination of the situation in which women may become mothers against their will. Previous studies (Donath, 2015a) have shown that women who do not want to become mothers can sometimes be exposed to attempts at persuasion, in and outside of the home, that make it difficult for them to be consistent about living as they wish and according to what they know about themselves. Some of these women must cope with a reality in which, almost every day, they have to stave off direct or indirect attempts at persuasion to become mothers against their will. Thus, even if a subject is said to have written her own biography that includes the decision to become a mother, the entire process raises questions about women's autonomy, as part of a couple or as a member of society.

In contrast to this situation, Nitzan, who became a mother several years after the group sessions ended, described a different event. Although her partner's attitude differed from hers because he wanted to be a father, he did not attempt to persuade her, but enabled her to make a decision about whether or not she would become a mother even though she did not want to be. Nitzan's decision may be confusing and may arouse pity if one interprets it to mean that she was forced to decide. However, during the group sessions and to this very day, she has insisted that she made the most complex use of the essence of autonomy. She believes that it is completely possible to combine not wanting to be a mother with the joy related to both her spousal relationship and the upbringing of her daughter. This joy was partly made possible by the feeling that she owns knowledge of herself, and by the understanding that her continuous lack of desire to be a mother is respected, even when her status has changed to "mother." This is what allows Nitzan to contain and recognize all these contradictions, without deleting any option or ignoring any feeling.

The possibility that women will become mothers and still define themselves as undecided about motherhood also emerged in the e-mail correspondences conducted between the group facilitator and the participants, 4 years after the group termination. At this time, the participants were asked to indicate their

current family status and their self-defined status regarding their indecisiveness toward motherhood. Due to loss of contact with one of the participants, only nine participants responded. Of these, six reported that they had not become mothers, and three reported that they had become mothers. Among the six participants who did not pursue motherhood, three noted that they are still debating motherhood, while the other three stated that they had decided to forgo motherhood. Of the three participants who had become mothers, two continued to define themselves as undecided:

> **Nitzan (age 33, partnered):** *"This may surprise you. My answer to the question is that I'm no longer uncertain—but I maintain the identity of undecided (hope this sounds logical)."*

> **Noga (32, married):** *"At the time, I thought I might choose to do so [become a mother] even though I did not want to. In the end, I did not choose at all—it happened by chance … so it's true that it may seem that there is no more uncertainty about whether to become a mother—it already happened. But because I never actually made a decision, and because to this day I cannot say what I would have chosen, I still define myself as undecided."*

These statements indicate that the differentiation between "mothers" and "non-mothers" and between "I want to be a mother" and "I do not want to be a mother" is not binary. It can be flexible and can have many meanings in ways that do not necessarily correspond with the women's self-definitions and attitudes toward motherhood, enabling women to cross-check and integrate categories that are perceived as rigidly binary. Thus, women can change their concrete status from "non-mothers" to "mothers" as they become mothers, and still define themselves as undecided with regard to motherhood.

Our findings also suggest that the women who participated in the current study cannot be divided into hermetic categories, such as "active deciders" and "passive deciders" (Gillespie, 1999; Settle and Brumley, 2014), because the very fact of their participation in the group sessions indicates that they all sought to clarify to themselves that they would not be making any decisions without "turning over every stone" in their decision-making process. We are not arguing that the wish to clarify and map their attitudes should be regarded as active decision-making. Rather, we suggest that the discourse regarding reproduction decision-making should refrain from the value judgments inherent in the labels "active/passive," mainly due to the complexity of the intrapsychic processes involved in this decision-making.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Remaining in a State of Indecisiveness About Motherhood: "I Kind of Want to Want"

The inability to decide whether to become a mother or remain a non-mother can have major impacts on a woman's wellbeing and self-esteem, as well as on her status within her family, community, and society as a whole (Tietjens-Meyers, 2001). Thus, one might assume that many women who are deliberating motherhood seek to renounce their undecided status as soon as possible. However, our findings indicate that this assumption does not universally apply to all women. During the group sessions, several participants indeed expressed their desires to be released from the state of uncertainty, as well as to feel normal and belonging. Such desires were clearly expressed by Nitzan **(age 33, partnered)** during the first group session, when presenting her expectations of the group process:

> *My expectation of this process … I have some sort of an internal expectation that by the end of the group process, I will want children, because that is much easier in our society. I kind of want to want [she smiles].*

Nitzan's statement is consistent with Maher and Saugeres' (2007) findings that their participants wished to experience a desire or a strong urge for motherhood, which would assist them in their fertility decision-making. The finding that women who are not interested in becoming mothers may wish to develop a desire for motherhood indicates that—contrary to the message conveyed to women from an early age—not all women have a natural biological which is usually referred to as "maternal instinct." Moreover, women's wish to desire motherhood emphasizes the need to re-examine society's rigid imperatives, which lead women to hope that they will eventually want to pursue something that they are not interested in pursuing. The finding that society's rigid expectations play a critical role in shaping women's reproductive decisions suggests that children are sometimes brought into the world merely because their mothers "succeeded" in forcing themselves to want to have children.

Along with the wish to be released from their state of indecisiveness, toward the end of the group sessions, the women also expressed reluctance to depart from their state of uncertainty. The following group discussion reveals the complex and dynamic negotiation between the group members with regard to the implications of their indecisiveness:

> **Group facilitator:** *Does anyone want to say something about the advantages—if there are any—of uncertainty [regarding motherhood]? The advantages of defining yourself as being undecided*?

> **Noga (age 32, married):** *The advantages of not deciding?*

> **Facilitator:** *Yes.*

> **Noga:** *Clearly. For all of us, it's the best thing.*

> **Facilitator:** *You'll speak for yourself?*

> **Noga**: *No. I am speaking on behalf of all women who call themselves "undecided" [about motherhood]. Being uncertain has the most advantages, because for women*

who define themselves as "undecided," the implications of "yes" are difficult, as are the implications of "no"—so [indecisiveness is] the best place to be in that situation. The other two situations are too difficult.

Naomi (age 27, partnered): *As Nitzan said, you just do not take any responsibility.*

Abigail (age 34, married): *But that's also not a pleasant place to be. I hate that place.*

Daphna (age 41, single): *Like Nitzan said, in the first session that she wants to want. I think that at least for me, if I decide not to [become a mother], I will be "marked" in some way. People will look at me. I'll no longer be the one who is uncertain about having children. I'll be the one who decided that she does not want children. What does that say about her? It's preferable to want [to be a mother]. It's [not wanting to pursue motherhood] a loaded issue.*

Nitzan (age 33, partnered): *When you are undecided, you are still on the margins of society. And if you decide not to [become a mother], then you become an outsider.*

Facilitator: *I can understand the difficulty of giving up the state of indecisiveness if there are implications for the understanding that I do not want to be a mother.*

Abigail: *The implications of bringing children into the world are much more scary [laughs].*

Facilitator: *I do not know. I assume each of you has her own scale.*

Abigail: *I assume that everyone here believes she is strange and absurd—but we are already used to coping with that.*

Facilitator: *But maybe it's like Daphna said, right now people are thinking that "you are [potentially] strange," and there are three dots after that. It may be different than "you are strange" followed by an exclamation mark. I do not know. Maybe. Does anyone want to add anything about the advantages of remaining in a state of indecisiveness?*

Abigail: *It's pleasant. It's having your cake and eating it too. Not deciding enables me to have the option of sometimes thinking this way, and sometimes thinking that way. Whatever's comfortable for me.*

Facilitator: *Do you wish to depart from this position?*

Abigail: *Sometimes. It's very comfortable and pleasant. I have not reached a point yet where I can say, "I want to be a mother" or "I do not want to be a mother." Sometimes it's more in the direction of "I do not want [to be a mother]. But it's comfortable for me to put an asterisk next to it of "at the moment."*

Nitzan: *I think I said this at the last meeting, that there is something about the position of uncertainty that is a position in itself. This position does not just consist of not deciding, not committing oneself to any position—rather it's a privileged position of talking about the issues from another viewpoint. I observe reality from a place that is neither here nor there, but somewhere else. Like it's a little bit from on high. I feel that my self-perception as undecided is a full position; it enables me to look at issues—and at everything else—from a patronizing stance [people laugh]. There is something in the position itself that enables you to remain indecisive all your life. It's really awesome. If it were not for the f-cking biological clock, it would be wonderful. And I understood that part of being indecisive may also be creating a reality in which I make better decisions—that maybe there's more time, and in which it's also possible to negotiate about the right time. And then if you continue with uncertainty about little things, like how many children you want* etc.*, it eases the major indecisiveness a bit […] I think I'm somewhat in the process of reclaiming the uncertainty—that the decision is not a whole set of things but it breaks down their meaning, and breaking down their meaning might mean taking something from here and something from there, perhaps trying something I devised myself [she makes a hand motion of mixing].*

The above group discussion indicates that staying in a position of indecisiveness has quite a few advantages, in that society waits for them to demonstrate their commitment and act in accordance with the capitalist, neoliberal ethos of pursuing and reaching goals, as well as with the ideal type of the neoliberal individual, that is, "an individual who chooses."

One advantage of remaining in a state of uncertainty that was mentioned by participants was that it enabled them to "stay under the radar" of intense social pressure and judgmentalism. In a society that tends to deride women who are not interested in becoming mothers,[4] saying "I do not know yet" enables one to remain in a situation where one can stave off direct criticism. A statement of uncertainty could also reduce the likelihood that women who are debating motherhood are turned from being subjects **who ask themselves questions** to being the objects of questioning and subject to pleading and attempts at persuasion **by others.**

Some participant described another advantage of remaining in a state of uncertainty—that it enabled them to keep all options open, thereby expanding their boundaries of autonomy. Indecisiveness enables the imagination to run in all directions without needing to ground it, and without having to take action deriving from each decision. For example, if a woman

[4]This is in contrast to women coping with fertility problem and for that reason are treated with relative compassion – both because they show a desire to be mothers and make sacrifices if they choose to proceed with fertility treatments, and because they are involuntarily childless.

decides to become a mother, she may need to stop using birth controls (if she will be pursuing motherhood within a heterosexual relationship), or to start investigating the option of sperm donation (if she will be pursuing motherhood in a non-heterosexual relationship or without a partner), or to go for gynecological examinations, start taking nutritional supplements to increase the chances of pregnancy, take economic considerations into account, etc. On the other hand, if a woman decides to remain a non-mother, she may need to make clear statements about her reproductive decision, which will require her to deal with the responses of her family, friends, and workplace. A woman's decision to forgo motherhood may also change her view of romantic and sexual encounters and require her to reveal her reproductive intentions from the very outset. Additionally, she may need to reconsider her place of residence (e.g., a city, small town, or a neighborhood populated mainly by families with children), as well as reconsider staying in Israel, where being a non-mother is more openly criticized than in other countries, etc.

Analysis of the group discussions reveals that by leaving all options open, participants felt that they could break down their uncertainty into smaller units, which allowed them to address an array of questions, rather than just the question of whether they want to become a mother. In this respect, the state of indecisiveness paves the way for a detailed exploration of diverse questions related to motherhood, such as "Do I want to be a mother?," "Whether the answer is yes or no, why?," "Do I want to raise a child without a partner?," "Am I prepared to be a mother, irrespective of the 'ticking of the biological clock?'," "Am I willing to be a mother because my partner is interested in having children even though I am not?," "Do I want to arrange with my partner that he/she will bear the main responsibility for raising the child?," "Can I imagine being able to not play an active role in raising the child if I did not want to be a mother from the outset?," "What conditions will I need in order to become involved in raising the child?," etc.

The complex roadmap that emerged from the group discussions also reveals that by leaving their options open, participants felt that they could control time. According to Amal Jamal (2008), "Dividing time, sorting it, and turning it into a reference tool reflect the power relations between groups of people. The subject who sorts imposes, through the division of his/her time, a certain type of relationship with others" (p. 354). Within the context of reproduction and motherhood, this means that women have limited control over their time. They can hardly decide whether to wait and delay motherhood, because both biology and society are perceived as the sole legitimate owners of women's time, and they are the only determinants of when "the time has come" to be a mother. Any other relationship between women and time in this context tends to be framed in capitalist terms as a "waste of time," that is, time that is of no value, leading to devaluation of the present (Lahad, 2016). Thus, the issue of remaining in a state of indecisiveness, with regards to ownership of time, is a significant matter in a society where the pace of life is dictated by capitalist, neoliberal, pronatalist, and heteronormative logics, and in a society that requires people to demonstrate visible "progress" toward the "right" decision at the "right" pace (Amir, 2005). It is also a key issue in a society where women are viewed as essentially in a state of waiting that has been **forced** on them: "Women have always been perceived as expectant figures: they are expecting to be addressed, they are expecting to get their period out of fear that it will not come; they are expecting men to come home from battle or from work; they are expecting their children to grow up; they are expecting to give birth to a new child; or they are expecting menopause" (Rich, 1976, pp. 68).

Studies conducted by Lahad (2016) and Israeli-Nevo (2017) have shed light on the way that waiting or delays while "taking time for myself," without hurrying to fulfill expectations for the future, can involve an experience of insisting on ownership of time, in a manner that completely disrupts linear perspectives of time as moving toward the "right act" or the "right appearance" of the body. In this sense, the wish of some participants to remain in a state of uncertainty, and to not be classified into categories of "want to be a mother" or "do not want to be a mother," undermines some of the fundamental logics of contemporary society.

During the group discussions, participants also discussed the various ways by which they can "be a mother." However, this issue is beyond the scope of the current paper and will be addressed elsewhere. Future studies would benefit from further investigations into the meanings that women who are indecisive about motherhood ascribe to "being a mother." Findings from such studies may enrich our understanding of the perceptions accompanying indecisiveness about motherhood.

Summary

In this article, we sought to broaden the limited body of knowledge regarding women who are.

in a state of indecision, self-clarification, and uncertainty about motherhood. We contend that the state of indecision should not be viewed as a passing or idiosyncratic phase, but rather as a state that deserves comprehensive sociological investigation. The state of indecisiveness about motherhood, whether long-term or temporary, can teach us about the perceptions, types of discourses, and cultural understandings regarding fertility, motherhood, decision, and indecision, as well as about the relationship between decisions and inaction.

We demonstrate that while indecisiveness is nurtured by neoliberal rhetoric, it simultaneously undermines that rhetoric, as well as pronatalist, heteronormative, and temporal linear norms. We also show how participation in a group that aims to respect uncertainty can be in itself an island of resistance.

Under neoliberal, capitalist/consumerist, and post-feminist logic in the late modern era, more and more women from different social groups are perceived as equal citizens in the "Republic of Choice" (Ginsburg and Rapp, 1991). Nonetheless, it appears that women's freedom is still limited with regards to the arena of reproduction and motherhood. That is, women are given the right to choose what society wants them to choose. As long as women's choices are in

line with the hegemonic discourses—and follow the priorities that they dictate and the roles selected for them (e.g., to be "sexually free," "well-kept," consumerist, and to live with a spouse as mothers)—women are socially respected, and view themselves as free subjects who are independent, autonomous, and have desires that they are free to realize. However, women encounter a problem when their choices are not in line with the social directives, for example, if they refuse to devote themselves to being "well-kept" or to living with a spouse, particularly with a man. Not only are many women condemned for such choices, but many contemplate these implications alone because it is perceived as "their own choice," while disciplinary action and denunciation are expected for those who make "wrong choices" (Gill, 2008). Therefore, in the contemporary era, the discourse of "there is no choice" has been replaced with the discourse of "bad choices" (Solinger, 1998).

This pattern is particularly evident in the arena of fertility, natality, and motherhood. Although more women have the option of choosing today than in the past, they are still expected to make "the right choice," that is, to bear children (Oliver, 2012). In this social context, women's indecisiveness about motherhood contradicts the neoliberal order of "knowing, deciding, striving, and conquering"; the expectation in post-feminist discourse that the "woman who chooses" will make an appearance; the pronatalist rhetoric that claims there is a "natural transition" to motherhood; and temporal linear discourse in which women are expected to "progress" toward motherhood at the pace of the ticking "biological clock."

The establishment of a group for women who are deliberating motherhood provides legitimacy for these oppositions. The group sessions created a safe and autonomous space for the participants, in which they could learn that they were not alone in not knowing what they want, and could hear other women who expressed uncertainty about motherhood. In turn, this provided each participant the opportunity to observe the state of indecisiveness from a different perspective, as they struggled to avoid attaching definitive timetables and target dates.

In this sense, the group sessions challenged the individualist, neoliberal order, in which the individual is placed in the center along with their desires, preferences, interests, and goals, which are clearly defined, along with the various means for achieving them. The group sessions also challenged the order that clarification of goals, or determining the most effective means of attaining them, takes place through a rational decision-making process that operates according to a predetermined and fixed timetable. Moreover, the group sessions challenged the cyclical individualist order that praises the individual's own will, which is meant to spur actions deriving exclusively from personal will. Participation in the group "disrupted" this cyclical order and distinguished between the two components of that order, thus cutting the Gordian knot connecting them.

The presently conducted type of group is not the only forum that can enable women to explore their desires. Other settings can potentially serve the same purpose, such as friendships, intimate relationships, therapeutic spaces, or any other space that gives women an opportunity to be autonomous subjects in themselves, including spaces for isolation and privacy (see *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf). Considering that different women have different priorities and paces of life, it is not worthwhile to create a hierarchy of one form while insisting on autonomy (Tietjens-Meyers, 2001).

Nonetheless, this type of group is unique in that it is public and political. Even when such groups are intended for making personal and private decisions, by their very existence, they have the potential to undermine the rigid directives discussed in the current article. Every word said by those women when they talk among themselves about their personal uncertainty that links personal biographies with rigid social structures, plays an active role in breaking down and constructing the "vocabulary that can describe the restraining forces that dictate the lives of most of the world's population" (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 438). We can only wait and see whether or not these islands of opposition will expand, as additional groups of this nature will emerge and enable more and more women to develop greater autonomy and a sense of ownership over their desires and actions.

A major limitation of this study is that the majority of the women who participated in the group sessions were heterosexual. Inclusion of women who identify as lesbian or bisexual/pansexual may have yielded different findings. Nonetheless, this is an important study that gives voice to women who are deliberating about motherhood, a unique group that has received little attention in both the research literature and the public discourse. The study provides insight into the experience of indecisiveness about motherhood within a familistic and pronatalist context. Our findings expand existing typologies of women's reproduction decision-making by showing that women can become mothers and still define themselves as undecided about motherhood.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the departmental ethics committee at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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Tied Migrant Labor Market Integration: Deconstructing Labor Market Subjectivities in South Africa

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The South African labor market is characterized by a high degree of inflexibility and complexity which poses significant challenges for both indigenes and migrants looking to be integrated into the labor market. These challenges are likely to be more poignant for international migrants as they face additional barriers owing to a chronically high employment rate, xenophobic sentiments, and racial exclusion. For female tied migrants, gender bias, expressed through migration policies and legislation, adds yet another layer of complexity to long-term aspirations of settling in South Africa. How well tied migrants fare in the South African labor market is an important matter for consideration. Using an intersectional approach and the theory of governmentality, this study sought to deconstruct the labor market subjectivities of tied migrants in South Africa. This paper used a qualitative approach, with a narrative and interpretivist research paradigm, on female tied migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa who either accompanied their husbands or followed them to South Africa in a process of family reunification. Although 13 interviews were carried out in total, as part of a broader study, the narratives of six participants were included in this study, to zone in on labor market experiences. The study found that despite their high human capital, tied migrants are not likely to be well integrated into the South African labor market. Their inequality in the South African labor market was attributed to their gender, ethnicity, race, migrant status and locality and various intersections thereof through which they are subjected to informality, immobility and precarity.

Keywords: tied migrant, female, labor market integration, intersectionality, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Labor market participation is one of the strong predictors of long-term integration into society and a key instrument through which migrants can make monetary contributions to the host society (Konle-Seidl and Bolits, 2016). For migrants arriving in South Africa in search of better opportunities for socioeconomic wellbeing however, the South African labor market poses significant challenges for integration.

Like the status quo in other parts of the world (Ballarino and Panichella, 2017; Ressia et al., 2017), research in South Africa suggests smoother transitions into the labor market for male migrants in comparison to their female counterparts who are faced with formidable barriers to overcome (Mbiyozo, 2018; Souza and Flippen, 2020). While a substantial amount

of research has been conducted on the labor market, skilled female migrants, particularly those emigrating in the context of family, remain largely obscured in extant literature on labor migration. This could be attributed to the fact that the dominant image of the skilled migrant is male, and the fact that family migration is generally regarded as a social process (Bailey and Mulder, 2017). For instance, accompanying spouses arriving in the context of family in South Africa are legally designated the status of the dependent, which makes it illegal for them to work, study or conduct business (Department of Home Affairs, 2017).

The literature shows that skilled and tied migrants, however, remain agentive (Riaño, 2012; Bailey and Mulder, 2017; Grigoleit-Richter, 2017; Kõu and Bailey, 2017; Föbker, 2019; Di Martino et al., 2020) and seek ways to subvert governing technologies that keep them excluded from the labor market. Owing to the complexity of the South African labor market, some of the previously mentioned authors argue that it is inadequate to focus on the binary of employed or unemployed. This suggests the need for labor market integration further.

Little is known about how skilled female migrants who emigrate in the context of family migration, fare in the labor market in South Africa. Using an intersectional lens and the theory of governmentality this article explores the labor market experiences of skilled female migrants who emigrate to South Africa in the context of family migration. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the literature on the transitions of skilled migrants who remain largely understudied in the global South context.

A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Intersectionality

Intersectionality has traditionally been utilised as a heuristic device to unlock multiple layers of social stratification (Ressia et al., 2017; Kaushik and Walsh, 2018; Atewolougun, 2019) that female migrants face in countries of destination. First coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, the term intersectionality was used to explicate how access to the labor market by black American women was influenced by intersections of gender, race, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Crenshaw (1989) emphasized that the marginalization these minority women faced was mutually constituted. An intersectional lens, therefore, provides for simultaneous attention to different social structures as they give rise to different social positions and subsequently lived experiences (Anthias, 2012; Ressia et al., 2017). While particular attention has been paid to this trinity of disadvantage, over the years, new categories of intersection such as sexuality, and disability/health have been proposed (Amelina and Lutz, 2021).

Critically, the use of an intersectional approach can help understand the "interconnectedness, interdependencies and mutual co-construction of key categories of social marking and positioning" (Amelina and Lutz, 2021, p. 57). Applying an intersectional lens to studies on skilled migration has several advantages. According to Morokvasic (2014, p. 357), an intersectional lens helps to illuminate "who works and where, whose work is acknowledged as work, whose is invisible and unrecognized," and how life is destabilized and negotiated in the migration process. In this way, it can help to comprehensively determine the issues that impact on settlement and integration including issues of identity, inequality/privilege and to better target those in need of integration services (Kaushik and Walsh, 2018). One of the major criticisms of intersectionality, however, is that it has not been well operationalized (Ressia et al., 2017; Atewolougun, 2019).

Intersectionality and Labor Market Integration

Research on intersectionality and the labor market reveals that the labor market experiences of tied migrants are shaped by various identities (Bailey and Mulder, 2017; Fobker and Imani, 2017; Ressia et al., 2017). Because of these various identities including, race, ethnicity, and migrant status (Kaushik and Walsh, 2018; Mbiyozo, 2018), tied migrants are subject to differential treatment in host countries.

For accompanying women arriving in the context of family migration several factors constitute what may be regarded as primary forms of discrimination. Compared to other migrant women who experience a "double earnings penalty" because of their categorization as immigrants and as women (Ballarino and Panichella, 2017), women arriving as family members are likely to suffer triple penalties based on their gender, immigration status and migration background (Mbiyozo, 2018). Their condition, therefore, would not be much different from refugees and asylum seekers who are among the most marginalized migrants and are subjected to the highest levels of discrimination.

Evidence shows how on account of gender norms, migrant status, and ethnicity, tied migrants commonly face discriminatory norms in the countries in which they choose to settle (Bailey and Mulder, 2017; Grigoleit-Richter, 2017; Ressia et al., 2017). Discrimination directly impacts the labor market integration outcomes of immigrant women. This discrimination can take on various forms such as ethnicity, race, class, religion, and gender intersections to create barriers to LMI for immigrant women (Wojczewski et al., 2015; Korteweg, 2017; Kesler and Safiz 2018; Chinyakata et al., 2019). Wojczewski et al. (2015), for example, highlight how the discrimination of Black African migrant care workers based on gender and race is more poignant than for other migrant races. Racialized minorities typically face the greatest discriminatory barriers. For instance, Kesler and Safiz (2018) found that Pakistani and Bangladeshi women realize much higher penalties in labor market integration than other immigrant women groups in France. The discrimination that skilled women immigrants face can be imperceptible, but it often results in barriers to advancement in the workplace (Grigoleit-Richter, 2017). However, discrimination in the labor market may manifest at any stage in the labor processes, including in hiring, promotion, retrenchment, work assignment, promotion, or retirement (Cooke, 2007). Wage differentials are also common in virtually all western European countries, where it is common for immigrants from non-Overseas Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries to significantly lag with respect to wages.

Because of their gender, tied migrants are likely to be accompanying partners (Cooke, 2007; Fobker and Imani, 2017). They are also likely to face deskilling and downward occupational mobility, domestication, and their subsequent care responsibilities are likely to make it very difficult for them to be integrated into the workplace (Fobker and Imani, 2017; Ressia et al., 2017).

Othering practices based on ethnicity also extend to the workplace (Yeoh and Lam, 2012; Grigoleit-Richter, 2017) where they can produce direct impacts for the career trajectories of skilled migrants. A study by Grigoleit-Richter (2017) for example, showed how ethnic based discrimination resulted in a significant impact on the professional identity of skilled migrants in Germany, and the slowing down of the transfer of their cultural capital.

Integration into the labor market is not without its challenges and tied migrants are likely to face further disadvantage based on their gender, migrant status, ethnicity etc. (Bailey and Mulder, 2017). Tied migrants also typically experience exclusion from the labor market or being employed below their skill level. Skills that are not utilised fully, represent brain waste. In this regard, Beukes et al. (2017) warn that the possible underutilization of skills and qualifications in the South Africa labor market could exacerbate structural problems within the South African economy.

According to Atewolougun (2019, p. 4) "embedded within each socially constructed category, is a dynamic related to power and power interrelations" and this makes it imperative for intersectional analysis to pay attention to power. As a result of power relations, people may experience unequal treatment in the determination, application, and implementation of rules (Collins and Bilge, 2020). In this regard both intersectionality and governmentality are key considerations as it relates to labor market integration of tied migrants in the South African labor market.

The migration legislation in South Africa sets up a different application of treatment for tied migrant women arriving in the context of family. Their identity as dependents is assigned through legality and as a result this makes it significantly difficult for them to access the labor market even when they are in possession of appropriate qualifications and work experience. This can be characterized as an explicit gender bias which plays out in legislation and migration policies to the detriment of female international migrants (Dinbabo and Nyasulu, 2015). The determination of tied migrants' transition into the host country as a social process, belies their aspirations to re-establish their careers. The application of power therefore relates to their identity as married women, migrants, and relates to the acknowledgement of their skills. In this regard, power relations are an important consideration not only for access and integration but also long-term career outcomes.

Power and Subjectivities

As a critical theory, intersectionality, like governmentality, recognizes that power works by making various knowledges available and these ultimately shape identity, person, and self (Rose et al. 2006; Liversage, 2009; Dean, 2010; Ho, 2017). Critically, the shaping of subjectivities subsequently shapes lived experiences. Subjectivities, however, are not totalizing and can be challenged and resisted at a micro level (Hudson et al., 2019). This notion of resistance or counter-conducts encourages the interrogation of the "flows of power in the opposite direction," i.e., bottom-up (Ball and Olmedo, 2013, p. 86). This is at the center of the notion of freedom or agency, and the bi-directional nature of power (Death, 2016).

"The will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price" (Foucault, 2007, p. 75) however, is not foregone conclusion. This is reflected in that while tied migrants may want to be integrated into the labor market (alternate subjectivity) they may be prevented from doing so due to deeply entrenched practices of ethicized discrimination. This inability to subvert all governing technologies in the host society is reflected in the fact that migrants may need to be assisted to integrate into society through specific integration programs. This does not suggest the absence of resistance but suggests the limits of resistance, or agency on the part of migrants as highlighted by Ncube and Mkwananzi (2020). As Death (2016) argues counter-conducts are acts of resistance and not to be confused with political revolts.

While programs for integration are not strongly established in the global South, the South African government for example, in its White Paper on International migration suggests the need for the specific development of programmes that will facilitate the integration of migrants in the host society (Department of Home Affairs, 2017). The utility of the intersectional approach used in this study in identifying specific needs of migrants with respect to integration is important.

METHODOLOGY

The research explores the labor market experiences of tied female migrants who emigrated to South Africa in the context of family migration. These spouses either accompanied their husbands or followed them for the purposes of family reunification. Semi-structured interviews were used, which are considered the most effective interview style to capture and document multiple experiences, explore contested issues, and capture multifaceted views of a phenomenon (Brinkman, 2014). Although 13 interviews were carried out in total, as part of a broader study, the narratives of six participants were included in this study, for the sake of focusing on labor market experiences, which was in conformity with the qualitative sample size recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2013). The inclusion criteria of the interviews used in the analysis of this study also considered the study by Guest et al. (2006), which found that 94% of most prominent or frequent codes emerge in the first six interviews and 97% by 12 interviews, thus implying data saturation. These six were chosen based on correct documentation required to work in South Africa (either work permit or permanent residence) and the relevance of their exposure in the workplace for the analysis at hand.

Research Approach and Philosophy

A narrative, qualitative approach was used to garner the rich interpretations of reality and understanding of the world through the lens of the respondents. The emic approach used was regarded as suitable to understanding lived experiences from an intersectional perspective (Atewolougun, 2019). In addition, unlike the quantitative approach, the narrative approach is lauded for its ability to make the invisible visible (Meares, 2010).

Further, this study employed an interpretivist ontological research paradigm, which acknowledges that multiple realities or truths are the products of human subjectivity (Harrison, 2014). Through the voice of the participants, the study sought to understand or interpret certain phenomena.

From the interpretivist paradigm, reality is shaped by experiences and therefore becomes something to be interpreted. Through the narrative approach and interpretivist paradigm, the researchers scrutinized the lived experiences of others and interpreted them within a particular historical and social context.

Data Collection

Purposive sampling was used to select respondents meeting the inclusion criteria to participate in the study. The advantage of purposive sampling is that it allows the researcher(s) to choose cases from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 2014). Thereafter, a snowball approach was utilised to complement the initial purposive sampling, in which participants were asked to refer other participants to the researchers, who met the inclusion criteria for the research.

Participants were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews *via* Zoom. The interviews began with an open-ended question designed to elicit rich narratives of their labor market experiences from pre to post migration. A semi-structured guide was subsequently used to interrogate any areas that were regarded as requiring further elaboration. Data collection took place over the period August 2020 to February 2021. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and recorded to an external device.

Upon referral to the researchers, with permission, the interviewees received a call explaining the nature of the research project and key ethical issues regarding consent and voluntary participation. After verbally consenting to be interviewed, each interviewee was furnished with a consent letter to sign which was to be returned prior to the date set for the interview. Owing to the predicted length of the interview, respondents were asked to choose a date and time which was most suitable and for which they would be available for the interviews. A review of the issues of consent also took place prior to the actual interview online.

Data Analysis

This research employed thematic analysis to explore the narratives of accompanying spouses. The advantage of using thematic analysis is that it is not tied to any theoretical framework and therefore remains flexible mainly for use in various contexts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As stated by Merriam (2014), in qualitative research the process of data analysis and data collection occur simultaneously. The six stages of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2021) were employed to analyze the data, namely, getting familiar with the data through immersion in the data, transcribing the data, generating initial codes, review of themes, definition, and review of themes to ensure accuracy and alignment, and lastly, compiling the report using comparisons between the study's results and extant literature.

Transcription of the audio-recorded interviews was done as soon as possible after each interview by playing back and listening to the recordings while typing the narratives word-for-word in a Microsoft Word document. This provided the researchers an opportunity to engage with the text and develop initial ideas about coding. An inductive approach to coding was used, allowing themes to emerge organically, within the broader context of the intersectionality theory. During the process of coding, notes were made in relation to key ideas for codes emerging from the text. Full transcriptions were subsequently loaded to ATLAS.ti for analysis. After a final decision on codes, themes were developed by grouping codes together in a way that answered the key questions arising from the study (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The verbatim quotes that were generated were used to substantiate the emergent themes in the results section.

Research Ethics and Authorization

The study considered the main ethical considerations of informed consent, voluntary participation, academic integrity, and confidentiality. Owing to the risk of emotional distress arising due to the personal nature of some of the questions, access to psychological counseling was offered to all participants. Ethical clearance was sought from the General and Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) of the University of the Free State. Ethical Clearance Reference Number: UFS-HSD2020/0123/0506.

RESULTS

Utilizing the intersectional approach and the theory of governmentality, this study sought to understand the labor market experiences of tied migrants in South Africa. The study found that tied migrants were most likely to be subject to immobility, informality and precarity within the South African labor market and this were on account of their gender, race, ethnicity, migrant status but also on account of their locality and the various intersections thereof.

The term immobility does not refer only to physical immobility but is also concerned with subjective notions of progressing in one's life. Spatial immobility represents being forced to remain in a particular position. Socioeconomic immobility refers to inability to earn a living because of one's inability to get a job (O'Neil et al., 2016). Precarity refers to a state of vulnerability in which one's agency can become limited (Hudson et al., 2019). Informality relates to the type of work which is not subject to national labor laws, tax, social protection nor entitlement to various employment benefits like sick leave or severance pay (**Figure 1**; OECD/ILO, 2019).

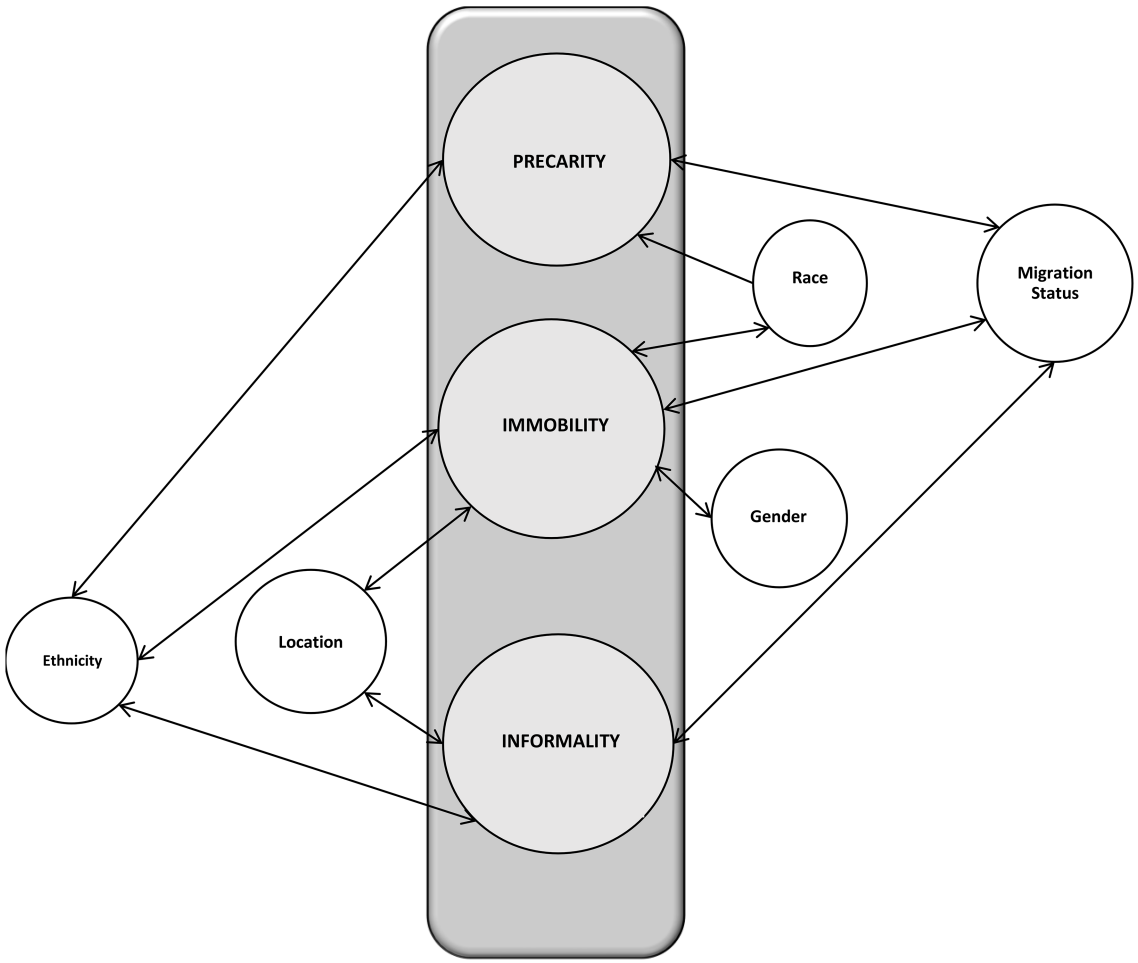

FIGURE 1 | Interrelationship between subjectivities and intersections (author's own illustration).

Theme 1: Ethicized Ascriptions

Identifying as a non-South African was perceived to be one of the primary reasons for severely curtailed access to the South African labor market.

Strict employment legislation meant some opportunities for employment were deemed inaccessible to migrants because they were exclusively reserved for South African nationals. This was attributed to national policy. For instance, specific reference was made to the BBBEE policy, as supported by the following:

> *Some of the jobs, they really state they want a South African citizen… You just have to accept they need someone with the credentials of being a citizen because the moment they say BBBEE, they want someone who is African and the African they want is a South African citizen* (Lucille, B (Honours) Accounting, lecturer, took 4 years to achieve LMI).

Ethicized ascriptions rooted in policies enacted at the institutional level, similarly, were also regarded as problematic. In institutions with such policies there appeared to be the wholesale discounting of qualifications and/or the working experience of foreigners. This made it particularly difficult for tied migrants to compete based on skills, qualification, or experience. This contributed to feelings of immobility, being overtaken, and left behind, as expressed by the following participant:

> *After I had my permanent residence, I was employed as a primary school teacher but as an SGB* [School Governing Body] *teacher, I could not be employed in the Education Department because the policy is that they start by employing South Africans and there was nothing amazing for me in having a masters because they said the basic qualification for one to teach in their primary schools is a first degree* (Monica, PhD in Education Management, educationist, took 5 years to achieve LMI).

Ethnicity also intersected with race in giving rise to immobility. Notions of deservingness and acceptance in the labor market were linked to hierarchical, racialized, ethicized ascriptions.

Being a black person from the African continent was regarded as a source for greater discrimination in comparison to black Europeans and black Americans. Being a black African migrant was therefore associated with increased propensity for broad exclusion from the South African labor market, as indicated by the following sentiment:

> *Actually here, the culture is different* [regarding] *the acceptance rate of non-South Africans…It's not super. They'd rather accept the Europeans, the Americans, no matter* [whether] *they are black skinned...* (Iris, PhD in Animal Science, lecturer, took 3 years to achieve LMI).

Tied migrants expressed difficulties with breaking into the professional labor market. This was attributed to beliefs about what kinds or types of jobs migrants should have access to. Access to professional white-collar jobs was viewed as limited owing to beliefs that foreigners were not suitable for such, as exemplified by the following:

> [In Cape Town] *They believe foreigners should work in restaurants, or hotels as waiters and cleaners so, it's hard to break into the* [professional] *work market* (Theresa-May, B Accounting, quality analyst, took 8 years to achieve LMI).

Despite being in possession of the correct documentation to work, being a foreigner was regarded as the basis for automatic disqualification by employers, regardless of one's qualifications or experience. For the most part, tied migrants felt that there was no equality of opportunity to compete based on merit for work opportunities and were therefore, most likely to be discriminated and marginalized in this regard.

> *And then you only realize if you know a few people that have applied for the same job that uh, but they took this person who is less qualified than me. Why did they do that? So somehow there's this xenophobic thing as much as we run away from saying the word xenophobia, but they* [employers] *will be xenophobic* (Theresa-May, B Accounting, quality analyst, took 8 years to achieve LMI).

Overall deskilling of qualifications and experience was viewed as something that would happen time and time again, resulting in persistent occupational downward mobility, and poor upward mobility over the career trajectory even with change of employer. This was associated with feelings of being underemployed, underpaid, and feelings of immobility and lack of progress and general feelings of dissatisfaction, as shown in the following response:

> *After 15 years of service [in education], I am employed as a new teacher. When I moved to the TVET college where I am now, I came in as an entry, despite 15 years of experience, plus five years acquired in South Africa. So, you start afresh. The salary is very low, lower than the least person. I am saying as long as I am employed, but am I getting what I'm supposed to be getting? No…. I feel I am very far from where I am supposed to be* (Monica, PhD in Education Management, educationist, took 5 years to achieve LMI).

And,

> *I can work in any sector, that's the good thing, but the job I do, it's for a grade 10 or 12. It's not something I would say I am passionate about. I'd be lying if I said I am passionate about it. It's only that I can do it, there is no passion there* (Theresa-May, B Accounting, quality analyst, took 8 years to achieve LMI).

Precarity among tied migrants arose in the context of being unable to secure permanent work contracts. Instead, tied migrants found themselves confined to fixed term contracts wherein employers would not have to remunerate tied migrants at higher levels, as substantiated by the following:

> *Of course, they are not spending much on me. So, I can remain there. They have refused to make me permanent. Yeah, I understand. I am not South African* (Iris, PhD in Animal Science, lecturer, took 3 years to achieve LMI).

As suggested in the quote above and supported by the quote below, tied migrants commonly experience poor remuneration levels and this is suggestive of the vulnerability to exploitation that tied migrants face in the labor market.

> *I actually feel like I'm subsidizing my employer… The money that you earn cannot even take you through the whole month…Maybe a housemaid earns more than me* (Theresa-May, B Accounting, quality analyst, took 8 years to achieve LMI).

Persistent feelings of insecurity associated with one's status as a foreigner, commonly experienced in South Africa in general were likely also experienced in the workplace. There was a strong sense among some that unfair dismissal on basis of ethnicity could arise at any given moment. Such views suggest a strong sense of precarity characterized by non-belonging, othering, and poor integration despite being employed in the labor market, as shown by the following:

> *I am a foreigner in the company and it's always like when they start speaking about unemployment, maybe one day, they'll say, they'd rather employ a South African. You're not fully secure cause you are a foreigner. It's never like 100% sure* (Charlotte, Diploma in Journalism, administrator, took 7 years to achieve LMI).

And,

> *We once had a cleaner at work who said [to me], "Oh, you are a kwerekwere* [derogatory term ascribed to black foreigners in SA]." *It's embedded in them this person is a*

foreigner, they do not belong (Theresa-May, B Accounting, quality analyst, took 8 years to achieve LMI).

Derogatory comments were also associated with having a foreign accent and associated assumptions about one's inability to communicate well, as supported by the following:

But this older lady, I assume she had, or she has, you know, better experience but she actually came and said, but students may not understand us, you know these non-South Africans. We always have this kind of accent that students do not understand. Wow. It was so derogatory. And she was screaming, she wasn't silent, people could hear. [She said] *Students do not understand and that's how students fail* (Iris, PhD in Animal Science, lecturer, took 3 years to achieve LMI).

Theme 2: Migrant Status

Tied migrant status was the biggest impediment to entry into the labor market owing to the institutional rules making it illegal to work without the correct documentation. Tied migrant status critically, was also linked with career gaps which made it difficult to enter the formal labor market owing to limited work experience. Long gaps were also viewed as making tied migrants desperate for work and subsequently vulnerable to exploitation as evidenced by poor salaries, as substantiated by the following view:

If people look at your CV and you have this gap. They do not even ask you whether you were studying. They're looking for experience. Of which, where are you going to get experience if you are in university, that's number one. And then when they see this employment gap, they actually think oh no this person is desperate. That way they capitalize. and to make it worse if you do not have correct papers, it's rare to get paid well (Theresa-May, B Accounting, quality analyst, took 8 years to achieve LMI).

Without permanent residence denoting legal authority to work, tied migrants resorted to informal, "piece" jobs. While permanent residence did not guarantee employment opportunities, it was regarded as instrumental to opening opportunities for formal, permanent, and professional jobs which was virtually impossible with tied migrant status. This is supported by the following:

And then once I had the South African ID, it was easy to look for employment elsewhere, because now there was no restriction in terms of paperwork. As you know some companies, they know that with the accompanying Spouse Visa, you are not allowed to work. So, when you are trying to apply for new opportunities, they'll just reject the application (Andrea, Master's in Development Studies, programme manager, took 5 years to achieve LMI).

And,

You're just accompanying your husband and that's it. I did get some piece jobs, but you know how it is, it wasn't really a formal thing. We actually have an ID now, a permanent residence [permit]. *Then that's when I got a formal job after that* (Charlotte, Diploma in Journalism, administrator, took 7 years to achieve LMI).

Interestingly, tied migrants with permanent residence rated their prospects of integration into the labor market to be below that of asylum seekers. Naturalization was viewed as opening a much broader range of opportunities which could not be accessed through permanent residence, as exemplified in the following:

They [the employers] *are not going to take you because they are forced to take South Africans or someone whose got citizenship, or even an asylum person I think they can take but not someone who has got a PR. No, they will not take someone with a PR. That's SA for you* (Theresa-May, B Accounting, quality analyst, took 8 years to achieve LMI).

And,

Remember, some of the jobs they really state that they want a South African citizen not a permanent resident. Some of the job adverts, you know for sure they'll say, we want a citizen not a permanent resident (Lucille, B (Honours) Accounting, lecturer, took 4 years to achieve LMI).

Having permanent residence was regarded as significantly useful in terms of facilitating access to formal employment and as instrumental in expanding employment options (job changes) however, it did not guarantee freedom from impacts of ethicized ascriptions, as expressed in the following:

After I had my permanent residence, I was employed as a primary school teacher but as an SGB teacher. I could not be employed in the Education Department because the policy is they start by employing South Africans (Monica, PhD in Education Management, educationist, took 5 years to achieve LMI).

Theme 3: Gendered Ascriptions

Poor career progression in the workplace particularly with respect to promotion was strongly linked to gender. Greater challenges with advancing up the corporate ladder appeared more male dominated industries and in work environments with a strong patriarchal leaning.

For me it's two things happening, it's being a foreigner and being a woman. It seems the South African education system is patriarchal in terms of leadership, in terms of promotion. For me it's worse because I'm a foreigner (Iris,

PhD in Animal Science, lecturer, took 3 years to achieve LMI).

And,

Being a woman in IT (Information Technology), the promotion just wasn't coming (Andrea, Master's in Development Studies, programme manager, took 5 years to achieve LMI).

Theme 4: Racialized Ascriptions

Identifying as Black was associated with poorer outcomes in comparison to other racial groups. For instance, being passed for promotion, getting a poorer salary or unfair treatment. Tensions arising from racialized ascriptions were apparent between various races including blacks, whites, colored and Indians, as exemplified in the following views:

If they would hire a white person, we [the blacks] *would train them, next thing the white person is promoted, and you are not* (Andrea, Master's in Development Studies, programme manager, took 5 years to achieve LMI).

And,

You've got so many battles to fight. It's whites against blacks. There's Indians against blacks. And I'm not saying this because it's only the company, it's just in general. I feel that there's racism. In SA, you fight so many battles, you are black, you are a foreigner and you are a woman. Those are the three you are constantly fighting (Charlotte, Diploma in Journalism, administrator, took 7 years to achieve LMI).

Theme 5: Locality

One's location in South Africa impacted significantly on what opportunities were available. Smaller towns were seen as having limited professional job opportunities and not having jobs in line with qualifications obtained in one's home country. For most tied migrants, strong family ties made it difficult to move to other locations to take advantage of job opportunities there. Locality was therefore associated also with a lack of mobility, as supported by the following:

For about three years we lived in Pretoria. I tell you, I did not realize I was a non-South African. Their criteria was just, can you do the job? Do you have this qualification, before we can take you, you must have your qualification in so and so sector. That was just only the criteria. Then you'll be looking at the person interviewing are you not going to ask me if I'm a South African. Cannot you decipher from my tone? From my accent? But they do not care. Because they have mixed with a lot of people who are non-south Africans so me being a non-South African is not an issue so long as you have a permit book. It a totally different experience from what is obtainable in the Free State (Iris, PhD in Animal Science, lecturer, took 3 years to achieve LMI).

And,

I had got something at Rhodes, but family ties also came in, unfortunately… Something was coming up but eish, when we thought of it, the travelling and leaving the kids… It's like, my husband feels we should always be together everywhere. I also feel the same, but I was tempted because I was looking at the salary and I was also looking at the upward mobility and the opportunity that had just been presented but he said money is not everything, we need family (Iris, PhD in Animal Science, lecturer, took 3 years to achieve LMI).

Access to the labor market was predicated on language ability although this was more salient in certain localities compared to others. In this regard ethnicity connected with locality to produce relatively poor labor market outcomes. In these localities, lack of knowledge of Afrikaans, or any one of the indigenous languages was regarded as a factor diminishing the chances of gaining access into the labor market, as expressed in the following quotes:

I have seen adverts where they want an Afrikaans speaking person to teach something in English, because they will have Afrikaans speaking people. The belief is that the students must be able to express themselves, so it's a big limitation (Lucille, B (Honours) Accounting, lecturer, took 4 years to achieve LMI).

The importance of this for LMI was reflected in that certain cities were regarded as more multi-cultural and accepting of foreigners, whereas some were regarded as less accepting of foreigners and with very few employment prospects. Other towns were considered more favorable in terms of offering job prospects for accompanying spouses. This was supported by the following quotes:

… but here [Cape Town] *because it's racist, and they believe foreigners should work in restaurants, or hotels as waiters and cleaners so, it's hard to break into the work market... I always still feel Pretoria was a better city than Cape Town personally. Because the people are better. They are not too racist. They are more accommodating* (Theresa-May, B Accounting, quality analyst, took 8 years to achieve LMI).

It's a small town where there's no media anyway. I could not even apply for any job. And at that time, like journalism in that town, I could not find anything… And then we moved because he also wanted a promotion and we moved in a plantation deep in Mpumalanga... It was

> *even worse for me at that time because I was like, I'm not working. It caused a strain actually, at that time in our marriage. I felt as if I'm the only one who is sacrificing. I cannot get a job and we are even moving deep, deep in plantations. You are happy in terms of your career, but I am not, I'm just here now* (Charlotte, Diploma in Journalism, administrator, took 7 years to achieve LMI).

> *You know how it is in small towns. If you are a professional, what work will you do? There are limited options in terms of professional jobs. It's difficult to find good paying jobs in smaller towns. That's why we ended up moving to Johannesburg* (Andrea, Master's in Development Studies, programme manager, took 5 years to achieve LMI).

Different locations were perceived very differently in the minds of interviewees which some places viewed as being very accepting of foreigners while others were not so accepting, as supported by the following:

> *The only difficult place that I found it very difficult to break through it was here* [in] *Bloemfontein. It was a very difficult one because one, the language, they cannot employ you if you cannot say, what is it, morning in Afrikaans* (Unarine, Bachelor's in HRM, real estate agent, took 4 years to achieve LMI).

> *I think it was in the Northern Cape…., and the guy called me and spoke Afrikaans. I was like, oh, sorry, I do not understand Afrikaans. And he was like, are you for real? You do not understand Afrikaans? You want to work in this company? Oh, no, sorry. All their clients do not even speak English, so I should be able to speak Afrikaans. I just dropped the phone. For me that was like an unspoken code. You do not come here if you cannot* [speak Afrikaans]. *Then, there was a place in Bloemfontein, because you know Free State is just an Afrikaans zone no matter the Sothos and the Tswanas. You guys are just wasting their time if you do not know Afrikaans...* (Iris, PhD in Animal Science, lecturer, took 3 years to achieve LMI).

> *No, I think Cape Town is naturally racist. So, the coloured people, they also have to look after their own which is very commendable because with us the black people we do not look after our own* (Theresa-May, B Accounting, quality analyst, took 8 years to achieve LMI).

DISCUSSION

Recent statistics show that South Africa is one of the top 20 nations globally among those hosting the largest populations of international migrants. The proportion of international migrants as a percentage of the population rose from 2.2% in 2000 to 7.1% in 2017 (United Nation, 2017). This data reflects South Africa's prominence as a regional migration hub in sub-Saharan Africa (Mbiyozo, 2018) and its influential pull factors of a higher standard of living, relatively stable economy, and lower cost of living (Dinbabo and Nyasulu, 2015).

The labor market experiences of tied migrants in this study were distinctly shaped by governing technologies operating at the macro, meso and micro levels and mediated mainly through the gender, race, ethnicity migrant status and locality and the various intersections thereof. This study found that tied migrants were likely to be subject to immobility, precarity and informality in the South African labor market. Furthermore, this study affirmed the assertions that the exercise of power can result in differential treatment based on identity. Contrary to assumptions that high human capital fosters mobility and integration into the labor market (Khattab et al., 2020), this study confirms that tied migrants are in fact a unique group who despite their human capital, generally face unemployment, underemployment and generally, relatively poor integration into the labor market (Gerber and Wanner, 2019; Riaño, 2021).

Like findings by Riaño (2012), this study found that tied migrants face significantly diminished opportunities to integrate into the labor market. This, despite having secured the correct visas that allow them to work and having the appropriate qualifications and/or work experience. Where they may have integrated into the labor market, tied migrants in this study were likely however to be employed below their skill, underpaid, or kept on fixed term work contracts. In part, broad exclusion could be attributed to the very strict employment protection policies which pose significant barriers to LMI by migrants (Ballarino and Panichella, 2017; Ncube et al., 2020). For instance, the Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment [BBBEE] Policy (2013 as amended) represents one of the policies that perform a gatekeeping role in the labor market. The BBBEE sets out to redress the inequalities brought about by the Apartheid era by ensuring "equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workplace," (Government Gazette, 2013, p. 2). BBBEE appointments are solely reserved for Africans, Coloreds and Indians by birth or descent or those who became naturalized citizens prior to 1994, or for those who were eligible prior to 1994 but only became naturalized thereafter. Most of the migrants in this study arrived in South Africa post 2004 and therefore would not be eligible given the criteria set out in the BBBEE thus narrowing the opportunities available to them.

South Africa abounds with controversies about the purported impacts of migration on the labor market and the country's scarce resources. Rising unemployment accompanied by the belief that migrants "steal jobs" and the alleged readiness of unskilled migrants to work for lower wages have all contributed to the rise of xenophobic attacks against immigrants (Landau, 2011; Chinyakata et al., 2019). These attacks are particularly severe against migrants of African and Asian origin (OECD/ILO, 2018). Anti-immigrant sentiments continue to be pervasive and have been expressed by prominent politicians including the former health minister Aaron Motsoaledi, who was quoted

in the media as stating that foreign nationals are placing a burden on the South African health system (South African Broadcasting Corporation News, 2018). This study found that ethicized (us and them) ascriptions played the most significant role in impacting the labor market experiences of tied migrants in South Africa and through which tied migrants were subject to informality, immobility and precarity. This is not surprising however, given the lingering effects of South Africa's apartheid history and the broad anti-immigrant sentiment that remains widely prevalent in the post-1994 era. As Souza and Flippen (2020) note, labor market experiences in South Africa are significantly shaped by socially constructed ethnic and racial boundaries.

This study suggests that ethicized ascriptions in addition, were likely not only to give rise to difficulties integrating into the labor market, but also dictating to some extent what types of jobs tied migrants might be able to access. Owing to these ascriptions tied migrants were likely to face lesser barriers to accessing work in the informal sector as opposed to the professional white collar labor market. This is consistent with the study by Souza and Flippen (2020), which suggests that male immigrants face formidable barriers in accessing the formal sector in South Africa. Consequently, it is not surprising that skilled female migrants would be subject to the same (Ncube et al., 2020; Vanyoro, 2021).

Most significantly, this study suggests the existence of wholesale deskilling, solely based on ethnicity. Ethicized downskilling was associated in non-equality of opportunity, significant down occupational mobility accompanied by poor prospects of upward mobility over time and across employers. For many tied migrants, career progress appeared non-existent and most appeared dissatisfied with their experiences in the labor market.

Many studies point to the difficulties of transferring institutional cultural capital from the country of origin as a significant barrier to labor market integration (Liversage, 2009; Ressia et al., 2017). In the South African context however, as suggested in this study, it appears it is difficult to transpose institutionalized cultural capital gained in the host country. This is contradictory to Bourdieu's theory of capitals which presupposes that institutional cultural capital gained in the host country translates to greater advantage and ease of access into the labor market.

In this regard, institutional cultural capital gained in the host country does not appear to improve the chances of getting employed. It also does not provide a guarantee of full labor market integration nor prevent occupational downward mobility accompanied by underutilization of skills and poor pay owing to ethicized ascriptions. This is also suggestive of the prevalence of significant brain waste among skilled tied migrants. While this may be the case, it does not suggest that the acquisition of institutional cultural capital is not beneficial, however, it seems to be significantly more useful when it is acquired in areas of skills shortages which most of the tied migrants in this study did not have.

Precarity associated with ethicized ascriptions was also to be associated with vulnerability to exploitation, fears of being summarily dismissed, feeling of lack of security and non-belonging. Precarity was also associated with tied migrant status particularly in so far as it was associated with piece jobs that did not provide decent work protections for tied migrants. Critically, the career gaps (of up to several years) associated with tied migrant status was likely to result with consequences impacting on the entire career trajectory including vulnerability to exploitation evidenced by poor salaries. As previous studies have pointed out, it is difficult to recover loss resulting from downward occupational mobility over time.

As noted by Vanyoro (2021) identity markers can shift over time and space and this is true regarding tied migrants. As shown in this study, tied migrant status was strongly linked to what job one might be more eligible for. Acquiring legal permissions to work (for example *via* attainment of permanent residence or work visas) did not necessarily provide any form of advantage in terms of labor integration owing to racialized and ethicized ascriptions but it was viewed as important in allowing access to more formal work. In confirmation of the findings of Vermaak and Muller (2019), this study also confirms that barring the impacts of ethicized ascriptions, naturalized citizens may in fact have greater advantages in the labor market but perhaps only in so much as it opens a wider range of employment opportunities than other migrant statuses. Interestingly, this study also suggests that asylum seekers may fare better regarding integrating into the labor market as compared to tied migrants, i.e., (type of) documentation determines possibilities (Vanyoro, 2021).

The significance of the impact of gender on migration cannot be understated. Critically for example, female migrants almost inevitably are almost always relegated to the position of accompanying partner on account of their gender (Raghuram, 2004; Cooke, 2007; Fobker and Imani, 2017). Regarding labor market experiences, in this study surprisingly, gender appeared to only gain salience regarding male dominated, patriarchal work contexts and in the context of promotion opportunities. Prior research suggests that gender care responsibilities may be a significant barrier for female migrants in respect to LMI (Fobker and Imani, 2017; Ressia et al., 2017), however, this was not as distinct among tied migrants in this study. This may speak to the lesser import of traditional gender role beliefs among younger more educated couples who have divorced themselves from hegemonic norms. Alternatively, this may speak to the demands for migrant families to ensure socioeconomic wellbeing by having both partners well integrated into the labor market. In addition, migrant families in this context may have relatively fewer challenges in establishing a support network and accessing childcare for their younger children, which is deemed a significant barrier in other contexts (Cooke, 2007). Further, the relatively surprising low impact of gendered ascriptions in this study, however, may additionally point to the fact that many in this study did not have male-oriented critical skills which present opportunities to work in typically male dominated contexts, which also presents evidence of gendered inequalities.

In identifying locality as a mediating factor, this study similarly concurs with Vanyoro (2021) who suggests that identity axes are not the only mediating factors to consider regarding

intersectionality. Locality became a strong mediator of labor market experiences owing to the structure of the labor market. As Statistics South Africa (2018) suggests, certain localities are more favorable for migrant labor market integration and mobility is favorable for LMI. As Föbker (2019) asserts regional labor markets and the availability of appropriate employment are critical to LMI. Language skills among tied migrants are key (Ballarino and Panichella, 2017), and in this study, language requirements were also strongly linked to locality.

Racialized ascriptions were regarded as bearing stronger influence in certain localities. Racialized ascriptions typically transcended the typical Black/White binary commonly associated with race and manifested in the differential treatment of blacks from coloreds and Indians as well. Racialized ascriptions were likely to be associated with career immobility wherein others of other races made faster progress up the corporate ladder.

Precarity in this regard, arose from the propensity for poorer salaries or unfair treatment. In addition, regardless of migrant status, in this study, family ties appeared to continue to play a significant role throughout the labor market trajectory of tied migrants (Ballarino and Panichella, 2017), contributing specifically to spatial immobility and therefore also significantly impacting on labor market experiences. Family ties made it difficult for tied migrants to access other employment opportunities in other regions. Limited mobility contributed significantly to the uptake of informal work particularly within smaller towns in South Africa.

Owing to ethicized ascriptions tied migrants faced non-equality of opportunity. This is in keeping with the notion that migrants generally face hierarchical ascriptions (Adjai and Lazaridis, 2013). The distinct presence of notions of othering or non-belonging in the workplace were linked to discriminatory and exclusionary practices (Riaño, 2021) and a significant level of poor integration into South Africa as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Using the intersectional approach and the theory of governmentality this study found that tied migrants are likely to experience informality, immobility and precarity in the South African labor market. Various intersections of ethnicity, migrant status, race, gender, and locality were likely to be the greatest source of disadvantage leading to generally poor labor outcomes. Three key findings emerged from this study and that is, the presence of broad ranging ethicized deskilling is one of the main factors contributing to unemployment and underemployment, there are very limited returns to institutional cultural capital gained in South Africa, and that the attainment of the legal right to work, is not sufficient in terms of guaranteeing full labor migration. This suggests the need for targeted interventions if high human capital bearing female tied migrants are to become significant contributors to economic development in South Africa. Significantly, this study was able to contribute to the literature in terms of understanding how tied migrants fair in the South African labor context, which as Föbker (2019) asserts, is an important policy question.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that supports the findings of this study is available on request from the corresponding author. The data is not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of the Free State, General Higher Research Ethics Committee. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This article was adapted from the doctoral thesis of FZ, who executed the research, while MS was the study leader and provided conceptualization guidelines and editorial inputs. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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"Is There Room for Both Loves?": The Experience of Couplehood Among Women Living With a Widower With Young Children

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Very few studies to date have explored the couplehood relationship in blended families with young children created after widowhood. This study sought to add to our knowledge of this issue by examining the couplehood experience of women who started a family with a widower with young children, with no children of their own. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 Israeli women aged 32–78 years. The findings indicate that many participants feel that the deceased wife continues to be present in their partner's life and that she is an integral part of their couplehood relationship. The participants described two subsystems existing alongside the couple subsystem with their partner, namely, the partner's spousal subsystem with his first wife; and a triadic subsystem consisting of the woman, her partner, and his deceased wife. The perceived presence of the first wife raised poignant questions concerning the place of the two women in the partner's life. Participants' narratives revealed the dissonance between understanding and acknowledging their partner's continuing bond with and affection for his deceased wife on the one hand, and recognition of his love for them on the other hand. The findings shed light on the complexity inherent in a couple relationship with a widower and may assist professionals who provide support to blended families in understanding the unique challenges faced by these women. This would enable them to tailor their counseling and the therapeutic process to the particular needs of these women.

Keywords: second couplehood, widowhood, deceased wife, widowers, women

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women who start a family with a widower with young children are forced to contend with a unique type of couplehood (Hickey, 1998; Lavy, 2015). Numerous studies have considered the couple relationship in blended families after divorce (Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham, 2004; Mirecki et al., 2013; Shafer et al., 2013; Zionov, 2015), and growing research attention is being paid to remarriage after the loss of a spouse when the children have already left home (Davidson, 2002; Carr, 2004; De Jong Gierveld, 2004; Carr and Boerner, 2013; Osmani et al., 2018; Ayuso, 2019). However, only a few studies have focused on couplehood in blended families after widowhood when the children are still at home (Kissman and Dane, 2001; Bishop and Cain, 2003; Baker, 2014; Bokek-Cohen, 2014).

Moreover, a review of existing studies shows that less is known about the experience of partners of widowed individuals. Most studies do not distinguish between widows and widowers, disregarding any possible differences between the two family models (Moss and Moss, 1996; Grinwald and Shabat, 1997; Kissman and Dane, 2001; Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011). The couplehood experience of women living with widowers with young children has received less attention in studies (Hickey, 1998; Lavy, 2015) that are related to various aspects of their lives. This study sought to add to our limited knowledge of these women by examining the way in which they experience their couplehood.

Couplehood in Blended Families

Blended families, which are becoming increasingly common (Ben-Yehoshua and Sabar, 2012), pose unique challenges for the couple. Unlike the relationship that develops in a first marriage, a second marriage begins in the presence of children from the former relationship (Pacey, 2005; Ben-Yehoshua and Sabar, 2012) and the presence, whether physical or otherwise, of the previous spouse (Ganong and Coleman, 2004; Martin-Uzzi and Duval-Tsioles, 2013). This reality is likely to complicate the building of a couple's relationship, as the partners do not have the opportunity to spend time in a couple space, which allows for the development of intimacy, mutual understanding, and sharing, without the presence of a third party (Ganong and Coleman, 2004; Pacey, 2005). Furthermore, the new couple's relationship takes shape against the background of a previous family history made up of rituals, values, and shared meanings that have yet to be constructed by the new couple (Dupuis, 2007). This may lead to tension between the couple, as the partner entering the existing family structure may feel they do not belong (Ganong and Coleman, 2004). In addition, the literature indicates that second marriage, whether after divorce or the death of a spouse, is created in the shadow of the loss of the former relationship (Pacey, 2005). Nevertheless, the different reasons for the dissolution of that relationship necessitate different types of coping. While divorce results from the desire of at least one of the two sides to end the relationship, which is therefore perceived as a failed marriage (Martin-Uzzi and Duval-Tsioles, 2013), widowhood is involuntary (Bokek-Cohen, 2014). The limited literature that focuses on couplehood after the death of a spouse suggests that the experience of loss is a central factor in understanding the new couplehood and presents the couple with unique difficulties (Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011).

Couplehood After the Loss of a Spouse

A review of the literature on couplehood following the death of a spouse indicates that loss is an integral part of the new romantic relationship and that this relationship does not replace the previous one but develops alongside it (Moss and Moss, 1996; Silverman and Klass, 1996; Grinwald and Shabat, 1997; Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011). For most of the twentieth century, ongoing ties to a deceased person were regarded as an indicator of pathological grief (Klass, 2006). This perspective was grounded in Freud's (1917/2009) "Mourning and Melancholia" in which he argued that successful adaptation to loss requires psychological separation from the deceased and relinquishing the bond with them to complete the grieving process. Klass et al. (2014) were the first to introduce the notion of the "continuing bonds paradigm" (Florczak and Lockie, 2019), describing the connection with a deceased loved one as normal rather than pathological. This approach also informed examinations of the loss of a spouse (Bauer and Bonanno, 2001; Lowe and McClement, 2011; Bokek-Cohen, 2014), which investigated the effect of continuing bonds on adaptation and coping with loss. Some found a positive effect. Thus, Lowe and McClement (2011) reported that widows' continuing bond with their deceased husbands strengthened them and helped them to maintain the continuity of their identity. Similarly, Bauer and Bonanno (2001) found that the ongoing connection played an important role in creating a sense of meaning and personal continuity after the loss. Other studies, however, reported a negative effect of continuing bonds on adaptation and coping (Klass, 2006; Root and Exline, 2014; Florczak and Lockie, 2019).

The complexity of the influence of a continuing bond also stands out in studies examining its effect on couplehood with a widow or widower. Several studies indicated that coping with a partner's continuing bond with a deceased spouse is not an easy matter (Moss and Moss, 1996; Silverman and Klass, 1996; Grinwald and Shabat, 1997; Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011; Bokek-Cohen, 2014). Kissman and Dane (2001) presented a case study of a widower who remarried a divorced woman and noted that the widower's ongoing connection to his late wife alongside the development of the new couplehood led to a triadic relationship that included the deceased woman, thereby interfering in the creation of the second relationship. The complex ramifications of this triadic relationship can also be seen in the study by Bokek-Cohen (2014), who examined the couple experience of young widows and their spouses. The new partners reported that their wives' continuing bond with their previous husband gave them the sense that she was married to two men. Although she loved them and was committed to them, she also continued to love and be committed to her deceased husband. Similarly, Moss and Moss (1981, 1996) examined couplehood after the loss of a spouse among older couples and found that the partner of the widow or widower was coping with the fear that their spouse's commitment to their first marriage came at the cost of their commitment to them.

A further difficulty for the new spouse relates to the tendency of widows and widowers to idealize their previous partner. Indeed, the literature on loss, in general, indicates the tendency to eulogize the dead (Hayes, 2016). O'Rourke (2004), who examined the adjustment to bereavement of older widows, found that this tendency facilitates better adaptation. Nevertheless, idealizing a deceased spouse may make it difficult for a new partner to feel appreciated (Grinwald and Shabat, 1997; Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011). In addition, it may cause the new partner to draw a comparison between the two relationships (Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011), potentially leading to a sense of insecurity (Moss and Moss, 1981; Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011).

To conclude, a review of the existing literature reveals that few studies have considered couplehood with a widow or widower

from the perspective of the new partner. Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, no previous study has related specifically to women who started a family with a widower with young children, with no children of their own. This study sought to expand our knowledge of this population by examining their experience of a couplehood that develops against the background of the loss of their partner's first wife.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed a constructivist-qualitative paradigm using the principles of Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2008, 2009).

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 30 women who had been in a family relationship with a widower with children. The eligibility criteria for inclusion in the study were that they were in a relationship with their widowed partner for at least 1 year; that at the start of the relationship, at least one of their partner's children was under the age of 18 years; and that they had no biological children of her own. Several methods were used to recruit participants: (1) An appeal to Internet support groups dealing with widowhood; (2) a call for participants posted on Facebook; (3) a notice calling for participants hung on bulletin boards throughout the campus of the researchers' university; and (4) the snowball method (Noy, 2008), whereby women who agreed to take part in the study were asked to refer to the researchers other women with whom they were acquainted who met the criteria.

All the participants had been born in Israel and all were Jewish, save for one Muslim Arab woman. Ten defined themselves as religious. Age at the time of the interview ranged from 32 to 78 years. In terms of education, 24 had an academic degree, five had post-secondary education, and 1 had a high-school diploma. For almost all the women, this was their first familial relationship, with only two being divorced. All, except one, were married to their partner. Years in the relationship ranged from 1.5 to 39 years, and the age of the partner's children at the start of the relationship ranged from 1 to 18 years. In only two cases did the man have older children as well.

2.2. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. The first six interviews centered around a research question concerning the woman's new role as mother. In describing their experience of motherhood, all six participants, with no exceptions, also referred at length to issues they were not specifically asked about, including the decision to enter a relationship with a widower with young children; their place, and that of the deceased wife, in their partner's life; and the sense of foreignness in the family home. Consequently, the research question in the following interviews was expanded to relate to the woman's overall experience and not solely her experience of becoming a mother. In the first section of these interviews, the participants were asked to speak freely about their experience as women in a couple relationship with a widower with young children. In the second section, they were presented with specific questions, outlined in the interview guide, which were similarly expanded as part of the circular process of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), in which data collection and analysis are conducted in parallel.

The time and place of the interviews were chosen by the participants, and they were conducted by the first author. Each lasted between 90 min and 3 h. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed with the participants' permission.

Content analysis was performed in the three stages suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), namely, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In open coding, the data are broken down, conceptualized, and categorized. In this study, this process revealed contents not included in the research question initially framed, which related solely to the experience of motherhood. As noted above, this led to the understanding that motherhood is only one part of the women's multifaceted experience. As a result, after the first six interviews, the research question was expanded to relate to the participants' overall experience, with the questions in the interview guide aimed at allowing for a broader observation of their lives on various levels. Each of the contents that emerged from the following 24 interviews was subjected to open coding, making it possible to identify a variety of categories.

Axial coding, during which connections are drawn between the categories and subcategories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), revealed three main categories, namely, the experience of home, the motherhood experience, and the couplehood experience. This study focuses on the experience of couplehood.

Selective coding identified the processes and characteristics of each of the three main categories. With respect to the experience of couplehood, several subjects that played an important role in shaping this experience were identified. The analysis was directed to understanding the connection and hierarchy between them as reflected in the participants' narratives. Three major subcategories of the couplehood experience were identified, namely, the presence of the first wife in the life of the partner and family, the factors presencing the deceased woman, and the new woman's place in her partner's life.

2.3. Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the authors' university. The aims and procedure of the study were explained to each participant, who then signed an informed consent form. To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were used.

3. RESULTS

3.1. The Presence of the First Wife in the Life of the Partner and Family

The overwhelming majority of the participants stated that the fact that their partner was a widower impacted the new couplehood. A dominant theme, iterated in numerous interviews, was the sense that the deceased wife continued to be present in the partner's life and was still an integral part of family and couple relationships:

I don't believe there's a day that he doesn't think of her (Michal[1]).

I'm certain he talks to her. I'm sure of it. He would never tell me, not because he's hiding anything but because it's not in his nature to share. But I'm 100% certain he has conversations with her. I'm sure (Shiraz).

Some participants attributed the first wife's presence to the tragic manner in which their partner's relationship with her ended. As they described it, death terminated a relationship that did not end voluntarily, and they noted the difference between a marriage that ended in divorce and one that was cut short by the death of a spouse:

He was in a relationship with a woman for 30 years, and they didn't want to end it. It ended because of an illness. . . In the case of a widower, there was a relationship, and that relationship ended in a way no one chose. . . I had that feeling, that the relationship wasn't over. It's a very different situation from divorce. In a divorce, there's definition. There's a breakdown, a decree, the relationship is over! There's a beginning and an end. Not in widowhood. There's an involuntary separation. It's different (Na'ama).

The presence of the first wife was manifested in varying intensity in the course of the couple's relationship. Her continued presence aroused a broad range of emotions and difficult questions regarding the woman's own place in her partner's life. The interviewees related to three primary factors presencing the deceased woman in the couple's relationship, namely, their own need to learn about her, their partner's need to preserve her memory, and family events.

3.2. Factors Presencing the Deceased Woman in the Couple Relationship

3.2.1. The Woman's Need to Learn About the First Wife

Most of the participants expressed a desire to learn about the deceased woman through stories and memories. As Ya'ara put it:

I felt I wanted to see more and more pictures of her, especially with the girls. . .to know how it once was. . .what his [her partner] family was like, how the four of them were together, how it was when they just met and how it was when they were a young couple with one daughter and then with another daughter.

The interviews revealed a variety of reasons for this need. For example, in the case of Orly, it was related to the fact that she was raising the woman's children, and it was, therefore, important for her to know as much as she could about their mother:

I said, it can't be that everyone knows her so well except for me. That's an impossible situation. . . Like, here I am raising her children. . .and I felt like. . .like. . .I have to get to know her as well as I can.

Galit attributed her need to learn about the deceased woman to her desire to be part of her partner's past:

Some of the memories, I want to be part of everything he brings with him. He brings it with him in the present and in the past and in the future. And I want to be part of the past he had. It's very significant for the whole personality I married. That's very important to me.

For most of the participants who expressed their need to learn about the deceased woman, this need was present at the very start of the relationship:

At the beginning I remember I asked him a million questions about her. . . I told him "I'm curious. I want to know who she was". . . She's part of his life, of the children's life, and this is my family. So from the beginning I didn't only get to know him and the children, I got to know her too (Orly).

Other women indicated that the need evolved gradually, appearing at a later stage in the couple's relationship:

I remember it took time until. . . I preferred not to know what she looked like. At the beginning it really really scared me. I wanted to stay in my bubble. I knew there was a woman who died but I didn't. . . Gal [her partner] wanted very much for me to see pictures of her. . . I don't know. I was afraid to look. . . I don't remember what scared me, but I remember I wanted to put it off while we were inside the bubble of a beginning (Ya'ara).

Alongside the need to learn about their partner's first wife through family photos and anecdotes, many participants described the difficult emotions these memories aroused. It was particularly hard for them to deal with memories relating to the previous couple's relationship. For example, they were more comfortable looking at family pictures or photos of the mother and her children alone, but pictures presenting their partner's relationship with his first wife were hard for them to handle. For example, one woman spoke of her difficulty coping with the preservation of the memory of her partner's relationship with his deceased wife in the home. She reported that after they renovated the house, she put back photos of the first wife alone or with her daughter, but not the romantic picture of the couple:

When you come into our house. . .um. . .even before we met there were two pictures of Shani [the first wife] with Noa [her daughter], one in the living room and one in the dinette, and there were similar photos on the refrigerator as well as a lovely one of the three of them together. There was also a photo of him with Shani, a very romantic one. They were kissing or something like that. After the renovation. . .the pictures were put back in place but now it wasn't exactly the same place. . .and the photo of the romantic kiss didn't go back where it was (Shachar).

The participants also spoke at length about the difficulty of dealing with memories in which the deceased woman was idealized by their partner. Many stated that their partner tended to describe his first wife as the perfect woman, highlighting her virtues. For example, Lotem noted that the idealization of the previous wife made her undervalue herself:

This practice, that when someone dies they become some sort of. . .like an angel on Earth. What human being is so perfect and amazing? And. . .it's like you're taking their place. . . You're like. . .stepping into their shoes, and. . .it's like. . .it's a heavy burden, like how can I. . . At the beginning it made me very emotional, at the beginning I didn't give myself much credit (Lotem).

[1]The names and personal details of the participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

Sima described how the idealization of the deceased wife placed her in a disadvantaged position:

> *But you can't say anything bad about her because she died and she's up there on some sort of pedestal like a saint. And I always, I get irritated and angry. I'm a human being and I can't compare to her. That's the price you have to pay when you're in a relationship with a widower. . . As if I expected him, you know, to say something about his wife that was annoying, but he's never said anything negative about her (Sima).*

While most of the interviewees referred to their need to learn about the first wife at some stage in the relationship, others expressed reservations about doing so. Na'ama's reservations, for instance, stemmed from the fear that preserving the past would place obstacles in the path of the new relationship:

> *I didn't want to hear about his first wife, what happened and how it was. I worked on the assumption that if he was choosing to begin a relationship now, then you put the past aside and start a new relationship. It's the same as my not talking about my exes and what it was like with them. It's not relevant and not appropriate (Na'ama).*

3.2.2. The Partner's Need to Preserve the Memory of His First Wife

The participants regarded their partner's need to preserve the memory of the first wife as the major reason for her presence in the couple's relationship and evidence of his continuing bond with her. The large majority of women reported that their partners exhibited this need at varying intensity in different stages of the relationship. It was expressed primarily in two ways, namely, keeping items associated with the deceased wife and commemoration of her.

3.2.2.1. Keeping Items Associated With the Deceased Wife

The interviews revealed the widowers' need to hold on to items belonging to their first wife to preserve her memory. For example, one participant spoke of a drawer in which her partner kept the deceased woman's personal items. The drawer was perceived as the partner's private space:

> *He has a drawer I've never opened. There are a few of her [his first wife's] things in there, her identity card, a framed picture. I don't know, I never opened it. I have no interest in it. It's not mine. . . It's in a three drawer dresser. I know what's in the top drawer, because he puts his wallet and a flashlight in it. . . But that drawer I don't open. . . I don't know. It's his private territory. I don't touch it (Mira).*

Holding on to items symbolic of the first wife, and letting go of these items, appears to be part of a dynamic process. Most of the participants related that at the start of their relationship, their partner had difficulty letting go of these items, but it became easier over time. For example, one woman noted that only after several years of marriage did her husband decide to give away the deceased woman's clothes. Other participants spoke of their partner's wedding ring from his first marriage, which they regarded as symbolizing the previous relationship and presencing the first wife in their couplehood. As Galit put it:

> *The ring makes it tangible to me that he had a relationship before me. That he loved somebody before me. I know that, I entered the relationship knowing that. It's a fact. But there's something in physical objects that makes it very concrete.*

She went on to describe the process her partner underwent with respect to the ring:

> *Today it's nothing. I remember a little something from 7 years ago. . . After he took off the ring, it was in his drawer. . . We talked about it, He moved the ring to a box that actually belongs to the girls and it's still in the house. But, like, it's not in his drawer. Like, it's in a box of things he put away, that he wants to keep for the girls (Galit).*

The participants experienced taking the ring off as an act symbolizing the end of the first marriage and the process of letting go of the previous couplehood. When this did not occur, the women were apt to feel insecure in their relationship. This is apparent from the words of Lotem, who had been in a relationship for 5 years, but felt that her partner's wedding ring from his first marriage, which he continued to wear, prevented the creation of a new emotional couple space:

> *He still wears the wedding ring. . . He hasn't entirely let go [of his first marriage], as if it's still there somehow. . . She [the couple therapist] confronted him with it. . .with the fact that he still has the wedding ring on his finger. . .about letting go and about. . .about the fact that I. . .don't feel. . .like I don't feel secure enough in my place. I feel as if. . .it's always there under the surface, in a very very sensitive place, very charged, and it has to do with a process of letting go that he has to undergo with himself. It can and should be a part of life, but at. . .a level of coming to terms with it more.*

Later in the interview, Lotem stated:

> *I feel inside that. . .he still doesn't entirely accept me. It will happen when he releases something. . . He doesn't have to let it all go, but. . . he has to free himself from something in order to let himself accept me too. . . I don't feel secure enough in the place I'm in.*

3.2.2.2. Commemorating the Deceased Wife

The partner's need to preserve the memory of his first wife is also expressed in various forms of commemoration, such as preparing a memorial book, organizing a walk in her name, keeping pictures of her in the home, or visiting her grave on the anniversary of her death. Most participants reported that the acts of commemoration decreased over time, with some attributing this decline to the strengthening of the new couple's relationship:

> *In a certain way I think he was a widower by definition. He was still preoccupied by memories of her and preparing her book and his preoccupation with it helped him process it, process his grief. . . He tried to sell her artworks and things like that, and it seemed to me it was also part of the processing. I think as soon as he decided he was ready to get married, it all subsided. This preoccupation wasn't there anymore (Vered).*

In contrast, several participants noted that their partner continued to be absorbed in preserving the memory of his first wife even after he was in a new relationship. For example, in the case of Hannah, this went on for many years into the marriage, arousing in her a sense of discomfort and of being in competition with the deceased woman:

I think somehow when we got married I expected him to put it aside. . . I said to him. "Why do you have to involve yourself in other things associated with your dead wife? There's a memorial service, you put out a book, why do you have to reach out to other niches related to her? Why do you go to those places? I'm your wife!". . . It's like he was drawn there. . . He didn't let go. He says, "What do you mean? I have to do it."

3.2.2.3. Family Events

The participants spoke at length of the way in which family events, such as memorial services and family celebrations, especially those of their non-biological children, presenced the first wife in the life of the couple and the family. Eden, for instance, described how she felt her strong presence in her partner's life at these times:

I have no doubt that she pops up in his world and she's there with him, doesn't just pop up, but pops up and stays there for a visit. Certainly before special events, certainly when the children start to get married. At the bar mitzva [2] and bat mitzva [3] we celebrated, it was obvious to me that he missed her much more, and he needed her to be there much more, and he communicated with her more. . . I know he also writes to her sometimes.

The deceased woman's birthday was also commemorated in different ways by several of the participants' families. One interviewee noted that the whole family got together every year on her birthday:

On Roni's [the first wife's] birthday it's become a tradition for the whole family to come to our house on her birthday. We try to make it the precise day, but if it doesn't work out then the day before or the day after everyone gets together at our house. . . It's a very strange occasion because there's a need for them to be together, but it's not really a birthday party. . .and they hardly talk about her. It's not like they all meet and "let's talk about Roni," but she's very present there. . . So it's a strange occasion but they keep doing it because it's become sort of a tradition (Shachar).

Another participant said that commemoration of the deceased wife's birthday included a visit to her grave with her partner:

The whole week leading up to his first wife's birthday he's not there. . . What made it even harder was that I had just gotten pregnant and I was all excited. . .and we were looking for a house, and I thought how can you be here and there at the same time. He has this amazing ability I can't understand. . . But I feel like the guy is sort of . . .fading out. . . And I find myself in a surrealistic world going with my husband to buy balloons and flowers for his dead first wife that he doesn't buy for me because he doesn't like. . . I just didn't know what to do with myself that day (Michal).

Another family event at which the presence of the deceased woman is particularly strong is her annual memorial service. Eden noted that on the days before the service, her partner would refer to her more frequently:

Before the memorial service, he'd mention her more often in our conversations and at Friday night dinner he'd say to the kids, "I still think about Mom, I think about her every day. She's always with us."

Dikla described how difficult it was for her when her partner chose to praise his first wife at the service by singing "Woman of Valor." It made her feel that his love for his first wife was greater than his love for her:

At the memorial service, all of a sudden he said: "Okay, so I want to devote this song to my wife, may she rest in peace," and started to sing the song, "Woman of Valor." It felt like a slap on the face. That's exactly what I felt, and I had nowhere to escape to. It was a small house, there were a lot of people, and I had nowhere to run to. . . After that I simply couldn't talk to him. The next day, someone called me, a widow who had married a single man, to give me her support. I said to her, "I don't know if there's any way back from here, how he could, right before my eyes, sing 'Woman of Valor' to his first wife as if he was in the throes of longing and yearning." And then she said, "Think of it differently. It doesn't necessarily mean he doesn't appreciate your virtues". . . I wasn't capable, because I felt like he was there and he wasn't here. I felt he loved what he had had, and he loved her now as well.

Shachar related that while in the past the strong presence of the first wife at the annual memorial service had undermined her confidence in her relationship, things had changed over time:

Then, at the service one year, the things he wrote. . . He wrote about how he finds himself consulting with his first wife, telling her things, passing by her picture and telling her. . .thinking about what she would say. . . um. . .like some sort of intimacy he has with her that I'm not part of. . . Again, I think today we're in a different place than five years, four years, ago. . .um. . .because my presence and the existence of our family and of Guy [her husband] and me as a couple are already so established that. . .it's not there. Today it isn't a threatening space, but I remember I read it and I said, Wow.

Nevertheless, most of the participants stated that the presence of the first wife is supposed to be dominant at the memorial service, and they actually choose to play down their own presence at the event. Some opted not to go to the gravesite, as they believed the day should be devoted to their partner and his first wife, and they had no place there. Even those who did go stressed their need to minimize their presence:

It's hard for me when I'm mentioned at the memorial service. It isn't appropriate. Those aren't days to talk about me. . . It's not the time to praise me or show me respect. . . It's hard for me, when they refer to me during the service. It's her day alone, her place alone (Deborah).

3.3. The New Woman's Place in Her Partner's Life

The fact that the new couplehood takes shape against the background of the partner's first marriage and the continued presence of his first wife raises questions as to the place of the new woman in his life. The interviews indicate two issues in particular, namely, the partner's preference, that is, "her or me?"; and "is there room for both loves?"

[2] A ceremony that takes place on the thirteenth birthday of a Jewish boy.

[3] A ceremony that takes place on the twelfth birthday of a Jewish girl.

3.3.1. "Her or Me?"

The participants' need to contend with the question of their place and the place of the new relationship in their partner's life raised the issue of which of the women the partner preferred. They spoke of wondering, if, given the opportunity, their partner would choose themselves or his first wife. For example, Orly described how difficult it was for her when her partner shared a recurring dream in which he had to choose between the two women:

> *He'd wake up from a dream at night and tell me he had dreamt she'd come back and that I was there and she was there, and he had to decide. He'd describe it to me [she laughs]. He didn't keep anything to himself. It was hard for me to get up in the morning after he told me about his dream. It would stay with me. . . It was hard knowing that if she [his first wife] came back. . .it wasn't a given that he'd choose me again. That's hard. Or maybe he would, I mean, it's not clear, not clear. . .but it. . .it weighed on me.*

Another participant similarly noted that the question of her partner's preference echoed in her mind and remained unanswered:

> *Sometimes I'm troubled by the question, what would happen if we were both there, who would he choose? I think he would choose me, of course, no question about it [she laughs], but he might choose her, because she's different (Malka).*

This issue arose particularly when the couple's relationship was not going smoothly:

> *Look, we don't fight a lot, you know, real serious fights. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, sometimes it seems to me he's saying to himself, "I wish Snunit [his first wife] was here. It was much nicer with her." I'm not sure he says that. I could ask him. He'd undoubtedly say no. But sometimes it seems to me. . .let's say, if I were him I'd say it, What do I need this for?! She's so annoying, it was so great with my wife. What do I need this for? It's too bad she died (Ya'ara).*

For most of the interviewees, the question of their partner's preference remained open. Several participants, however, expressed the feeling that they would always be their partner's second choice:

> *I'll always be the second wife. . .um. . .It's good and it's bad. Like, he compares us, he doesn't compare us. . . He didn't get a divorce, but there was a woman there before. . . When it comes down to it, it ended with a lot of love (Michal).*

> *I told him, "I know that feeling. . .like there's a multi-storied building and like she's on the first floor, and the first floor is important. I feel that I am the second floor. . ." I'm not complaining, but that's how it is. I'm not the first (Dikla).*

3.3.2. "Is There Room for Both Loves?"

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the question of whether there was room for two loves in the partner's life. Most of the participants stated that their partner continued to love his first wife. Thus, Ilana described a letter he read out at his deceased wife's memorial service:

> *He wrote to her on the anniversary of her death and read it out at the memorial service: "There is a love you have for people who are gone and will never return, people a large part of whom remain deep in your heart—a love that will never end."*

Later in the interview, she referred to the confusion aroused by her partner's simultaneous love for his first wife and for her:

> *I'm a little confused. . . He loves her and me too. . .But the word "love" should belong to one woman. It's a complexity I live with (Ilana).*

Other participants also expressed the difficulty of coming to terms with this duality:

> *Suppose I say he does feel a connection and love for his first wife, then it's like I don't feel loved enough. . . Sometimes yes, sometimes no. I feel very appreciated, very much so, but love. . .? When he also loves her? (Malka).*

> *For many years it was hard for me to accept that he could keep telling me he loves me, because how can you say you love me at all when I know you worshipped her and loved her very much, and. . .all you had together (Rotem).*

> *It can arouse, um, jealousy, thinking, "Wait a minute, does he really love me or does he love her?" Like, "Is he with her or is he with me?" It has to do more with an imaginary relationship. Like, it matters very much where the greater weight is (Galit).*

These quotes shed light on the complexity inherent in a relationship with a widower, revealing the difficult questions that the dual love poses for the new woman. The participants referred to viewing this complexity from a variety of perspectives that helped them accept the situation. Orly, for instance, attempted to give it a logical explanation:

> *The feeling, but it's a feeling that stayed with me, that he loves her very much. I'd ask him all the time if he misses her. . . At the beginning it was strange. But at some point it became. . .like, I said, I explained it to myself. It's logical, it makes sense! The guy loved somebody very much and she disappeared on him! Of course he loves her. Like, we love people we are separated from against our will. It's not over, and it will go on. . .um. . .and that's okay. I mean, it's, it's. . .it's right, it's logical. Is it good? I don't know if it's good.*

Although they had difficulty coming to terms with the fact that their partner still loves his first wife, several participants also noted that this love poses no real threat to them for a number of reasons:

> *There are things about a relationship with a widower that are comforting, in inverted commas. She can never turn up again (Orly).*

> *She was there until a certain point in time and I'm there from another point in time, and there's no overlap. She doesn't threaten to enter my time frame and I don't threaten to go back to hers. One was then and one is now (Yaara).*

> *One of my exes always talked about his previous girlfriend. Sharon [her partner] doesn't do that at all. To his credit, I've never heard a single word of comparison, and. . .um. . .but I live with the knowledge that the heart is divided into different parts (Michal).*

The couple dynamics was considered by the women the most important factor in resolving the ambiguity inherent in the dual

love. For some women, the insecurity regarding their place in their partner's life gave rise to a need for positive reinforcements from him to prove his love for them:

> *We're very much together, really going through it together. Um. . .he always conveys trust and a very deep love, always reminds me of it. I think it's very very meaningful, um, like giving me the. . .he helps me maintain a sense of security. . . I feel that if I didn't have a sense of security, it would be very hard to be in this situation, like entering a place, a space I may not fill, and maybe I don't do enough, and maybe I'm not loved enough, and maybe and maybe and maybe. . . I think he plays a very important role here in strengthening it, that place, telling me he loves me. I think it's really important (Galit).*

> *I felt as if he made room for me, he absolutely made room for me. . . Certainly in the emotional space, and also in the general space. I remember saying to him even before we got married, I said, "After the wedding when we're walking down the street you'll hold my hand. You can also kiss me in public. Now, that wasn't something they [her husband and his first wife] did before. I said, "I don't care! It's allowed by religious law. I want it. I need that proof, I need that public expression. I need the children to see it, to see that you love me." What can I say, it was important to me. I think he learned to like it in time. To acknowledge it (Eden).*

These words demonstrate how the perceived presence of the deceased woman impacted participants' couplehood experience. Indeed, many of the participants reported feeling that they had entered a triadic relationship that included the first wife:

> *Every time. . .we came to certain points in life. . .um. . .or special events. . .I always felt like Ofra [the first wife] was sitting here [she points to one shoulder] and Arik [her partner] was sitting here [she points to her other shoulder] and I have to carry all of us into the event (Orly).*

> *Like. . .um, what I felt, that we're almost three, that she's there in our space. . . She's there in the context of a partner. . .with all the memories surrounding that space, and go find your place. . . I had to find my place. . . Now, for me that was very hard (Malka).*

Rakefet felt that the first wife was even present at intimate moments:

> *It bothered me, just the thought that he was looking at her picture and thinking of her and I'm sitting next to him. The thought went through my mind that he's hugging me and kissing me and thinking of her. . .as if she was with us.*

The triadic relationship created a dissonance the women had to contend with, as reflected in the following quote:

> *In parallel to me, he leads another life with Roni [the first wife], as if there's a life with another woman, and I can't complain, he's not cheating on me [she smiles]. It's not cheating, but what he had there I can't provide and what he has with me he can't get there (Shachar),*

4. DISCUSSION

This study investigated the couplehood experience of women who started a family with a widower with young children, with no children of their own. Similar to previous studies of couplehood with a widower (Moss and Moss, 1981; Grinwald and Shabat, 1997; Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011; Klass et al., 2014), the results show that most of the participants felt that the deceased first wife was an integral part of the family and their relationship with their partner. Many of the interviewees noted that the presence of the first wife in these relationships stemmed both from their own need to learn about her and their partner's need to preserve her memory. Her presence aroused conflicts and questions about their own place in the couple relationship.

The concept of "subsystems," a fundamental component of the model of Structural Family Therapy (SFT) developed by Minuchin (1974), may provide a theoretical perspective for understanding the complexity inherent in the presence of the first wife in the couple relationship in a blended family after the loss of the children's biological mother. According to SFT, the family system is composed of interrelated subsystems based on generation, gender, and role, which may consist of individuals or dyads (Minuchin, 1974). Studies conducted in recent decades (Rosenberg and Guttmann, 2001; Faber, 2004; Dupuis, 2010; Parent et al., 2014) show that the subsystems in the traditional two-parent family have now been joined by a variety of new subsystems that exist in other family models, such as non-biological parent and non-biological child, and non-biological siblings. Two additional subsystems that do not exist in the traditional family model emerged from the interviews in this study, namely, the partner's couplehood with his first wife; and a triadic subsystem consisting of the new woman, her partner, and his deceased wife. In the eyes of the interviewees, these two subsystems exist side by side with, and impact, the couplehood they have built with their partner. This finding is in line with the results of previous studies conducted among widows and widowers (Moss and Moss, 1996; Silverman and Klass, 1996; Grinwald and Shabat, 1997; Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011; Bokek-Cohen, 2014), showing that the continuing bond with the deceased partner influences the new couple relationship. Our participants reported feeling the presence of the subsystem of the partner and his first wife at varying intensity, becoming stronger primarily when they and their partner were having problems, at family events, and on dates associated with the deceased woman, such as the anniversary of her death and her birthday.

The participants' sense that their partner's relationship with his first wife exists alongside their couplehood relationship is consistent with the continuing bonds paradigm (Klass et al., 2014), whereby the bond with a deceased loved one persists throughout a bereaved individual's life. It is manifested in various ways, including memories, keeping the deceased's personal belongings, sensing the presence of the deceased, and identifying with the deceased by adopting their habits and values (Field et al., 2003). The women in this study referred to two major ways in which they felt their partner preserved his bond with his first wife, namely, keeping items associated with her and commemorations of her. The interviews revealed a complex picture of the women's experience of their partner's continuing bond with his deceased wife. The emotions they described

ranged from positive to negative to ambivalent, with their response influenced primarily by the degree to which they perceived the bond to be central to their partner's life. This might be explained in terms of the conceptualization proposed by Florczak and Lockie (2019), who characterize the continuing bond with the deceased spouse as either in the "foreground" or in the "background." Bonds in the foreground color most of the bereaved spouse's life and are central to it. Those in the background enable the individual to maintain the connection without dwelling on it and without it interfering with their desire to form new relationships. When the women in our study perceived their partner's continuing bond with his first wife to be in the foreground, that is, when they described his difficulty parting from or storing her personal belongings or his ongoing preoccupation with her commemoration years into their relationship, they spoke of feeling insecure in their couplehood and that they were in competition with the deceased wife. Previous studies of widowhood (Moss and Moss, 1996; Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011; Bokek-Cohen, 2014) reported similar findings, showing that when the continuing bond with the deceased spouse occupies a central place in the life of the partner, it may lead to difficulties in the new couplehood and a sense of insecurity in the new partner. Our findings indicate that these effects tend to lessen in intensity over time, coming to the fore primarily at family events and on dates associated with the first wife.

One of the most common reasons for the insecurity of the new partner is the bereaved partner's reluctance to take off the wedding ring from their first marriage (Moss and Moss, 1996; Bokek-Cohen, 2014), an issue also raised in the interviews in this study. The wedding ring is a declaration of status, symbolizing continued commitment to the first marriage (Moss and Moss, 1996). When the symbolic act of removing the ring and thus letting go of the first marriage was not performed, our participants reported feeling their partner was in another relationship in addition to theirs. Bokek-Cohen (2014) similarly found that when widows did not cease to wear the ring from their previous marriage, their husbands felt their wives were married to two men.

The way in which our interviewees experienced their partner's continuing bond with his first wife was also influenced by the manner in which he chose to describe her. When he idealized the deceased woman and related only to her positive qualities, the women felt inferior to her. Idealization of the deceased is a well-known phenomenon, emerging from studies of loss in general (O'Rourke, 2004; Hayes, 2016) and loss of a spouse in particular (Grinwald and Shabat, 1997; Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011). Our findings are consistent with those of previous studies (Grinwald and Shabat, 1997; Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann, 2011) showing that the tendency of a widower to idealize his first wife makes it difficult for his new partner to feel that she is appreciated and may cause her to compare the two relationships. In this context, Moss and Moss (1996) proposed the concept of "protective silence," whereby both members of the couple refrain from referring to the deceased wife or the previous couplehood to avoid comparison or competition. This type of protective silence was only found among a small number of the participants in this study. On the contrary, most of the women noted their own need and that of their partner to present the first wife in their family life.

Another subsystem that emerged from the interviews in the wake of the partner's continuing bond with his deceased wife was triadic, consisting of the woman, her partner, and his first wife. The concept of "Triangle" suggested by Bowen (1978) may provide a theoretical perspective for understanding this triadic subsystem. Bowen viewed the triangle as an integral part of human and family existence. Its purpose is to stabilize anxiety situations in intimate relationships between two people that arise primarily as a result of changes in the family life cycle, such as marriage, childbirth, children leaving home, divorce, illness, and death (Titelman, 2008). According to Bowen, the triangle is expressed in thoughts, fantasies, feelings, or behavior toward a third party outside the dyad (Klever, 2008), which serve to regulate the anxiety in the intimate relationship (Flaskas, 2012). Unlike Freud's oedipal triangle, which relates to the triad of father-mother-child and is viewed as a stage in the child's development (Hartke, 2016), the triangle Bowen proposed involves relations between all members of the family, both nuclear and extended, and lasts throughout their lives. In response to the controversy in the literature over whether or not a deceased family member can be seen as part of this triangle, Titelman (2008) distinguished between two types of triangles, namely, the emotional triangle and the partial mental construct triangle. The former consists only of living entities, while the latter is a mix of living and non-living entities, whether a deceased individual, an idea, a religion, or a philosophy. Our findings show that many of the women felt part of a triangle consisting of themselves, their partner, and his deceased wife and that this triangle constitutes an inherent component of their couplehood with a widowed partner. The feeling was strongest at times of family events and when memories in the family and previous couple's space were aroused. A similar finding is reported by Moss and Moss (1996) on the basis of their study in 1981, which showed that the continuing bond with a deceased spouse creates a triadic construct that is an integral part of the new family structure when a widow or widower remarries. Kissman and Dane (2001) contend that the triadic subsystem that includes the first wife creates an obstacle to intimacy in a relationship with a widower. The findings of this study provide only partial support for this claim, as just a small number of participants reported that the triadic relationship hindered the creation of intimacy with their partner. On the other hand, many participants stated that their partner's continuing bond with his first wife raised questions as to their own place and that of the deceased woman in the partner's life, and caused them to wonder whether he could love two women at the same time.

An emotional bond with two women or two men within the framework of a monogamous relationship is liable to create cognitive dissonance (Morvan and O'Connor, 2017). A monogamous relationship, which is still the norm in Western

countries, is defined as sexual and emotional relations with one romantic partner alone (Conley et al., 2013). Anderson (2010) distinguished between four types of monogamy, namely, physical monogamy, i.e., exclusivity of sexual relations with a partner; desirous monogamy, or exclusivity of desire and sexual fantasies toward a partner; social monogamy, i.e., the need to belong to the social category of a monogamous couple in view of social expectations that regard monogamy as the normative couple model; and emotional monogamy, or the need for an exclusive emotional couple relationship with a partner. The interviews in this study reveal that some of the participants felt that their couplehood was not grounded in emotional monogamy as a result of their partner's continuing emotional bond with his deceased wife. As they saw it, their partner was conducting two parallel relationships.

A range of emotions were expressed here in the participants' descriptions of coping with the question of their place and that of the first wife in the couple relationship, including contradictory feelings of understanding and encouraging the presencing of the deceased woman in the life of the family alongside the jealousy and even the sense that their partner was cheating on them. These findings shed light on the paradoxical reality with which women in a relationship with a widower must contend. As our interviewees portrayed it, this reality includes the partner's continuing bond with his first wife alongside his love for them.

Future studies would benefit from exploring the couplehood experience of women who started a family with a widower with young children when they were divorced or widowed and had children of their own. Such investigations might provide insights into whether and how the woman's family status shapes her experience of the new couplehood. Another interesting avenue for future research is to explore whether or not and in what ways having common children with their widowed partner impacts the couplehood experience of these women. Further research is also needed to investigate the role of both the widower's children and their common children in shaping the couplehood experience of the new wife. It would also be of value to examine the experience of the widower in these relationships. In addition, longitudinal studies could increase our understanding of how these experiences change over time.

5. CONCLUSION

This study, which gives voice to women who started a family with a widower with young children, demonstrates the complexity and challenges with which they are forced to cope. The study views the couplehood experience of these women through three conceptual lenses, namely, the Continuing Bonds Paradigm (Klass et al., 2014), the notion of subsystems in Structural Family Therapy (Minuchin, 1974), and the Triangle as proposed by Bowen (1978). The findings expand our understanding of these theoretical concepts by revealing the link between them evidenced in the women's narratives. Accordingly, the widower's continuing bond with his deceased wife creates two subsystems that are inherent in the new relationship, namely, the previous subsystem of the partner and his first wife; and a triadic subsystem consisting of the woman, her partner, and his deceased wife. These two subsystems raise poignant questions regarding the place of the new woman in the couple's relationship, indicating the complexity of her experience. The findings make a further contribution to the theoretical literature by showing that the nature of the triadic subsystem is influenced by the manner in which the woman perceives the quality and intensity of her partner's continuing bond with his first wife and that this perception changes over time.

On the practical level, the study can aid professionals, particularly couple and family therapists, who offer support to blended families. Understanding the experience and unique challenges of women who start a family with a widower with young children can help them to tailor their counseling and the therapeutic process to the particular needs of these women. Our findings, which highlight the widowers' continuing bond with their deceased wife, may also encourage professionals to address their loss within the therapeutic process and to help them embrace the present and nourish their new relationship.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Social Work, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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Sense of Parenting Efficacy, Perceived Family Interactions, and Parenting Stress Among Mothers of Children With Autistic Spectrum Disorders

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This study examined the relationship between maternal sense of parenting efficacy and parental stress in children with autism and the moderating effect of family interaction. A total of 263 mothers of children with autism were investigated with the Parenting Ability Scale, Family Interaction Scale (FIS), and Parental Stress Scale. The results showed that (1) maternal sense of parenting efficacy significantly predicted parental stress in children with autism; and (2) family interaction significantly moderated the relationship between maternal sense of parenting efficacy and parental stress in children with autism, that is, when family interaction was lower than −1.54 standard deviation (SD), the sense of parenting efficacy did not significantly predict parental stress. When family interaction was higher than −1.54 SD, parenting efficacy had a significant negative predictive effect on parenting stress.

Keywords: mothers of children with autistic spectrum disorder, sense of parenting efficacy, perceived family interactions, parenting stress, moderation effect

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INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by varying degrees of language development disorder, interpersonal communication disorder, repetitive behavioral pattern, and narrow interest (McKinnon et al., 2019). Autism begins in infancy and lasts for a lifetime. Parents often face persistent stressful situations and experience high parental pressure (Hsiao, 2018). In China, the prevalence of ASD is increasing to more than 1% of the total population, and the estimated population of children (aged 0–14 years) with autism is more than 2 million (Clark et al., 2019). Parenting stress refers to the stress parents feel in the process of fulfilling their role, affected by their personality traits, parent–child interaction, children's traits, and family situation and accompanied by negative psychological feelings of anxiety, frustration, and self-blame (Abidin, 1990). Mothers, as the primary caregiver of children with ASD, usually face a variety of problems, such as a heavy financial burden, discrimination, stigma, and parenting stress (Abidin, 1992). Parenting stress not only affects marital relationship, intergroup relationship, physical and mental health, and family life quality, but also has a higher risk for poor treatment outcomes (Chen et al., 2015; Ban and Sun, 2017; Schlebusch et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2017; Sim et al., 2018).

The sense of parenting efficacy is a factor identified as relevant to parent distress and child therapy outcomes (Liu, 2019). Many empirical studies on parents of children with autism in China have found that the sense of parenting efficacy has significant predictive effects on parental stress and subjective wellbeing (Lei et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020a). The sense of parenting efficacy is defined as an individual's subjective perception of parenting ability and confidence when playing the role of parents (Peng et al., 2012). The sense of parenting efficacy is considered to be the core factor affecting the educational effectiveness of children with autism, which can significantly predict the parenting ability of children with autism and promote active participation in parenting (Solish and Perry, 2008). According to the Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1978), the sense of parenting efficacy affects individuals' emotional states and coping styles. Mothers with a high-level sense of parenting efficacy can choose more appropriate type of therapy for their children. On the contrary, mothers with a low-level sense of parenting efficacy are more likely to experience negative emotions, such as tension and anxiety. The sense of parenting efficacy, as an individual's internal psychological resource, can relieve stress and promote positive emotional experience, and also enable parents to experience significantly different parental stress in the process of raising children with autism (Iadarola et al., 2018; Güler and Letin, 2019). Mothers with a high-level sense of parenting efficacy tend to have a higher willingness and motivation to intervene, which can promote the active participation of family members in parenting and contribute to the children therapy (Benson et al., 2008; Yao and Liu, 2018). Based on this, this study hypothesized that the parenting sense of competence of mothers is an important factor affecting parenting stress.

The ecosystem theory divides the environment of individual life into different levels. Among them, the family is the microsystem with the largest physical and mental development of family members of children with autism, and the interaction between family members affects individual psychology and behavior (Loveland, 2001; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Xiong and Sun, 2014; Buchanan et al., 2017; Martinez-Torres et al., 2021). Therefore, individual psychology and behavior may be affected by situational factors (family interaction) in family ecosystem. Family interaction is the degree to which family members care for and support each other in their daily life (Fang et al., 2004). Parents' participation in upbringing and good family interaction between parents and children can build a good environment for children with autism, reflect the family's acceptance of children and the openness of family members, and help to promote the formation of a good educational force. In addition, the family provides certain environmental conditions for the healthy development of family members. The family is an important support system for the parents of children with autism, which provides certain environmental conditions for the healthy development of family members in physiology, psychology, and sociality (Skinner and Steinhauer, 2000; Fang et al., 2004; Prendeville and Kinsella, 2019; Degli Espinosa et al., 2020). Good family interaction and family support help to rebuild self-worth and play a crucial role in promoting the confidence of individual parenting. At the same time, the language input of parents in family interaction is a kind of language stimulation for children with autism and the application of language communication strategies in family interaction can promote the development of children's communication and language (Ye et al., 2020). Previous studies have also confirmed that parental participation in parenting and parent–child interaction is considered to be important factors to alleviate parental pressure with a low-level sense of parenting efficacy (Shumow and Lomax, 2002; Jones and Prinz, 2005; Weiss et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2019; Benedetto et al., 2021; Feng et al., 2021; Kurzrok et al., 2021). Parenting efficacy is an important factor for the effectiveness of autism parenting training programs (Russell and Ingersoll, 2020). It has been supported that interventions for families with children with ASD should focus on enhancing parental self-efficacy (Feng et al., 2021). Therefore, this study hypothesized that parental involvement and parent–child interaction are considered to be important factors in alleviating parental stress with a low parenting sense of competence.

In conclusion, this study was based on family ecosystem theory (Eppler, 2019), interaction theory, and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1978). Involving the mother of children with autism as the research object, this study aimed to explore the moderating effect of family interaction on the relationship between parenting sense of competence and parental stress in mother, so as to provide a reference for the development of family support services for children with autism. Considering previous studies, it is found that age and family structure are significantly correlated with parental pressure of parents of children with ASD (Liu, 2019; Hu and Guan, 2020). Therefore, these variables are controlled.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

We randomly contacted 18 special education schools serving children with autism in Mainland China. Notably, 15 of 18 schools expressed interest to participate in the research. Random sampling was used, and the samples were representative. Participating in this study required the parents to have a child diagnosed with ASD by a certified doctor according to the DSM-IV-TR criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Although the ASD diagnosis is based on parent self-report, a clinician's report was required for the child to get enrolled in the special education schools. Excluding invalid questionnaires, the final sample included 263 children with ASD, and their mothers were recruited in the study. There were 225 boys (85.6%) and 38 girls (14.4%). The mean [standard deviation (SD)] age of the children was 5.64 (2.63) years, ranging from 2 to 15 years; most of them aged 3–7 years (77.1%). Among 263 mothers, the mean (SD) age was 35.56 (4.42) years, ranging from 24 to 48 years; most mothers aged 30–40 years (82.5%). Of note, 256 (97.3%) mothers were married and only 7 (2.7%) mothers were divorced. Mothers with employment accounted for 41.1%, and 35.4% of them had a university degree education level. In addition, 70.3% of them reported that annual family income was US$8,000 to US$16,000, and 78 (29.7%) mothers reported that annual family income was

more than US$16,000. No incentive was provided to families to complete the survey.

Measures

In this study, three instruments were used to explore the relationship among mother's sense of parenting efficacy, family interaction, and parenting stress, namely, the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC), the Family Interaction Scale (FIS), and the Parenting Stress Inventory—Short Form (PSI-SF).

Parenting Sense of Competence Scale

The PSOC compiled by Johnston and Mash (1989), and revised by Peng et al. (2012), contains 12 items from the two dimensions of sense of parenting efficacy and parenting ability satisfaction. Using a 5-level score (with 1 being completely inconsistent, 5 being completely consistent), the higher the scale score means, the more confident they are in their parenting ability. The model fit index has $\chi^2 = 178.31$, $df = 46$, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = 0.92, Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.90, Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = 0.93, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.90, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.92, and Root Mean square Residual (RMR) = 0.08. Cronbach's α value for the PSOC was 0.77, and the values for the satisfaction and efficacy subscales were 0.85 and 0.84, respectively.

Family Interaction Scale

The FIS in the Family Life Quality Scale compiled by the Bridge Disability Center at the University of Kansas has 6 items in total, mainly measuring the interaction degree of family members of the disabled (e.g., "when faced with difficulties, my family will solve the problem together") (Poston et al., 2006). Each item is answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The model fit index is $\chi^2 = 14.83$, df = 5, GFI = 0.98, NFI = 0.99, Relative Fit Index (RFI) = 0.97, IFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, CFI = 0.99, RMR = 0.02, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.08. Cronbach's α value of this subscale in this study was 0.92.

Parenting Stress Inventory—Short Form

The PSI-SF compiled by Abidin (1990) and revised by Ren (1995) contains 36 questions from three dimensions, namely, parental distress, dysfunctional parent–child interaction, and difficult children. Using a 5-level score (with 1 being completely inconsistent, 5 being completely consistent), the higher the scale score, the more stress the parents experience in parenting. The model fit index is $\chi^2 = 890.566$, $df = 574$, IFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.90, CFI = 0.90, and RMSEA = 0.06. Cronbach's α values for the three subscales were 0.92, 0.88, and 0.86, respectively.

Procedure

After obtaining informed consent, the special education teachers issued the paper questionnaires to the mothers of children with autism, uniformly introduced the guidelines, and informed the test contents and requirements. The questionnaire is anonymous to ensure the authenticity and reliability of the survey. The test time was about 15 min, and all questionnaires were collected on the spot. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the first author's affiliation.

Statistical Analysis of Data

The data obtained in this study were statistically analyzed using SPSS version 24.0 and Amos version 24.0, and the statistical methods used were mainly descriptive statistics, namely, confirmatory factor analysis and model test of regulating action. The data were sorted and statistically analyzed using SPSS version 24.0, and Amos version 24.0 was used for confirmatory factor analysis.

RESULTS

Common Method Bias

We used Harman's one-factor test to determine whether the data exist common method. In this test, we used the SPSS factor analysis routine to identify the first eigenvalue from the data matrix. The test results reveal that the first eigenvalue accounts for 30.91% of total variances, which does not equate to the majority of the total variance explained (threshold of 40%). Thus, according to Harman's one-factor test, common method bias is not likely to bias the results (Zhou and Long, 2004).

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the mean, SD, and correlation coefficient of each variable. As predicted, Pearson correlations demonstrated that both parenting sense of competence and perceived family interactions were negatively correlated with parenting stress. Parenting sense of competence was positively correlated with perceived family interactions.

Moderate Inspection

We used model 1 of the PROCESS program using SPSS version 24.0 (moderate model). All variables except age and family structure were standardized to analyze whether family interaction moderated the relationship between sense of parenting efficacy and parental stress. **Table 2** shows that, after controlling for age and family structure, sense of parenting efficacy significantly predicted parental stress ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$), family interaction significantly predicted parental stress ($\beta = -0.40$, $p < 0.001$), and the interaction between parenting efficacy and family interaction significantly predicted parental stress ($\beta = -0.14$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the relationship between sense of parenting efficacy and parental stress is moderated by family interaction, which proves the hypothesis.

The Johnson–Neyman method was used to investigate the relationship between sense of parenting efficacy and parental stress at different levels of family interaction (Fang et al., 2015), and a simple effect analysis chart was drawn. The results further demonstrated the moderating effect of family interaction. When the family interaction is lower than 1.54 SDs, the sense of parenting efficacy had no significant influence on parenting stress; when the family interaction is more than −1.54 SDs, the sense of parenting efficacy had significantly negative parenting stress. That is to say, with the increase in family interaction level, the effect of parenting self-efficacy on parental stress increases (refer to **Figure 1**), and the proportion of cases accounted for 90.49% of the sample size.

TABLE 1 | Description statistics and zero-order correlation of the constructs.

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	35.56	4.42	—				
2. Family structure	1.74	0.75	0.08	—			
3. Parenting sense of competence	2.89	0.54	0.15*	0.08	—		
4. Perceived family interactions	3.26	1.05	0.07	0.03	0.24***	—	
5. Parenting stress	2.99	0.68	0.03	−0.23*	−0.37***	−0.41***	—

*$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.001$.

TABLE 2 | Hierarchical regression analysis among study variables.

Outcome variable	Predictor Variable	*β*	*SE*	95% CI	R^2	*F*
Parenting stress	Age	0.02*	0.01	(0.01, 0.05)		
	Family structure	−0.26***	0.06	(−0.38, −0.14)		
	Parenting sense of competence	−0.38***	0.05	(−0.49, −0.27)		
	Perceived family interactions	−0.40***	0.05	(−0.48, −0.29)		
	Parenting sense of competence × perceived family interactions	−0.14**	0.04	(−0.23, −0.04)	0.47	45.87***

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

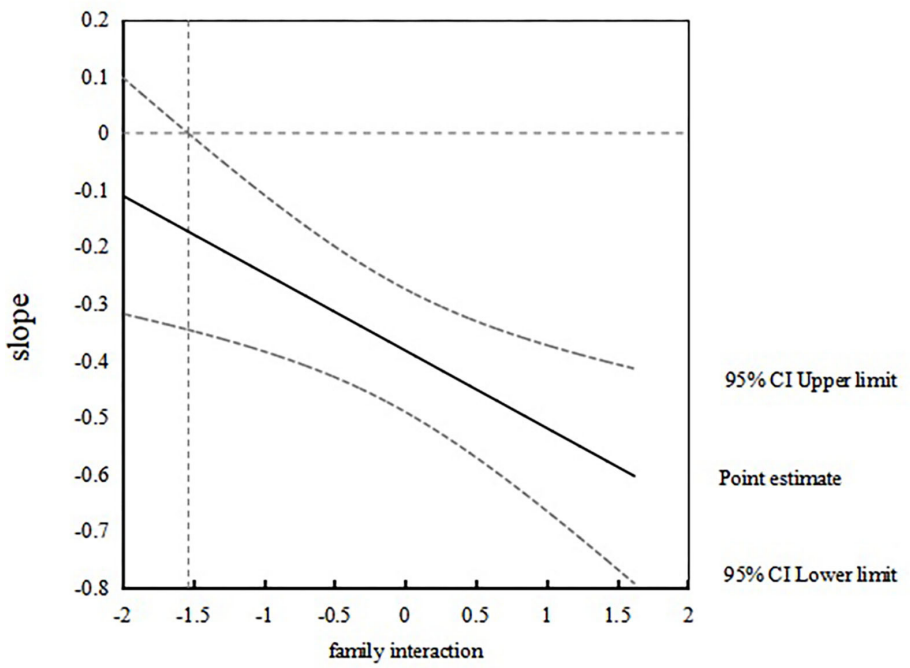

FIGURE 1 | The effect of parenting sense of competence on relationship parenting stress.

DISCUSSION

We investigated the relationship among mother's parenting sense of competence, family interaction, and parenting stress. We found that family interaction plays a moderating role in the relationship between maternal parenting efficacy and parental stress in mothers of children with autism.

This study found that the parenting sense of competence of mothers of children with autism significantly negatively predicted parental stress, which is consistent with the results of previous studies (Li et al., 2015; Kartini et al., 2018). This result is consistent with the view of self-efficacy. Parenting sense of competence is the subjective perception of mothers on the ability and confidence of raising children and affects individual emotional state and coping style. Mothers with a high

parenting sense of competence can choose more appropriate type of therapy and respond to challenges more actively. On the contrary, mothers with low parenting efficacy are more likely to experience negative emotions, such as tension and anxiety. The sense of parenting efficacy, as an individual's internal psychological resource, can relieve stress and promote positive emotional experience, and can also enable parents to experience significantly different parental stress in the process of raising children with autism (Johnson et al., 2011). In ASD parenting training programs, parents can learn to get involved in the intervention in their natural context to promote the development and learning of their sons or daughters with ASD (Russell and Ingersoll, 2020). Thus, parents with greater parental efficacy are more involved in rehabilitation and treatment processes (Feng et al., 2021). Some studies have revealed improvement in the levels of parenting self-efficacy among parents who take part in psycho-educational interventions and parent training (Deb et al., 2020). A greater parenting sense of competence predicts better parent–child relationships and less parenting stress (Benedetto et al., 2021). Mothers with a high parenting sense of competence often have higher intervention willingness and motivation, can promote family members to actively participate in parenting, and play a vital role in children therapy (Benson et al., 2008; Yao and Liu, 2018). The results of this study also confirmed the viewpoint of resource conservation theory (Hobfoll, 2001; Kaniel and Siman-Tov, 2011; Hayward et al., 2020). According to the resource conservation theory, parental psychological resources can help people cope with stressors and improve the relationship between parents and their children in the context of interactions with them (Kaniel and Siman-Tov, 2011). Parents are more likely to experience perceived failure in a parenting task if their children are more difficult to parent due to problem behavior or poor emotional regulation (Teti and Gelfand, 1991). The sense of parenting efficacy was an individual's internal psychological resource (Iadarola et al., 2018). When individuals consume internal resources to meet their role needs, they will activate positive emotions, such as pleasure, happiness, and pride, so as to alleviate stress and promote positive emotional experience (Leary and Brown, 1995; Güler and Letin, 2019; Zhu et al., 2020b). Therefore, the sense of parenting efficacy of mothers of children with autism can significantly affect parental stress.

This study also found that family interaction regulates the relationship between sense of parenting efficacy and parental stress. The higher the level of family interaction, the greater the possible impact of sense of parenting efficacy on parental stress. Specifically, when the level of family interaction is lower than −1.54 SDs, the negative impact of sense of parenting efficacy on parental stress is not significant. When the level of family interaction is higher than −1.54 SDs, the sense of parenting efficacy has a significant negative predictive effect on parental stress. This implies that parenting efficacy has a greater impact on parental stress at higher levels of family interaction than that at lower levels of family interaction. The results confirm the view of family ecosystem theory (Robles-Bykbaev et al., 2017; Kassim et al., 2020; Zhao and Fu, 2020). An appropriate family ecosystem supports children with autism and their families, so as to improve their quality of life (Kassim et al., 2020), and supports the development of social communication skills in children with autism (Robles-Bykbaev et al., 2017). Family is an important promoter of education for children with autism. Good family interaction helps families play a vital role in seeking treatment, helping coordinate services between professionals, and jointly participating in education, which is an important driving force to promote children with autism to receive an education. Family interaction builds a good environment for children, reflects the family's acceptance of children with autism and the openness of family members, and is conducive to promote the formation of a good educational force. Family interaction and sense of parenting efficacy have a two-way impact. Specifically, parents' belief in improving children's educational effectiveness can effectively promote family interaction and educational participation. At the same time, the higher the degree of family interaction, while promoting educational participation, parents also gain parenting experience and promote the improvement of parental competence. Therefore, in the case of high family interaction, family members actively participate in parenting and interact with children with autism through interaction strategies or parents as intermediaries can have a positive impact on children's development (Shire et al., 2015; Shu et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2021), so as to further improve parents' parental sense of competence and effectively alleviate the parental pressure in the process of raising children by parents. Studies have supported parent-mediated intervention (Shu et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2021). In the case of low family interaction, the social and emotional feedback of children with autism to their caregivers is limited. On account of interacting with children with autism is a difficult thing, it is difficult for parents to maintain long-term interaction with children with autism. The lack of family interaction will lead to increased parenting pressure and reduced family cohesion.

This study found that family interaction plays a regulatory role in the relationship between parenting sense of competence and parental stress of children's mothers, which provided a new idea for further developing family support services for children with autism and alleviating parental stress of children's mothers. First, parenting efficacy has a significant negative predictive effect on parental stress of children with autism. This indicates that the mothers of children with autism with better parenting efficacy have less parental stress. Mothers are the primary caregivers of autistic children and the core of their social ecosystem. Authorities and social workers need to recognize the importance of mothers in the development of children with autism. In the relevant training for parents of autistic children, the main educational goal should be to cultivate mothers' sense of parenting efficacy, so as to reduce mothers' parenting pressure to the greatest extent. Second, family interaction is an important situational factor for family outcomes and family functioning. Family interaction affects individual psychology and behavior, which suggests that we should actively build family environmental factors for children with autism, stimulate family vitality by organizing family activities, promote benign interaction among family members, and enhance the acceptance and openness of family members to children with autism, promoting parenting sense of competence and alleviating parental pressure. Autism is not a static state in the human body,

but a neurodevelopmental process, which should be understood from the interaction between human and environment.

Previous studies have found that the parenting efficacy of parents of children with autism can predict parental stress (Lei et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020a). This study has two contributions. One is that this study found that the parenting efficacy of mothers of children with autism negatively predicts parental stress, which verified previous studies. The other is that this study found that family interaction plays a regulatory role in the relationship between parenting sense of competence and parental stress of children's mothers. However, this study has the following limitations. (1) This study was only performed involving mothers, but some family functions cannot be fully borned by the mother and some problems of children with autism largely arise from a lack of emotional care from their father. In future research, we will compare the differences in father and mother participation. (2) The subject population may not be representative. There are two reasons. One is that the subjects selected for this study came from Fujian Province, which is an economically prosperous region in China. The other is that the sample size is not large enough. If the sample size is increased to more than 1,000, the obtained model data may be better. (3) This study was a cross-sectional study. The results indicated a possible mechanism and did not prove a causal relationship, which should need readers' attention.

Above all, further study should explore the role and impact of family interaction on children with autism and strive to optimize family interaction to the greatest extent to promote the development of children with autism. Future research may also pay more attention to the establishment of good family interaction and high-quality family interaction of children with autism and may deeply explore how the family interaction developed in a virtuous circle is formed and developed.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at School of Educational Science, School of Special Education, Quan Zhou Normal University, Quanzhou, China. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

YC: designed research, collected data, and drafted manuscript. TC: designed research, analyzed data, and drafted manuscript. FL: designed research, analyzed data, and revised the manuscript. All authors certify that they have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for the content and approved the final version of the article for submission.

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Authenticity as Best-Self: The Experiences of Women in Law Enforcement

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Law enforcement poses a difficult work environment. Employees' wellbeing is uniquely taxed in coping with daily violent, aggressive and hostile encounters. These challenges are compounded for women, because law enforcement remains to be a male-dominated occupational context. Yet, many women in law enforcement display resilience and succeed in maintaining a satisfying career. This study explores the experience of being authentic from a best-self perspective, for women with successful careers in the South African police and traffic law enforcement services. Authenticity research substantiates a clear link between feeling authentic and experiencing psychological wellbeing. The theoretical assumption on which the study is based holds that being authentic relates to a sense of best-self and enables constructive coping and adjustment in a challenging work environment. A qualitative study was conducted on a purposive sample of 12 women, comprising 6 police officers and 6 traffic officers from the Western Cape province in South Africa. Data were gathered through narrative interviews focussing on experiences of best-self and were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis. During the interviews, participants predominantly described feeling authentic in response to work-related events of a conflictual and challenging nature. Four themes were constructed from the data to describe authenticity from a best-self perspective for women in the study. These themes denote that the participating women in law enforcement, express feeling authentic when they present with a mature sense of self, feel spiritually congruent and grounded, experience self-actualisation in the work–role and realign to a positive way of being. Women should be empowered towards authenticity in their world of work, by helping them to acquire the best-self characteristics needed for developing authenticity.

Keywords: authenticity, best-self, women, law enforcement, eudaimonic wellbeing, subjective wellbeing, hermeneutic phenomenology, identity work

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INTRODUCTION

To work in law enforcement is inherently stressful, rendering law enforcement officers particularly vulnerable when it comes to their psychological wellbeing (Lees et al., 2019; Bowen and Witkiewitz, 2020). Law enforcers suffer a plethora of physical and psycho-social stressors because, in the context of their work, they are frequently exposed to danger, violence, suffering, aggression, conflict and various physical and interpersonal threats (Anderson et al., 2002). The coping

capacity and resilience of law enforcement employees are therefore consistently taxed, with potential negative consequences to service delivery and organisational effectiveness (Purba and Demou, 2019). Coping with such stress is made possible by manifesting one's best-self, as characterised in being authentic (Roberts et al., 2005; Roche, 2010; Spreitzer et al., 2021). As such, this article focusses on authenticity from a best-self perspective in the context of women working in law enforcement. Activating best-self helps employees to feel authentic and flourish in the work place (Cable et al., 2015; Bakker and van Woerkom, 2018). In this study, authenticity is approached from a best-self perspective since it is rooted in the strength-based assumption underlying positive psychology, regarding best-self as a significant intrapsychic strength resource for resilience and flourishing in challenging and stressful work settings (Van Woerkom et al., 2020; Spreitzer et al., 2021), such as the context of this study.

While all who work in law enforcement face challenges to their wellbeing, these challenges are compounded for women, because law enforcement remains to be a male-dominated occupational context (Kurtz, 2012; Chen, 2015; McGinnis, 2019; Neely, 2019; Froehlich et al., 2020). Women encounter unique psychological stressors in male-dominated professions (Du Plessis and Barkhuizen, 2015; Indiana University, 2015; Gaines, 2017; Mayer et al., 2018). These stressors may lead to negative health outcomes for women (Indiana University, 2015) and make it more difficult for them to achieve the same success as men (Blackmore, 2017). Studies specific to law enforcement, have shown women to experience higher levels of stress than men because they encounter occupational barriers related to gender role stereotypes and biased social constructions of femininity (Kurtz, 2008, 2012; Chen, 2015). To adjust to gender-biased work cultures typical to male dominated work contexts, the coping behaviour of women can be related to the dynamics of identity work. Working women engage in identity work in order to remain authentic or true to themselves (Haeruddin, 2016). Women constantly negotiate the identity tensions that result from the inconsistencies they experience between the expectations of their stereotypical social role identity and their work role identity (Davey, 2008). Löve et al. (2011) similarly highlight the existential ambiguity that women experience because to cope in male-dominated occupations, they constantly compare the self against ambiguous and overwhelming life-role opportunities and expectations. It is not surprising that women have been reported to adopt characteristics and strategies not particular to who they are, to cope in such work environments (Du Plessis and Barkhuizen, 2015; Gaines, 2017). The demands of working in male-dominated occupations render the ability for women to be authentic difficult (Haeruddin, 2016; Jackson, 2019) and some women experience a lack of voice in such work places (Gaines, 2017). Still, many women in male-dominated occupations are resilient and persevere despite socio-psychological barriers and present with confidence and self-efficacy (Gaines, 2017). This is also true of many women in law enforcement who succeed in maintaining a satisfying career and seem to do and cope well in this environment.

Seminal work by Ménard and Brunet (2011) highlights the value of authenticity at work as a way of advancing employee wellbeing. The body of research linking authenticity to various types of wellbeing in the workplace is growing and signifies the essential role thereof in coping with challenging or difficult work circumstances (Ariza-Montes et al., 2019; Sutton, 2020). Authenticity is directly and indirectly linked to subjective wellbeing constructs such as life satisfaction (Vainio and Daukantaitė, 2016; Hwang and Kim, 2019) and engagement (Van den Bosch et al., 2019; Ortiz-Gómez et al., 2020; Sutton, 2020). Authenticity is essential to understanding adaptive characteristics pertaining to optimal self-esteem (Kernis, 2003; Kernis and Goldman, 2006) and employees who experience high levels of authenticity are strongly intrinsically motivated (Van den Bosch and Taris, 2018a,b) and exhibit self-regulatory and goal-directed behaviour (Chen and Murphy, 2019). Authenticity has also been shown to negatively relate to turnover intention (Ogruk and Anderson, 2018) and positively relate to work engagement, job satisfaction and performance (Metin et al., 2016). As such, authenticity has increasingly been regarded as an indicator of functioning well, coping constructively and adjusting optimally in the workplace.

Career development theories pertinent to women, isolate authenticity as a unique need in the career trajectories of women and fundamental to their work wellbeing (Barnard, 2018; Mainiero and Gibson, 2018; O'Neill and Jepsen, 2019). For women, feeling authentic is important to life satisfaction and coping with emotional burdens (Hwang and Kim, 2019). Using authenticity as a checkpoint for wellbeing, and because women's authenticity experience is fundamental to their coping and flourishing in male-dominated work settings (Jackson, 2019), it is important to understand the authenticity experience of women. Flowing from a broader doctoral study on women developing authenticity (Jacobs, 2018), the objective of this study is to describe authenticity from a best-self perspective as experienced by women in law enforcement. To do so, the researchers explored narratives of best-self[1] experiences to construct an understanding of what it means for them to feel authentic. This article contributes to understanding women's ability to cope and flourish in the demanding law enforcement work context and inform developmental interventions to enhance their sense of authenticity and general wellbeing in a typical male-dominated occupation.

Authenticity From a Best-Self Perspective

A clear and consistent empirical conceptualisation of the construct authenticity seems to remain elusive (Kreuzbauer and Keller, 2017; Baumeister, 2019; Lehman et al., 2019). Most definitions of authenticity follow the original idea of being that self that one truly is (Rogers, 1961) and incorporate the balancing of two ideals namely *feeling* and *acting* in congruence with one's internal sense of self (Hewlin et al., 2020). Authenticity therefore denotes an *internal sense of self*. Ideas about what that means, are however multiple. Most commonly authenticity has been related to being true to the *core* self (Kernis, 2003),

[1]We favour the spelling of best-self with a hyphen as presented by Roberts et al. (2005), as opposed to others who omit the hyphen such as Cable et al. (2013).

the *true* self (Kernis and Goldman, 2006; Schmader and Sedikides, 2018) or the *real* self (Hewlin et al., 2020; Sutton, 2020). Perspectives of being true to a *whole* self (Glavas, 2016), the *spiritual* self (Kiesling et al., 2006), *ideal* self (Vainio and Daukantaitė, 2016) or being true to one's *best-self* (Roberts et al., 2005; Cable et al., 2013; Goodwin, 2019) have also been used to define authenticity.

From a paradigmatic point of view, two orientations frame the understanding of authenticity. The essentialist orientation views it as a process of self-discovery, while the existentialist view emphasises authenticity as a self-creation process (Sutton, 2020). Essentialists have promoted the idea of trait authenticity or personality trait consistency, seeking traits that align to a core or true self and seeking consistency in the expression and demonstration of one's personality traits. Existentialists support the notion of state authenticity and view authenticity as a process of coherence or congruence, emphasising the extent to which one's behaviour is self-determined and expressive of an evolving and integrated self (Sutton, 2020). In this view, being authentic allows for self-adjustment and change in a bigger context of integrating seemingly contradictory behaviours into a coherent self-concept (Harter, 2002). It also emphasises the personal agency of the individual in creating the self (Roberts et al., 2005). Behaviour is recognised as malleable and self-determined, and the self-integration process serves the pursuit of satisfying higher intrinsic goals or standards of being (Sheldon and Kasser, 1995) so that feeling authentic is expressive of the extent to which one feels aligned to one's ideal self (Lenton et al., 2013). The extent of alignment between the ideal self and the current self has been referred to as the space of the best-self (Boyatzis and Dhar, 2021) acknowledging that expressing one's best-self allows others to sense your true self more accurately (Human et al., 2012). State authenticity entails a self-verification process and implies an internal referent or benchmark against which one evaluates the extent of being true or congruent and results in a concomitant emotion (Lehman et al., 2019). Verification either results in positive emotions (high perceived congruence) or negative emotions (low perceived congruence), leading researchers to link authenticity with hedonic notions of subjective wellbeing (Ariza-Montes et al., 2017). Whereas research reporting the relationship between authenticity and subjective wellbeing abound, there is a lack of research exploring authenticity in the context of eudaimonic wellbeing (Sheldon, 2013). Hedonic wellbeing focusses on positive affect and life satisfaction, whereas eudaimonic wellbeing emphasise a fulfilling life based on the development of one's best potentials. Authenticity in an eudaimonic sense implies the realisation of one's best-self and the pursuit of actualising one's full potential rather than pursuing feelings of pleasure (Pancheva et al., 2021). Authenticity as an eudaimonic concept has been said to integrate trait and state perspectives emphasising the reciprocity between feeling self-congruent and behaving consistently (Smallenbroek et al., 2017).

Earlier conceptual frameworks of authenticity emphasise the complexity of the concept and explain that being authentic involves self-awareness and understanding, processing of self-relevant evaluative information, behavioural consistency with one's values and norms and open relational functioning (Kernis and Goldman, 2006). The tri-dimensional framework of Wood et al. (2008) have become popular and conceptualise authenticity as a disposition defined by one's ability to follow and live according to one's true emotions and values (authentic living); perceived congruence between your conscience and actual experience (low self-alienation); and one's ability to resist external influences and expectations. In terms of the latter and third construct in the Wood et al. (2008) framework, research advancing the state authenticity concept has emphasised that authenticity is related to being open to external influence, rather than rejecting or resisting it (Sedikides et al., 2019). In this way, the state approach again emphasises personal agency in deciding who and how one is and wants to be (Roberts et al., 2005). Gecas (2000, 2003) similarly describes authenticity in agentic terms as a self-motive but emphasises that construction of the self is linked to social and cultural norms and ideologies of how one ought to be. The self-verification process is applied as an enactment of this self-motive and is based on the need to affirm or verify valued aspects of the self, which derives from value-driven social systems of meaning (Gecas, 2000, 2003; Roche, 2010).

The self-verification process that is integral to feeling authentic is thus implicitly influenced by a person's engrained cultural norms and values of being good or living a good life (Rivera et al., 2019). This view acknowledges the idea of a socially constructed self and emphasises that authenticity is an individual experience with strong socially constructed ideals contributing to how a person judges the self. Barnard and Simbhoo (2014) define authenticity as an affective state, stemming from an ongoing self-appraisal of the degree to which self-expression corresponds with one's subjective, socially formed expectation of the self, relative to others. This self-appraisal or self-verification is of an ongoing nature as authenticity is never an ultimately reachable end-state, it is relative to context, non-dualistic (not either-or) and dialectic (integrating contradictory aspects in the self; Roche, 2010). In the self-verification process, Baumeister (2019) regards authenticity as reflective of the extent to which individuals' self-appraisal aligns with their *desired reputation*. In this vein, authenticity is a desirable state (Lehman et al., 2019) and usually reflect people's idealistic view of self (Vainio and Daukantaitė, 2016) in that people seem to feel most authentic when they judge their actions and expressions as close to their ideal self (Lenton et al., 2013). This also reminds of Kernis and Goldman's (2006) view of authenticity as reflecting optimal self-esteem (feeling of high self-worth and acceptance) and relates to Goodwin's (2019, p. 33) use of best-self as the 'self-checking' point for women's sense of authentic leadership. As such, in this study authenticity is defined from an eudaimonic, existential, state perspective and define it as an individual difference construct (Kernis, 2003; Wood et al., 2008) formed by an ongoing process (Barnard and Simbhoo, 2014) of the realignment of thoughts, emotions and behaviour (Roberts et al., 2005; Kernis and Goldman, 2006) with notions of best-self (Roberts et al., 2005; Human et al., 2012). Best-self denotes people's cognitive construction of the qualities and characteristics they display when they deem themselves at their best (Roberts

et al., 2005; Cable et al., 2013). Best-self is further regarded as an intrapsychic strength resource, a potential of being that already exists in the individual and to which one must realign to Padgett (2007) and Heidegger (2010), activate (Van Woerkom et al., 2020) and purposefully develop (Roberts et al., 2005). Goodwin (2019) draws a useful distinction between doing your best and being your best-self. Doing your best may be determined by others' expectations and standards, while being your best-self is related to how you measure yourself in what you do (Goodwin, 2019).

METHODS

Research Approach

This study followed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, located in Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology and interpretivist epistemology (Suddick et al., 2020). Heidegger's ontology highlights the complex nature of reality that results from the entanglement between subjective being and a pre-existing world of meaning (Davidsen, 2013; Suddick et al., 2020). The intention of hermeneutic phenomenological research is to interpret lived experience and explain the meaning thereof (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016) in relation to a research phenomenon (Churchill, 2018). Interpretation involves uncovering meaning through intentional and reflective research acts (Suddick et al., 2020) integrated with preconceived frameworks of knowing (Davidsen, 2013; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016; Gyollai, 2020). Findings reflect a co-construction of what it means to be and feel authentic for the participating women, as framed in the preconceived eudaimonic notion of authenticity as best-self.

Participants and Sampling

Purposeful sampling was employed because it suits the study's exploratory aim (Saumure and Given, 2008) and selects participants who are able and willing to provide rich experiential information needed to best achieve the research aim (Durrheim and Painter, 2006; McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). In purposeful sampling criteria for inclusion are predetermined to ensure information-rich data sources with personal experience that is significant and relevant to the research objective (Leedy and Ormrod, 2010). The sampling method and inclusion criteria thus guided the identification of women in law enforcement, who could share rich information about their experiences of best-self. Tenure was deemed an important criterion to ensure data adequacy in the context of having had best-self experiences in the stressful work setting. Women with a sustained career of minimum of five years in law enforcement were therefore targeted. Based on the primary researcher's previous employment in law enforcement, participants were accessed through mutual friends, ex-colleagues and approached *via* telephone or e-mail. The study ultimately included a purposive sample of 12 women working in law enforcement (6 police officers and 6 traffic officers) constituting a sample size well within the expected boundaries of a hermeneutic phenomenological study (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Alase, 2017). Such a sample size is appropriate in exploratory studies seeking to unearth rich concepts (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010), and in which multiple interviews are carried out with a participant (Riessman, 2008), to substantiate ideas of both the researcher and the participants (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). In line with Malterud et al. (2016), the sampling strategy benefited this study by having information power, changing the focus to new knowledge produced by the analysis as opposed to participant numbers. Accordingly, the more information held by the sample that are of relevance to the research aim, the less participants are required. Tenure, position and demographic characteristics of the participants are summarised in **Table 1**.

Data Collection

During the course of 2017, narrative, face-to-face interviews were conducted because personal narratives are constitutive of identity and elicit notions of the construction and development of the self (Adler et al., 2017). Narrative interviews are unstructured, in-depth interviews that focus on eliciting lived stories about the research phenomenon in the context of past and present events or across time (Muylaert et al., 2014). Literature informed how the questions were structured (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). Directed by the focus on authenticity as best-self, a core question was asked namely, 'Share with me times you found it easier to be your best-self at work and times you found it more difficult.' Elements in the integrative definition of authenticity from a best-self perspective were further considered, such as how aspects of emotions, thoughts, behaviour and strength(s) were experienced. Possible probing questions therefore included 'How do thoughts and emotions influence your dealing with these challenges?' and 'So where do/did you find the strength to handle that?' These, together with active listening ensured a natural conversation flow and an engaged narration to evolve during the interviews (Slembrouck, 2015). Follow-up interviews were conducted with all participants during which each of the women viewed the verbatim transcription of her initial interview. The purpose was to confirm and clarify where required, their initial contributions (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010), while the verbatim text was used as a prompt for them to elaborate or add experiences of best-self.

Data Analyses

Congruent to hermeneutic phenomenology, data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 2004; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016; Gyollai, 2020). Transcribed interviews constituted the primary data, which were deconstructed after repeated reading and familiarisation, by making descriptive notes relating the meaning of noteworthy pieces of data (Alase, 2017; Gyollai, 2020). Then, still attending closely to the participants' verbatim narrative, descriptive notes that are conceptually related were categorised into clusters of meaning forming preliminary themes to describe authenticity. Refining and revising the themes ultimately lead to forming a framework of related superordinate themes and subthemes giving meaning to the research phenomenon (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). The analytic process underlying IPA reflects a double hermeneutic process of interpretation, integrating

TABLE 1 | Descriptive profile of the research participants.

Participant	Age category (years)	Race	Level of work	Tenure (years)	Marital status	Children
PO1	46–55	Mixed race	Commissioned officer	25–30	Married	Yes
PO2	46–55	Mixed race	Commissioned officer	25–30	Single (D)	Yes
PO3	46–55	Black	Commissioned officer	11–15	Single	Yes
PO4	46–55	Black	Commissioned officer	25–30	Married	No
PO5	46–55	White	Commissioned officer	31–35	Single	Yes
PO6	36–45	Mixed race	Non-commissioned officer	5–10	Single	No
TO1	26–35	Black	Functional	5–10	Single (D)	Yes
TO2	26–35	Mixed race	Functional	5–10	Married	Yes
TO3	36–45	Mixed race	Functional	11–15	Married	Yes
TO4	36–45	Mixed race	Supervisory	11–15	Married	Yes
TO5	36–45	White	Functional	11–15	Single (D)	No
TO6	26–35	Mixed race	Functional	5–10	Single	No

PO, police officer; TO, traffic officer; D, divorced.

participants' making meaning of their experience and the researchers' understanding of that meaning (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Alase, 2017). Credibility of the data analysis was enhanced by following a structured and rigorous data analysis method (Smith, 2004). The quality criteria proposed by Patton (1999) were applied by (i) using a method that is congruent to the methodological orientation of the study; (ii) applying analyst triangulation by subjecting the data to analysis from both authors in a consecutive and iterative manner; and (iii) using theory triangulation by critically interpreting data against existing literature conceptualising authenticity from an eudaimonic, state and best-self perspective.

Researcher reflexivity consistently guided the whole research process, specifically the data analysis stage. During the study and especially during data analysis, the researchers regularly cross-questioned their own experiences, specifically by frequently considering how their predispositions as women who previously worked in male-dominated settings, influenced their interpretations and meaning-making. With the primary researcher having worked in law enforcement herself, the secondary researcher assumed the role of seeking out data that challenged potential preconceived assumptions and values about how it is possible to be authentic in this context.

Ethics Statement

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa (Reference: 2016CEMS/IOP085). Participants gave informed consent for participation and recording of interviews, after being duly notified of the purpose and nature of the study and strategies to ensure protection of their rights to privacy, confidentiality and no harm. Pseudonyms as depicted in **Table 1**, are used to report on verbatim data in the findings.

FINDINGS

Four superordinate themes were constructed to describe participants' best-self experiences namely (i) a mature sense of self; (ii) feeling spiritually congruent and grounded; (iii) self-actualisation in the work role and (iv) realigning to a positive way of being. The four themes and their related subthemes are depicted in **Figure 1** and described below, grounded in verbatim text from the data.

A Mature Sense of Self

Participants narrate best-self experiences in relation to the extent to which they experience positive self-regard and express a mindful relatedness to others. These subthemes were clustered to describe a mature sense of self, which fundamentally describes balancing self-interest with the needs and interests of others. A mature sense of self is conceptualised as valuing the self in the awareness of limitations and strengths and mindfully relating to others through compassion and understanding of differences. A mature sense of self helps these women to cope with conflictual situations or people and experience a sense of best-self.

Positive Self-Regard

Participants' sense of authenticity seemed rooted in an evolving self-knowledge and awareness. One participant (TO6), for example, notes, '*I knew in the back of my head that I was wrong and that I needed to acknowledge that I was wrong. I knew I was wrong and if I could not recognise that I would not have been my best-self'*. Their self-insight develops from discovering and learning from their inadequacies, to develop a sense of self-worth despite potential limitations as described by PO2, '*I first had to get to know myself as my personality, who I am, and then things fell into place*' and affirmed in the words of TO3, '*Each person plays a part in the bigger picture. When I realised this, it became easier for me and I stopped competing with others. I concentrate on my own life and my own goals for myself and what I want to reach in my life*'. Similarly, TO1 emphasises her positive self-regard as an expression of feeling her best-self, '*You are your best-self when you are feeling good about yourself, that's the honest truth. It can be that things are still negative, I still do not have the money that I needed. I still do not have that, but as long as from the inside I am clear and I feel strong and motivated and all that.*' A sense of best-self evolves in moving from self-insight to self-acceptance and ultimately to positive self-regard as evident in how PO2 values her strength, '*I believe that one will never know your own strength if you do not push yourself to find*

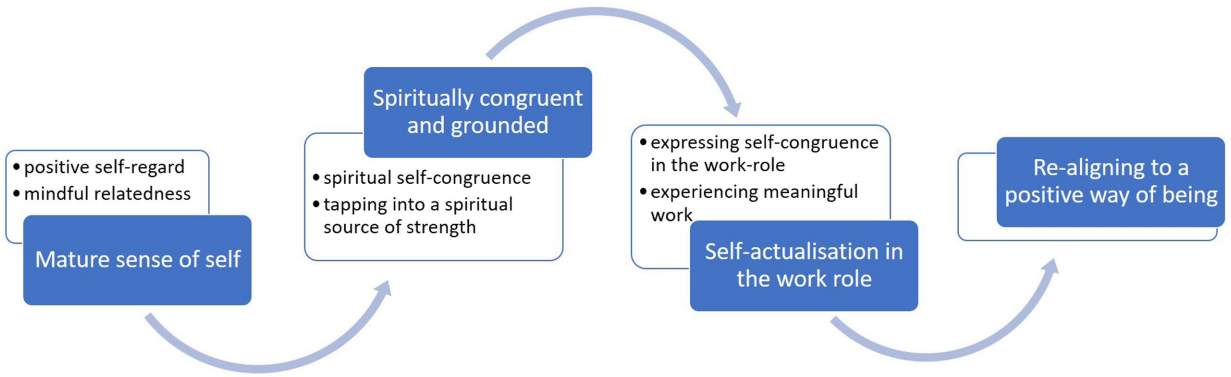

FIGURE 1 | Themes describing the experience of authenticity as best-self.

out who you really are.' Ultimately, positive self-regard denotes valuing the self despite limitations and feeling positive and confident about the self, based on self-knowledge and insight. Self-regard forms the bedrock of a mature sense of self and enables women to emphatically understand others better as well, leading to a mindful relatedness.

Mindful Relatedness

In describing their sense of authenticity when dealing with conflictual interactions, best-self was expressed when participants felt they could handle conflict calmly and maturely because they could access a sense of compassion and understanding for the other. Cranton and Carusetta (2004) defined authenticity in how self-awareness is used to understand, care for and have better relationships with others. From a position of positive self-regard (noted above), TO2 continues to describe her capacity to understand and accommodate self-other differences, '*What I also realise is, you get different personalities … people with different backgrounds, different cultures, and those play a big role*'. PO1 and TO1 reflect similarly on being more tolerant and understanding of others, '*I just realised one day … she is also a human being, maybe she has her own issues that causes her to be the way she is*' (PO1), and TO1 states that '*Members of the public they tend to back up their [angry] drivers…not knowing you are there to protect them … Now members of the public are not aware of those things*'. Compassion is part of being authentic because it is an orientation that enables one to be true to the self, while having sympathy for all beings (McGrath, 2013). Compassion was further reflected in having sympathy with transgressors, without losing their sense of self, as was noted by PO5, '*I understand their [transgressors'] point also*' and affirmed by PO4, '*We expect people to behave, but people are hungry, they want to have something as you are having something*'. Similarly, sympathy as a component of mindful relatedness is also reflected in PO6's memory about how she calmed herself in a conflictual situation '*And then I hear, actually also with a sympathetic ear that, the person is actually not that informed*'. Ultimately mindful relatedness is founded on understanding and accommodating self-other differences through compassion, enabling participants to conduct themselves in an emotionally controlled manner when dealing with conflict in the workplace.

Feeling Spiritually Congruent and Grounded

Participants narrate best-self experiences as rooted in feeling spiritually congruent and grounded. Their spiritual groundedness is therefore described in the experience of spiritual self-congruence and tapping into spiritual strength resources to help them cope when work circumstances are conflictual and challenging.

Spiritual Self-Congruence

Spiritual self-congruence reflects participants' authenticity as rooted in a strong spiritual identity that is congruent to living according to and acting from spiritual values and norms. In reflecting on being her best-self, TO2 notes '*I will also link it [best-self] very strongly to my spiritual background, the fact that I am very spiritual and have the Lord in my life, because I have spiritual values*'. Their actions are driven from internalised spiritual values, such as serving others, '*Because what you are doing today to a person will be done to you one day*' (PO4). Their spiritual identity establishes a value-based benchmark reflecting how they ideally see themselves, and when they are not like that, they do not feel authentic. As noted by TO4, '*I talk to God…I say Lord…I am not like that. Take it away so we can go on*'. Similarly, TO1 reflects on her ideal self in a spiritual context, '*God talk to me, show me where I went wrong, show me where what I can do to better myself'*. Speaking about her best-self, according to TO6, God has helped her to know herself and change herself for the better, '*And I pray a lot for my temper … and dear Jesus must help me with that. I can see that I have changed a bit, not a bit, I have changed*'. It is in acting in congruence with their internalised values that participants experience a sense of authenticity. The internalised spiritual values of how one should be become part of the benchmark against which participants measure the self and especially the sense of being best-self, as denoted by TO1, *'That is why as an individual you cannot speak out of anger… yes we have got contracts binding us, job descriptions*

binding us, but what does God say? What does the Bible say? What do the Ten Commandments say?'. In experiencing authenticity as best-self, it appears that the mind is illuminated, and the self is elevated beyond self also by spiritual conceptions (Vaughan, 2002).

Tapping Into a Spiritual Source of Strength

Feeling spiritually grounded stands apart from spiritual self-congruence also strengthened by tapping into strength resources of a spiritual nature. Women expressed authenticity to the extent that they could trace their source of strength and energy to a higher power. They feel that they can only cope, especially given the nature of their work, by deriving strength from a higher power, as expressed by TO1, '*More especially if you are in this kind of work where you are on the line, … we need God*'. They lean on a spiritual source, especially in challenging situations over which they have no control. This is resolutely confirmed by PO2, '*I firmly believe that a person can do nothing on his own strength and that God brings things on your path and with it the necessary strength to get through it*'. Their experiences show how participants associate their best-self with a higher power helping them to deal with emotions of self and others. Being their best-self is not in and from themselves, but '*The Lord is the one who keeps a person going. One goes at night and pray and then tomorrow you feel alright again and then you go on again*' (PO5). Some participants expressed accessing or connecting with their higher power by attending church, praying and/or reading the Bible. Tapping into their higher power in this way is how they access the internal resources they need, such as strength and wisdom to handle problems in a way that leaves them with a sense of best-self. Hence, even when faced with pressures (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993), cognisance of the spiritual strengths at work within helps them remain aware of the positive aspects of their being (Zukav, 2001; Murray et al., 2004). Such aspects include how they feel when they do work that aligns with their passion and purpose (Waterman, 1993).

Self-Actualisation in the Work Role

Participants' experiences of best-self manifest in expressions of self-actualisation in the work role. Their self-actualisation is conceptualised here in expressing self-congruence with the work role, experiencing work as meaningful and in authentic self-expression.

Expressing Self-Congruence With the Work Role

Participants relate a sense of best-self to experiences reflecting a strong identification with their work role. Participants' identification with their work role is evident in their describing a sense of congruence between self-values and their ability to express these at work. For TO5 this sense of being able to be herself in the work role, results in positive self-assessment, '*I was like myself there and I was very happy… I like to talk and I make people feel at ease*'. PO5 also relates to how in comparison to a previous work role, she now feels at home in her current role, making her happy to be a police woman, '*There I felt like a clerk … I did not feel like a police woman … it was so monotonous that I later developed half of a depression there … where I am now I'm very happy*'. In this sense, participants feel their best-self when they feel that the job affirms who they are and makes them feel good about themselves. Experiencing work as a place where they can live the person values that they hold in high regard leaves them with a sense of being their best-self, as noted by PO1, '*It [Police station] was really where I could express myself in my career by working with people, by building relationships, and my passion was working with people*'. Self-congruence in the work role is also reflected in descriptions of passion and enjoyment in relation to the work they do, as evident in the words of TO3, '*Somebody who is in a job and who does not love that job is actually more of a waste for the company and for himself*'. Similarly, TO2 notes, '*I fell in love with the occupation of a traffic officer and I enjoyed my work tremendously*'. In this way, several participants reflected on the positive emotions they experience because of a positive identification with their work role and the feeling that they can live the self-values they hold in high regard at work. This positive identification with the work role is further strengthened in that they find meaning through their work.

Experiencing Meaningful Work

Participants locate best-self experiences in feeling that through their work they are making a meaningful contribution to society. Some find meaning in serving others through their work, '*If I assist people and people are happy about what I've done for them then I feel I've done something; you know?'* (PO4). Similarly, PO6 describes how she found this occupation, meaningful and rewarding because it enabled her to help others, '*I could help people better…and the community in that instance*'. Making a meaningful contribution for participants resides in doing something of personal significance for which they have a passion. Participants note that '*When I am happy and I am at work, then I do my best, it's as if you go that extra mile*'. (TO6). One participant, TO1, reflected on a sense of best-self by saying '*And you looked forward to going [to work], because when you do something for another person you feel good yourself'*. The meaning that participants derive from work stems from engaging with work activities resembling values that they consider to be important.

Re-aligning to a Positive Way of Being

During the interviews, participants inadvertently narrated experiences of best-self in response to work-related situations of a challenging, frequently violent and conflictual nature. It seems that it is especially such emotionally challenging situations that elicit a need to return to a sense of best-self. In response to conflictual interactions, participants for example explain how they experience negative emotional charge which moves them away from feeling authentic. PO2 for example says, '*When you deal with difficult people who causes you to forget who you are, that brings out the ugly in you, is when I am no longer my best-self'*. The words of TO6 likewise reflect a sense

of moving away from best-self when negative emotions are not regulated, '*When I am myself is when I am positive…because when you are not yourself you snap*'. TO1 also realises how negative emotional charge removes her from best-self, '*If I'm sad or there is something that is not making me happy, I'm not gonna perform my best-self'*. Reflecting on being emotionally charged in a work situation leads the women to recall consequent negative feelings and low self-affirmation. This helps them to recognise not having a sense of best-self and to activate thoughts and emotions to realign to a sense of best-self, as noted by TO6, '*Where not being my best-self almost got me into trouble, when my emotions controlled me a bit, I was a bit tough with a motorist … I am glad it happened to me so I can prevent it in the future, because it can cause big trouble if a person does things when your emotions overwhelm you'*.

Based on their knowledge of self (see theme 1, mature self), women seem able to identify and express their emotional reactions to daily work challenges appropriately, like stated by PO3: '*I became scared';* TO6: '*Sometimes you can feel so down*'; PO5: '*I get so angry that I do not actually know what I must say, then I walk away*'; TO2: '*I was very nervous … you are exposed to the public, drunk people';* and TO2*: 'It is hurt … it is sadness, it's a lot of things, which one must deal with*'. The ability to express thoughts, emotions, perceptions, stimuli and experiences as words is related to authenticity (Baer et al., 2004). When participants express their emotions, it enables them to activate their inner resources to deal with their negative emotions, and in a continued strive for positive affect, adjust to focus on positive and constructive responses. Women consequently engage coping thoughts to deal with the stressful situations (*cf.* Lazarus, 1993) and these thoughts are affirmative or positive (Kernis, 2003) realigning the women to their sense of who they are when they are their best-self. Through being more positive women feel more authentic, which is congruent to the emotive effect explained in the process of self-verification (Lehman et al., 2019). When narrating circumstances when they felt their best-self, they recall being optimistic, hopeful and confident, for example as stated by PO1, '*I always try to be positive … irrespective, because I always tell myself I am not here [at work] the entire day, let me do the best for the 12 h that I am here*'. Participants' ability to recognise emotional demands and consequent negative emotional responses helps them to express their emotional responses and this is followed by active attempts to deal constructively with their emotions. This self-adjustment process is described here as realigning to a positive way of being, because at its essence it is the need for positive affect that is driving the adjustment process.

DISCUSSION

Women in law enforcement's experiences of authenticity were explored from a best-self perspective, with the aim of constructing an understanding of when they experience a sense of best-self. The inquiry was approached from an existentialist, eudaimonic notion of authenticity, purporting the authenticity experience to denote a sense of best-self. Four themes were constructed from the data that constitute fundamental pillars in experiencing a sense of best-self. It is proposed that participating women in law enforcement, express a sense of best-self when they present with a mature sense of self, feel spiritually congruent and grounded, experience self-actualisation in the work role and realign to a positive way of being.

Best-self is experienced when participants express a mature sense of self. A mature sense of self is described as having a positive self-regard that is rooted in a consistent process of developing self-knowledge, accepting who you are and having a strong sense of self-worth and self-confidence. Self-worth or self-regard is essential for becoming a fully functioning person (Rogers, 1961) and is an essential component of a positive self-esteem (Cast and Burke, 2002). Yet, a mature self-esteem balances self-interest with responsibility to others (DuBrin, 2004). The mature sense of self thus extends positive self-regard to others by being mindful about and having compassionate tolerance for self-other differences. Embracing the self while also respecting others enables participants' ability to negotiate and accommodate interpersonal differences, especially in a work context wherein they are consistently challenged with interactions of an aggressive and violent nature. Thus, a mature sense of self is based on a balanced and constructive self-other orientation that empowers the participants to cope with conflict and negative emotions in a constructive and self-empowered manner, leaving them feeling their best-self.

Secondly participants' spiritual congruence and grounding seem fundamental to their sense of best-self. Exploring authentic being will unavoidably unearth facets of a spiritual nature (Hiles, 2000), especially when prompted by an approach to authenticity as being congruent to one's best-self (Roberts et al., 2005). Women described being spiritually grounded as rooted in the experience of spiritual self-congruence, in deriving strength and coping from spiritual resources. They further describe being aware of the presence of a higher power in their lives and it is in living in congruence with this awareness, that they sense their best-self. Participants identified a Christian religion although religion was never part of a specific question in the interviews. None religion-specific aspects also influenced their spiritual grounding, such as living according to internalised values and beliefs. Authenticity from a best-self perspective highlights individuals' extraordinary aspects (Roberts et al., 2005) that relate to their sacred internal being (Anderson and Braud, 2011) or higher power (Barton, 2009). From such being they form a spiritual identity (Poll and Smith, 2003) that grounds their behaviour (Suzuki, 2010), since tapping into this 'ultimate being' (Kilcup, 2016, p. 248) helps them to feel, think and behave in alignment with their higher power (Barton, 2009; Howard, 2009). Spirituality relates to belief systems involved in universal quests for meaning and purpose, regardless of religion or the absence of religion (Murray et al., 2004). When participants mirror their religious beliefs and values in their actions, they experience a sense of authenticity and in so doing they furthermore associate best-self with a strong spiritual identity. Thus, viewing authenticity from a spiritual congruence perspective enables participants to realign the self with the characteristics and values they hold in highest regard.

Authenticity as best-self, is also experienced when participants feel self-actualised in their work role. In the findings, self-actualisation in the work role firstly describes how participants identify with their work role and experience self-congruence as they are able to express and live the characteristics they value in themselves, in the work role. Self-actualisation relates to state authenticity in that it refers to being oneself or actualising the real self by developing the self to its highest potential (Cohen, 2008). Feeling affirmed because they can be themselves and live out who they are and the person characteristics they value in their law enforcement role, relates to what Glavas (2016) describes as doing work that is true to the self. Maslow's conceptualisation of self-actualisation is based on the value ideals individuals integrate from societal norms of what is good and worthy (Cohen, 2008). Self-actualisation in this sense reflects an ideal self or in the context of this study, a notion of best-self. Self-actualisation was secondly related to the participants finding the work they do meaningful. Meaningful work reflects the individual's subjective value ideal of balancing self-other interests and it is regarded in literature as the bedrock of self-actualisation (Bailey et al., 2019) and essential to being authentic (Martela and Pessi, 2018). Although meaning is subjectively constructed, the subjective evaluation of what is meaningful is inextricably linked to societal norms (Martela and Pessi, 2018). Ultimately work is regarded as meaningful, when it enables self-actualisation and brings the individual closer to the ideal self (Bailey et al., 2019).

Lastly, the participants describe their ability to realign to a positive way of being as characteristic of them being authentic from a best-self perspective. These include returning to ways of being that are optimistic and hopeful, while being associated not only with authenticity (Avolio and Gardner, 2005), but also with wellbeing and coping (Lazarus, 1993; Karademas, 2006). Feeling positive emotions is, however, not a given in the context where they work. Their related experiences are more probably based on an active process of constantly choosing to realign the self with thoughts, emotions and behaviour associated with best-self. Since possibilities of being authentic or inauthentic are both already within individuals, we are already what we want to become, so that actual *being* depends on which possibility we intentionally manifest (*cf.* Heidegger, 2010).

It seems that the conceptual array and disagreement around authenticity may, at its core, be related to the inability to define the internal referent, that is central to the verification process when trying to gain a sense of people's authenticity experience. The idea of a singular true self or consistent personality does not hold in the context of social identity theory, which acknowledges a multifaceted self-concept that continues to develop as normally functioning people engage with and adapt to new and changing environments (Baumeister, 2019). It is utopic to operationalise the theoretical ideals of being completely authentic in any social context, wherein people change and are influenced externally (Ariza-Montes et al., 2017). A true self, real self, or a core self may be illusive to its own subject, whereas reflecting on one's best-self may be more accessible and may offer insight into feeling authentic that is not always accounted for by only happiness and satisfaction (Smallenbroek et al., 2017). In response to the core interview question, participants inadvertently narrated experiences of self in response to work-related situations of a conflictual and challenging nature, which at first does not provide the in-the-moment feeling of happiness and satisfaction. It is in processing the event, evaluating and adjusting their actions and emotional responses that participating women find a state of being that they are satisfied and happy with, that is a sense of what they feel is their best-self. It is also in this process that the need to feel happy and content drives the strive to consistently work on the self, and in doing so it may sometimes, and even frequently, result in feeling happy. This experience as described in the findings reflect what the literature defines as state authenticity and aligns with eudaimonic identity theory, which posits that in constructing a sense of self, one is concerned with developing and demonstrating the best-self (Waterman et al., 2010). Being authentic is thus a consistent process of negotiating self-other expectations. This defines authenticity as a process akin to identity construction, but it does not exclude the ideal of finding happiness and satisfaction in work and in life. In fact, the hedonic notions of wellbeing seem intertwined in the broader context of eudaimonia as the need to realign to a positive way of being seems to be at the core of feeling good about the self in relation to others, how one lives according to your spiritual values and beliefs and how one finds congruence between the self and the work role. The findings provide a conceptual grounding for authenticity as a relational construct—the experience of self in relation to the self, to others, to a higher power and to work.

Implications

This study emphasises the importance of establishing a sound conceptual orientation to the study of authenticity. As such, researchers should ground their conceptual understanding in a clear paradigmatic orientation, distinguishing either an existentialist or essentialist orientation, a hedonic and/or eudaimonic stance and favouring a state or trait perspective. More authenticity research is needed that takes an existentialist, eudaimonic orientation and regards authenticity as a consistent process of self-construction in view of having a best-self experience. Specifically for women, this may shed light on their identity work as a self-determined, self-constructed narrative, rather than an external ideal of consistently displaying feminine or masculine behaviours. Women should know that they can be authentic while growing their leadership style, while adjusting to work demands and role requirements in the workplace. They should know that they are the authors and judges of their authenticity experience. Pragmatically, to cope with work–life challenges and stressors and to enhance psychological wellbeing, support interventions should facilitate women's authenticity by focussing on the development of a sense of best-self. Such a focus should entail working with authenticity as a relational phenomenon—the self is consistently constructed in relation to the self, to others, a higher power and to work. As such, working intra- and inter-personally to develop a mature sense of self (positive self-regard and mindful relatedness) is needed. Interventions should furthermore capitalise on developing spiritual resources and enabling women to express their spiritual values and ideals in how they relate in the work context. Lastly, developing women's

sense of self-actualisation in the workplace can be attained by developing a strong career identity and helping them establish meaning in their work endeavour.

CONCLUSION

Developing authenticity is a relational identity construction process that helps women to cope, adjust and flourish in the workplace, in part because it is activated by challenges or stressors. It facilitates our concept of self, our interconnectedness with others and as a spiritual being and it enables self-actualisation in the work–role. Developing authenticity is a cyclical process of consistently returning to one's sense of best-self and aids eudaimonic as well as hedonic wellbeing. The study contributes to our perceptions of authenticity and how authenticity is about becoming (or returning to) your best-self. It adds to the body of existing knowledge on authenticity by exploring women's authenticity as a means of coping and flourishing in the law enforcement context.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because participants provided informed consent to use data for the purposes of this study. The data is not available for any other use. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to barnaha@unisa.ac.za.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the relevant Research Ethics Review Committee in the College of Economic and Management Sciences of the University of South Africa (UNISA). The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

RJ and AB contributed to the conception and design of the study and all sections in the manuscript and collaborated on the final findings in this manuscript. RJ did the fieldwork and a first level data analysis for her PhD in Psychology and contributed to revision and approval of submitted version. AB did a second level of analysis for this manuscript and final write up. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Motivating Women to Travel in India: Embodying Safety as an Organizational Purpose

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Safety concerns are a key factor that demotivate women from traveling. Tourism organizations are yet to develop approaches to address this comprehensively. Employing the case study design, this study describes how an Indian tourism organization adopted safe women travel as its purpose to reduce women's safety risk perceptions and motivated them to travel. Nine qualitative interviews were conducted with key stakeholders including co-founders, employees, customers, and vendors. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis resulting in the identification of purpose as a pull factor. Themes of defining, communicating, embodying purpose, and its resulting influence were identified. Through this process, the organization was able to positively impact perceptions of safety, enhance women's travel motivation, and develop long-term associations with all stakeholders. An actionable framework for implementing purpose was developed that can be used to align tourism organizations' practices and activities.

Keywords: purpose, safety risk perceptions, travel motivation, women, India

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INTRODUCTION

Women are increasingly choosing to travel independently, either alone (Seow and Brown, 2018) or in all-female groups (Khoo-Lattimore and Prayag, 2018). They differ from men in their travel preferences, needs (Junek et al., 2006), and motivations (McNamara and Prideaux, 2010). These aspects can help create service offerings specific for women (McNamara and Prideaux, 2010), but they have not been adequately examined (Small et al., 2017). One of the most important issues impacting women's travel motivations is safety risk (Wilson and Little, 2008; Yang et al., 2017). Women are more vulnerable to crimes especially those that are sexual in nature (Brown and Osman, 2017). This demotivates several women from traveling or constrains their travel choices (Wilson and Little, 2005). All-female tours reduce such risks and are gaining popularity (Khoo-Lattimore and Prayag, 2018). They are pitched as being higher on safety by providing women-specific services. Most travel companies and destination managers focus on cosmetic aspects to customize all-female tour packages, such as women-friendly floors, or women-specific add-ons in accommodations (Yang et al., 2018). These measures, while useful, do not address the core issues of reducing safety risk sustainably. Tourism organizations serious on encouraging more women to travel need to go beyond these cosmetic changes to engage more deeply with the issue and create a safer travel environment for women (Yang et al., 2018).

This study illustrates how Gotravel (pseudo name), a travel organization in Bengaluru, a city in India, endeavored to address this issue seriously by identifying and implementing safe women travel as its purpose. It embodied women safety in its behavioral norms, which reflected in its interactions with customers and motivated women to travel without being conservative in their choices of destinations and experiences. All direct and indirect interactions of prospective women travelers with Gotravel reflected its purpose and *pulled* them to travel with it. Thematically analyzing the data employing push-pull theory of travel motivation (Dann, 1977), we identified organizational purpose as a strong pull factor to motivate women to travel. We present a framework illustrating how Gotravel defined and implemented purpose. Our findings can guide tourism organizations to develop and implement purpose through norms and processes in order to promote safer women travel and enhance their travel motivation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Individuals' travel behavior is influenced by their travel motivations, perceived risks, and travel-related constraints (Sönmez and Graefe, 1998; Huang and Hsu, 2009; Chen et al., 2013). For women travelers, perceived safety concerns and socio-cultural constraints are critical factors that often prevent them from traveling (Wilson and Little, 2005; Brown and Osman, 2017; Yang et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2019). The impact of these risk perceptions on travel behavior can be reduced by identifying factors that motivate women to travel (Khan et al., 2019). For example, intrinsic motivators such as feelings of empowerment and independence (Green and Singleton, 2006; McNamara and Prideaux, 2010) encourage women to travel despite the risks involved. In addition, tourism organizations can create extrinsic motivators.

Motivation to Travel

Several theories have examined travel motivation, of which the push-pull theory (Dann, 1977), one of the most popular approaches to examine travel motivation (Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019), forms the basis of our study. This theory purports that individuals are intrinsically motivated by socio-psychological needs that "push" them and are extrinsically motivated by destination-related factors that "pull" them to travel (Jang et al., 2009; Mohammad and Som, 2010). In one of the earliest studies, Crompton (1979) identified seven push factors (escape, self-exploratory, relaxation, prestige, regression, kinship-enhancement, and social interaction) and two pull factors (novelty and education). Over the years, several factors have been identified that vary based on tourist demographics such as age, marital status, income, education, health status (e.g., Zimmer et al., 1995; Sangpikul, 2008; Hanafiah et al., 2010), nationality (e.g., Jang and Cai, 2002; Hikmah et al., 2013), and destination (e.g., Park et al., 2010; Yousefi and Marzuki, 2015).

Travel experiences vary according to gender (Wilson and Little, 2008). The needs and travel preferences of women differ from men (Junek et al., 2006), as do their tourist experiences (Brown et al., 2020). Thus, their motivations to travel also vary and need examination (Chiang and Jogaratnam, 2006; McNamara and Prideaux, 2010).

Women Travel Constraints, Motivators, and All-Female Tours

Several factors demotivate women from traveling. They encounter gender-based power differences, gender roles, and behavioral norm expectations while traveling (Brown et al., 2020). They face constraints related to socio-cultural issues and family commitments (Henderson, 1991; Wilson and Little, 2005, 2008). More critically, they confront safety and security risks arising from sexualized male attention (Jordan and Aitchison, 2008; Brown and Osman, 2017). They are also vulnerable to risks involving violent crime, harassment, and theft (Amir et al., 2015; Brown and Osman, 2017; Yang et al., 2017).

All-female tours address several of these constraints and are becoming popular across the world (Gibson et al., 2012; Khoo-Lattimore and Prayag, 2018; Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019). While providing safety in numbers (Song, 2017), they incorporate several push factors that motivate women to travel. Women are able express themselves freely and perceive a sense of equality (Doran, 2016). They can let go of their gender roles and familial responsibilities (Jennings, 2005), and rediscover their "selves' (Kasanicky, 2009; Berdychevsky et al., 2013). They escape from routines, get dedicated personal time, and experience a sense of freedom from gendered interactions and dynamics (Berdychevsky et al., 2013). They experience a sense of community by meeting likeminded people and fostering friendships (Berdychevsky et al., 2016).

To complement these, travel companies include customizations such as accommodations with women-friendly floors or women-specific add-on services (Yang et al., 2018) to act as pull factors. Most of these services do not address the core issue of safety risks (Yang et al., 2018), and therefore are weak pull factors. Serious engagement with the issue is needed (Yang et al., 2018) to develop comprehensive solutions that would also act as strong pull factors for women travelers. Much research is required to identify and understand these pull factors.

This study identifies organizational purpose as a strong pull factor to motivate women to travel. It presents the case of Gotravel, a tourism organization in Bengaluru, India, which identified women safety as its purpose and aligned its internal norms and activities toward this purpose.

About Gotravel

Established in 2013, and comprising of five women employees, including the founder and co-founder, Gotravel wanted to bridge the gap between women keen on traveling but concerned for their safety, and the untapped potential of India as a versatile tourist destination. Despite being a popular tourist destination, India does not attract the expected number of tourists (Khan et al., 2019), especially women. Consistent reports of India being unsafe for women (Charlton, 2014; World Travel and Tourism Council, 2014; Thomas and Mura, 2019), clubbed with underdeveloped infrastructure (Mohsin and Lockyer, 2010), has deterred women travelers from traveling to and in India.

Reports of theft, sexual, and physical assault on tourists have further exacerbated negative perceptions of India (Agrawal, 2016; The Times of India, 2017).

Gotravel adopted women's safety as its purpose to address these concerns. It aimed to encourage and equip women to travel through safe yet immersive travel experiences without restricting their destination choices. It provided women-only group tours and made extensive efforts to ensure safety. The founder and co-founder were directly involved in the vendor identification process. They visited destinations multiple times and personally verified safety-related arrangements at accommodations and with travel partners. They personally communicated with the families of their travelers to educate them about the safety measures. They conducted workshops with women on travel safety and travel-related skills such as riding bikes or fixing cars, which went beyond the immediate travel experience. Additionally, they also raised conversations on women safety in popular media and through traveler meet-ups, which included both men and women. Thus, they endeavored to create an ecosystem to reduce safety risks for women.

Internally, Gotravel consistently perpetuated its purpose through behavioral norms. These were also built into hiring, associating with external vendors, and work practices. Beginning with a few tours in the first year, Gotravel expanded to an average of 50–60 tours per year and has impacted over 7,000 lives. By aligning its norms and activities with its purpose, Gotravel was able to positively influence women's perceptions of safety with respect to India, enhance their travel motivation, and develop long-term associations with them.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Purpose was an emerging concept not examined in the context of the Indian tourism industry. In this context, an intensive study of a single unit would enable generation of new insights and enrich existing theory (Pettigrew, 1990; Yin, 1994; Lilius et al., 2011). Therefore, we employed the case study design (Yin, 1994) for our study. All of Gotravel's activities, decisions, and stakeholder interactions were consciously aligned with its purpose, thus making it suitable for our study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol, site visits, and information on the organization's website and social media platforms. The first author met the co-founder, visited their office, and also experienced their services as a customer. The first and second authors conducted semi-structured interviews with nine individuals associated with the organization. They interviewed the other co-founder, two employees handling communication and operations, and three vendors associated with Gotravel for at least 2 years, handling accommodation in South, East, and North India. They also connected with three customers associated with Gotravel for at least a year. Data from the organization's website and social media platforms were used to corroborate interview data.

The interview protocol (**Appendix A**) was based on literature on positive organizations (Quinn, 2015) and purpose-driven organizations (Quinn and Thakor, 2018; Thakor and Quinn, 2019). Questions were classified into four groups: one focusing on general information about the participant and his/her association with the organization; second relating to the organization's purpose; third examining organizational practices and norms that enforced the purpose; and fourth exploring participants' loyalty and commitment to the organization. The questions were adjusted suitably for interviewing employees, customers, and vendors. Wherever needed, participants were probed further and were encouraged to provide specific examples to enhance the depth of the data. The interviews averaged 40 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis for identifying patterns and developing themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012). The first two authors analyzed the data and then critically reviewed the identified themes with the third author. The first two authors read the interviews several times to familiarize themselves with the data. They worked independently to develop initial codes by identifying recurring patterns, similarities, and dissimilarities across interviews. Then, they critically reviewed the codes to explore commonalities and reconciled differences to develop a common set of initial codes. Next, they worked independently to group initial codes into themes by examining their relationships and inter-connections, and again engaged in mutual discussion to develop initial themes. They developed a set of themes, which they discussed with the third author for her inputs and identification of any individual biases. At this stage, they also examined their themes in light of extant literature on purpose. This enabled them to refine the themes and develop a comprehensive framework. This process of data collection and analysis incorporated data and researcher triangulation, thus ensuring the trustworthiness of emerging themes (Nowell et al., 2017). **Table 1** presents the data analysis process and depicts changes in emergent themes during the different phases of data analysis.

FINDINGS

Analysis revealed three key elements of implementing purpose: defining purpose, communicating it, and embodying it. The resulting influence on internal and external stakeholders was identified. These elements were consolidated into a framework of implementing purpose and its outcomes (**Figure 1**), and are discussed below.

Defining Purpose

Gotravel began with the idea of fulfilling a purpose of changing women's travel experiences in India by facilitating safe, immersive tours. It used this purpose to extend conversations on women's safety and continuously aligned and expanded its activities accordingly. Three key features assimilated in

TABLE 1 | Data analysis process.

Phase	Process description	Coders
1. Data familiarization	i. Reading interviews multiple times	Authors 1 & 2
2. Initial coding	i. Independent coding to identify recurring patterns, similarities and differences in the data ii. Inter-coder discussion to examine emerging patterns, and reconcile differences	Authors 1 & 2
3. Development of initial themes	i. Independent coding to group codes into themes, followed by inter-coder discussion to develop initial themes ii. Initial themes and sub-themes: a. *Purpose:* Prosocial behaviour, meaningful experiences, beyond profit maximization b. *Communication:* Clarity, authenticity, transparency, honesty c. *Culture:* Empathy, trust, integrity d. *Practices:* Detail orientation, approachability, responsiveness	Authors 1 & 2
4. Theme consolidation and finalization	i. Discussion on themes in light of literature on purpose. ii. Reviewing, refining and streamlining of themes iii. Final themes and sub-themes: a. *Defining purpose:* Being Prosocial, creating a meaningful experience, going beyond profit maximization b. *Communicating purpose:* Clarity and authenticity, transparency and honesty c. *Embodying purpose*: i. Values: Empathy, trust, integrity, ii. Practices: Being detail-oriented, approachability and responsiveness iv. Themes brought together into an actionable framework	Authors 1 & 2, Reviewed with author 3

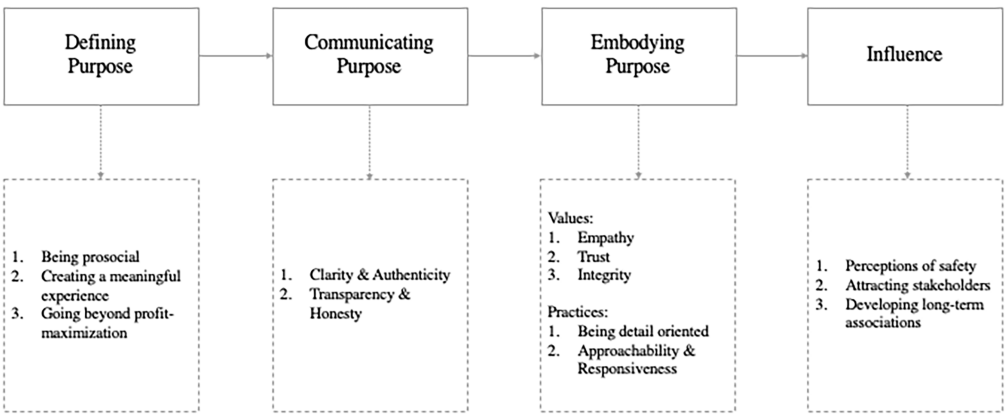

FIGURE 1 | Implementing purpose in tourism organizations.

Gotravel's purpose were being prosocial, creating a meaningful experience, and going beyond profit maximization. These were reflected in employee actions, service pricing, and customer experience.

Being Prosocial

Gotravel aimed to create social impact by helping and empowering women to travel with confidence. Thus, pro-sociality was inherent in its purpose. As a co-founder described as:

> [We are] fulfilling a market need - providing tours and encouraging female travel. But we are also creating a social impact. For us, it's one of the key driving factors.

Employees also described the organization as a closely associated community of people working towards helping women. An employee stated as:

> I had the struggle of traveling solo, not being able to convince my parents, even lying to them to go to a different place. So I knew what women were going through, and now in the last three and a half years [of my employment], I have met people, I can sense that [Gotravel] is giving purpose to a lot of people who want to travel alone. There is this company or community that is helping them do it.

This was echoed by customers as well, who could identify the prosocial element as empowering women to travel, building their sense of confidence, and enabling them to feel free. A customer described as:

> Their purpose is to get women out of their houses and travel and explore and not worry about safety and just give them some amount of freedom… that's the reason why I was able to go with them.

Creating a Meaningful Experience

Gotravel aimed to create meaningful experiences for women travelers. In addition to carefully curated immersive travel plans, it also conducted trainings such as how to ride bikes or fix cars, which were useful life skills. According to the co-founder, such workshops aimed to create a meaningful impact that went beyond the short-term travel experience. This was corroborated by a customer:

> … they do a lot more workshops like travel safety, biking, and fixing your car workshops, so it's not just about traveling it's also about how to live more confidently.

Going Beyond Profit Maximization

While Gotravel acknowledged that financial resources were necessary, its greater focus lays beyond profits on women travel. A co-founder emphasized the importance of the larger objective of the organization:

> We actually started from social impact… of wanting to make a difference in terms of the way women travel in India. And from there, it grew into a business idea.

A similar understanding was seen among the employees who identified the key objective of the organization as not being profits:

> It's been six years now [Gotravel] is there, but when you are part of it, and you see the business side, I will not say they are very much money minded. Money is involved for our services [but] it never felt like we are doing it for the sake of money.

This was also built into the pricing of packages, which were comparatively lower than the competition while maintaining the quality of the tours. A customer appreciated this aspect:

> It's not a philanthropic organisation… if you compare the cost of the tour with any of the peers you would see that there is a distinct difference in the rate. It is a lot cheaper than any other tour and for the same quality.

Communicating Purpose

Gotravel consistently reinforced its purpose both with internal and external stakeholders through communication. All communication was clear and authentic, and exhibited transparency and honesty. Communication was not always verbal in nature. It was also reflected in employee actions and behavior, indicating the internalization of purpose.

Clarity and Authenticity

Gotravel's communications and actions were clear and authentic. Within the organization, purpose was not communicated explicitly. It was evident in the functioning of the organization and the clarity of functions to team members. As a co-founder mentioned as:

> That's [purpose] not definitely [stated] verbally, we do not do that… as a team, we are pretty sorted about our function…on what we want to do to help women travel.
>
> Ultimately that's the goal, and with each other's action, our purpose gets revalidated.

That the organization was genuine in communicating its purpose was also evident in their efforts to reach larger audiences beyond immediate customers. A co-founder explained as:

> We have our operations, marketing, and sales team who are working to reach mass audiences… colleges, schools, NGOs… to make them more confident and build trust in themselves that they can do anything that they want to do. So…it's not only about working women who want to take off. It should be about the people who are in college and the short trips or workshops they can be a part of.

Clarity of purpose was also built into communications for external stakeholders through their website and social media. As a customer stated as:

> Their communication is very good…I think they are pretty passionate about women's travel and women's empowerment and kind of enabling change in India's travel space, I think she (a co-founder) does a really good job of communicating that through her personal timeline on Facebook as well as through the organization.

Transparency and Honesty

Communication across all organizational interactions were marked by transparency and honesty. This started with the hiring process during which the candidate was honestly informed about the organization. Often, it was the reason for individuals to join the organization. An employee described as:

> When I first interacted with one of the co-founders, it was such an easy conversation because she was telling me all the pros and cons of [the organization], she was so transparent. It was the same with other members as well…. If a person is so transparent to you, you easily can connect to it (the purpose).

It created a sense of bonding that facilitated employees to learn quickly and start contributing to the organization. This

also facilitated a working environment open to discussing issues and resolving them. As a co-founder explained as:

> I think that honesty, about pointing out breakpoints it's so apparent. There's no fear of ruffling feathers, or there's no fear of irritating someone. So you are generally very open about what's working and what's not working … that's helping us move forward.

Transparency and honesty were also maintained in communication with customers. This, together with the purpose and experience overall, had such a positive impact on some customers that they offered their *pro-bono* services as tour guides. A customer stated as:

> I think honesty is very important. Whatever they say is what they do, there is no hypocrisy. You know they are very transparent, so that is what I appreciate most about them [Gotravel] and also why I would love to continue being a trip lead.

Embodying Purpose

Purpose was further integrated in Gotravel through practices and values. Several norms were developed to guide employee behavior and actions. Key values of empathy, trust, and integrity were identified. Practices of being detail-oriented, approachability, and responsiveness were observed.

Values

Empathy

Empathy enabled team members to understand where the other person was coming from. It created a supportive environment where conflicts and differences were handled smoothly. Members were encouraged to be who they were. Personal differences and goals were supported, which motivated them to work harder toward the organization's goals and enhanced their dedication toward it. Such an environment led to employees feeling motivated and owning responsibility:

> There is motivation from all of us to do different things, not just work-related… we are all connected to each other, which makes me part of this more than just for the company. So they kind of hold me accountable for a lot of things apart from work as well, and that makes it easier for me to wake up every day and do this work.

The organization also practiced empathy in their treatment of customers. They ensured positive experiences for customers, even when it costed them financially. Decisions were made keeping the mind the customer's experiences and feelings. An employee illustrated as:

> On one trip, the flights were delayed, flights are not our responsibility. When we announce a trip, we tell them what time to reach the trip's starting location, reaching there is their job. But the flights got delayed, and the rest of the group had to move on, so the others had to have a separate vehicle organized for them to get dropped. Now it was not our fault, and it was not their fault either. But we thought it's the start of the vacation, to make them pay [extra] money is going to sour the mood, and it just does not make anyone happy, so we pitched in half of it. We took a conscious hit, and it might sound silly and naive in the short-term, but in the long-term, we have ensured that they understand the kind of heart we put in the trip. It comes from the point of empathy, if we were in that position, our mood would be so off, we would be so upset that we might not be able to enjoy the rest of the trip.

Trust

The other core value of the organization was of building trust with all stakeholders. A co-founder stated that they trusted their employees from the time they joined, even though it impacted attrition rates such that only those who were comfortable with this amount of trust, stayed. They provided employees autonomy to work from any location, design, plan tours, and try new things at work. An employee remarked that this had a positive impact on her sense of ownership over her work. A tour lead also reflected the same sentiment:

> When leading a trip, an amount of money is allotted, and as trip leads, we can do what we want. It's just that we have to submit the bill, and the bill should not exceed what was quoted in the first place. And no question has ever been asked [about how and why the money was spent]. Whatever quote I have given has all been reimbursed; basically, they trust you.

Trust was also extended to customer interactions. A co-founder emphasized that they worked on building trust with their customers and did everything possible to never break it. The instance of the organization going the extra mile to accommodate travelers with a delayed flight and bearing half of the cost was a case in point.

The organization also focused on creating trust-based associations with their vendors. They actively engaged their vendors in tour planning and displayed trust through their financial dealing with them by settling payments in advance.

Integrity

Another crucial value displayed was integrity. It began with hiring, where prospective employees were clearly informed about the organization—one with limited financial resources but dedicated to enhancing women's travel experiences. This attracted employees who were passionate about and motivated toward working for the organization's purpose. As an employee stated as:

> Whatever they say is what they do, there is no hypocrisy in what they do and what they say…that is what I appreciate most about the organization.

Similarly, customers' expectations were realistically set before a tour commenced, so that they knew what they were getting into. A customer turned trip lead stated that the organization was honest and trustworthy, which was the reason for her volunteering her services to it.

Practices

Being Detail-Oriented

Stemming from their passion for travel and safety, Gotravel practiced detail orientation in all its activities. A co-founder mentioned that she loved planning trips and researching destinations, which was reflected in their itineraries that focused on off-beat destinations and travel paths. They also paid attention to customer demographics, interests, requirements, and expectations, building that into their itineraries. This was notably reflected in customers' statements:

> They ask you about the type of experience you are looking for, your age group, limitations, they go a little bit in-depth, which was nice, and after that, they came up with a detailed itinerary based on [these] inputs … the planning process was interactive and detailed.

The detailed level of planning for every tour was appreciated by vendors as well. A vendor described the interactive nature of planning and how it helped him in running his own business better:

> Whatever ideas they incorporate, are passed onto me. The itineraries, the social media marketing… they share with me also. If an idea comes to them, they share with me, or if I come up with anything, [I share] …both ways we share the ideas, so it helps me also to grow. I am a male, in a package tour if a family comes, earlier I considered only from my limited perspective but after working with them I came to know what a lady accompanying on a trip looks [for] in a package, which I am learning from them.

Approachability and Responsiveness

Another important practice displayed was the approachability and responsiveness experienced by external stakeholders. This was reflected in the incident of a flight delay being quickly handled by the team, even when it was not part of their package. This was also evident in their interactive tour planning approach with both customers and vendors discussed above. All the customers interviewed were highly appreciative and mentioned instances of how the team, including the co-founder, was approachable and responsive to their requirements. They described as:

> Customer 1: I really like the way they work, because the other tours I have gone with were not so friendly or approachable, but even the co-founder(s) have no airs about them. You can call her any time, and talk to her any time, she's very approachable and then the feedback also they take up quite seriously.
>
> Customer 2: I kept emailing them before I went on the trip, asking details about it, and they are very responsive. They keep you completely updated, and they put you on a WhatsApp group before you travel.

Influence

Through effective definition, communication, and embodiment of purpose, Gotravel was able to positively influence its stakeholders. Perceptions of safety were enhanced, larger numbers of women were attracted to travel, thus facilitating their travel motivation, and positive long-term associations were developed.

Perceptions of Safety

By effectively implementing its purpose, Gotravel was able to enhance perceptions of safety among its customers. This was reflected in weekly testimonials from customers and media coverage, which the co-founder felt was validation for their efforts. This was also echoed by a customer:

> …their purpose is to get women out of their houses and travel and explore and not worry about safety… The fact that it's very easy for me to [travel with them], I do not even have to think about it I just have to say that I'm traveling.

Attracting Stakeholders

The implementation of the purpose was also reflected in the overall performance of the organization. In the first year of its operation, Gotravel conducted a few short tours. The company got positive feedback from the women who traveled with them, and through word of mouth, they were able to attract more customers. Over time, the company began organizing longer tours with customized itineraries, attracting a larger female customer base, including working mothers, teenagers, and ladies' clubs. Thus, from a few short tours in the first year, the company expanded to conducting around 60 tours a year along with other social initiatives. Thus, through its purpose, Gotravel was able to enhance the travel motivation of customers and attract more women travelers.

Developing Long-Term Associations

Gotravel's positive professional interactions with external stakeholders through communication, values, and practices led women travelers to appreciate the organization for what it stood for, and develop trust and comfort with them. It led them to travel again with the organization, some of them offering their services *pro-bono* as tour leads. Thus, it developed long-term associations with its customers.

DISCUSSION

The rise in women travelers globally (McNamara and Prideaux, 2010) has put focus on safety risks and constraints faced by them. In order to create an enabling travel environment and

motivate women to travel, tourism organizations need to develop long lasting solutions to reduce safety risks (Yang et al., 2018). Extant research describes several push factors for women travel motivation but does not sufficiently discuss the pull factors. Pull factors become critical as tourism organizations can exercise greater control in planning and implementing them. This study contributes by presenting organizational purpose as a critical pull factor in motivating women to travel by addressing their safety issues. We identify key elements of defining and implementing purpose and consolidate it into a framework. This framework can act as a guide for tourism organizations looking to implement purpose effectively in order to create a safe travel environment for women and motivate them to travel.

Purpose is an organization's reason for being (Collins and Porras, 1996) and directs all organizational actions. In the recent years, there is fresh emphasis on organizations to re-examine their purpose, go beyond economic value, and create societal value to build trust and lasting relationships with stakeholders (Hollensbe et al., 2014). Following this approach, Gotravel adopted a goal that went beyond profits to address a larger social concern of women travelers' safety. Studies indicate that purpose can lead to various positive outcomes for the organization. It enhances employee perceptions of their behavior as being virtuous, aligned with important values, and provides meaning to their work (Rosso et al., 2010). This, in turn, can enhance their efforts (Birkinshaw et al., 2014; Quinn and Thakor, 2018), leading to higher job performance, organizational commitment (Liden et al., 2000), organizational identification, organizational citizenship behavior, and motivate them to work harder (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Michaelson et al., 2014). It can enable organizations to develop meaningful relationships with stakeholders (Gwartz and Spence, 2019) such as customers and enhance their loyalty and satisfaction (Du et al., 2013; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2015).

Our findings corroborate these positive outcomes in Gotravel and the framework presents ways in which they can be achieved. Gotravel's leaders had a strong sense of purpose, which was clearly defined and communicated both internally and externally. It was reinforced by values and practices employed, resulting in positive experiences for employees and customers. These experiences led to highly motivated employees and long-term relationships with customers. We further note that in order to reap benefits of purpose as a pull factor, it is important for organizations to not only define but also internalize it in practices and values. This happens when leaders believe in purpose, it is communicated authentically and employees put faith in it (Quinn and Thakor, 2018).

Our framework is useful for tourism organizations that have different identified purposes, such as eco-tourism, spiritual tourism, responsible tourism, or customer delight, and aim to operationalize it. It can assist them in aligning their activities with their goals, curate their business accordingly, and utilize purpose to enhance tourist motivation. In the context of the current pandemic, our study provides a way for tourism organizations to re-establish their trust with customers by reinventing themselves through purpose.

It should be noted that our framework is based on a single case and addresses a single type of purpose. While deploying it in other organizations, it is likely that variations in the identified features and additional unique features of implementing purpose may emerge due to differences in purposes and unique organizational characteristics. Therefore, while utilizing this framework, organizations should be mindful of such emergent variations and be open to incorporating them suitably.

Our study opens new research directions on purpose in the tourism sector. While we examined a single organization in depth, studying purpose in multiple organizations with larger number of stakeholders can deepen our understanding of the concept. Additionally, examining purpose as a variable quantitatively can further enrich literature.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical review and approval were not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

RC: conception of the study, research design, method, and interpretation. VL: literature review, data collection, and analysis. AT: introduction, method, interpretation, and discussion. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

General Information

1. What do you currently do?
2. What is your association with the organization?
3. For how long have you been associated with the organization?

Purpose

1. Does the organization have a higher purpose? How would you define it?
2. How do you identify with its purpose?
3. How do you see its purpose come to life in its functioning?

Factors That Reinforce and Facilitate Purpose

1. What enables the organization to carry out its purpose?
2. How is the organization's purpose communicated? In terms of daily practices/functioning and more generally.
3. Are there any practices/activities carried out by the organization that enable it to fulfill its purpose? Can you elaborate on them?
4. How has this culture/environment been reinforced/cultivated since your association?

Influence on Stakeholders

1. Is there anything about the environment or culture of the organization that has encouraged you to continue your association with the organization?—As an employee/customer/vendor.
2. What attracted you to the organization?
3. What has made you decide to continue your association with the organization till now?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add?

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Andean Women's Persistence Amidst Racialized Gendered Impoverishment, Capitalist Incursions, and Post-conflict Hauntings

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Throughout the last four decades, Andean women from the highland communities of Peru have been significantly affected by ongoing neoliberal capitalist development and patriarchal structures. These intersecting violence(s) took on more horrific dimensions during the Peruvian armed conflict (1980–2000) and have contributed to multiple psychosocial sequelae that linger in the daily lives on these communities as "ghostly matters." Seeking to face these experiences in a context of ongoing material impoverishment, Andean women from highland communities have initiated multiple associations or economic collective projects. The authors accompanied a group of women who formed a knitting association and facilitated a feminist participatory action research (FPAR), creating opportunities through which these women could engage in action-reflection processes toward enhancing their association. Twelve women from this FPAR process agreed to be interviewed by the first author who sought to explore their understandings about the processes of forming their association in this post-conflict context and the challenges they were facing. Interview transcripts were analyzed using Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory coding strategy. The findings reveal multiple challenges for women's collaborative work created by ongoing racialized gendered violence and its intra- and interpersonal effects. Moreover, the findings confirmed that capitalist development dynamics, and, more particularly, resources introduced by agents from outside the community, bring both gains and losses for Andean women. The latter reported having learned skills that allowed them to better insert themselves in a market economy, but that these new activities were displacing more community-based Indigenous practices and traditions. Finally, this study reveals that the wounds created by the armed conflict generated multiple forms of silence that prevent Andean peasants from openly expressing their desires. Despite this, the women in this FPAR process and participants in these interviews are engaging in action-based responses through which they are overcoming some of these challenges and sustaining their association. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for mental health professionals and activist-scholars working with Indigenous communities affected by armed conflict by underscoring the limitations of interventions based exclusively on the spoken word and arguing for action-based approaches that draw on bottom-up knowledge and practices.

Keywords: armed conflict, psychosocial sequelae, Indigenous women, feminist participatory action research, women's associations

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INTRODUCTION

Andean women have faced diverse experiences of racialized gendered marginalization both in their local communities and in the Peruvian society more broadly, within and across time. This marginalization has deep historical roots and can be found in and through contemporary neoliberal, racist, and capitalist systems and structures. The Peruvian armed conflict of the 1980s and 1990s was rooted in these dynamics and affected extensive areas in the southern Peruvian Andes, leading to the death and disappearance of 1,000 of Quechua-speaking *campesinas*[1] (peasants; Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003) and to complex psychosocial sequelae in their communities (Martín–Baró, I., 1994).

During the past three decades, as one response to this continuum of economic and political violence and marginalization, Andean women have sought to build a better life for themselves and their children. In doing so, they have exercised their agency in complex and sometimes contradictory ways within multiple structural limits and some new opportunities in their socio-historical and economic contexts (Charrad, 2010). Many have opted to come together and organize women's associations, and in so doing, have found, or been offered, support from both private and public institutions including reparations initiatives, NGOs, state programs, and private corporations. Andean women's work with these institutions has brought them benefits but also challenges in terms of leaving behind previous campesina cultural practices and values including local ways of being in the world. The research reported here complements a feminist participatory and action research (FPAR) process that was initiated to better understand one these efforts. It focuses on an analysis of in-depth interviews with 12 Andean women from a town affected by the armed conflict and increasing capitalist incursions who participated in the FPAR. These women had decided to work together in a knitting association, seeking a better life for themselves and their families. The first author initiated this FPAR process in 2016, accompanying the knitting association for 18 months as they developed collective efforts to enhance the quality of, and the market for, their knitted products. The second author accompanied at a distance, drawing on years of feminist participatory action research with creative resources in rural Guatemala during conflict and post-genocide processes and in contexts of humanitarian disasters in the US and beyond.

Through participatory workshops that incorporated local practices as well as creative storytelling, dramatizations, and drawings, the authors and the Andean group sought to document experiences of the post-conflict period as well as the strengths and resources through which they could move roughly forward in this changing context. As outsider activist-scholars, the authors facilitated iterative processes through which the women reflected on actions through which they sought to mobilize their individual and collective responses to the sequelae of the armed conflict in a context of ongoing racialized impoverishment. Internal community dynamics and multiple silences and silencing about the armed conflict were reflected in what we saw as the women's hesitancy to share narratives of these complex experiences. Recognizing that mainstream EuroNorthAmerican psychological and feminist thought tends to equate silence with disempowerment, this article aligns itself with a more nuanced understanding of silence that is grounded in the experiences and activities of these Andean women (Parpart and Parashar, 2019). Moreover, as some Indigenous scholars have noted (see Gone, 2007) and as we have discussed in previous work (see Lykes and Crosby, 2015), situating stressors within historical and sociocultural contexts and/or acting to redress problems is most often a preferred strategy to that of "talking about individual-level or current feelings." Despite this, the authors hoped that in-depth individual interviews with some of the participants, that complemented time together in the larger group workshops, might facilitate a better understanding of their complex post-conflict gendered and racialized experiences in hopes of also generating meaning making that might enhance women's broader participation in their community (Lykes et al., 2021). We document below some ways in which these Andean women contested racialized gendered impoverishment in the context of ongoing marginalization and resistance in the midst of what we have come to understand as post-conflict "hauntings" (Gordon, 1997).

This study's findings confirm the multiple contributions and some of the limitations of participatory, action-based approaches in the wake of armed conflict and structural economic and gendered violence. It begins with a brief overview of the context in which the women's knitting cooperative was developed, including a discussion of the multiple circulations and intersections of patriarchal, racialized, and capitalist power. We then describe the FPAR processes briefly, situating the in-depth interviews as one aspect of these broader action-reflection processes. After describing the interview protocol, sample and analytic strategies for this study we present our interpretations of the women's meanings made of their experiences within the knitting association, including their reflections on the limits and possibilities of organizing together in this post-conflict context. We conclude with a brief discussion of limitations as well as implications for future work with rural women in conflict and post-conflict transitions that are continuously constrained by neoliberal capitalist development.

Andean Women Confront Gendered Racialized Violence

The Andean women participants in this FPAR process are positioned in a rural town within a continuum of patriarchal, racialized, and economic violence that constrains their psychosocial health and wellbeing, factors that persist despite peace accords and transitional justice processes in the wake of the most recent Peruvian armed conflict (Comisión de

[1]We use the word *campesina (s),* instead of *campesino(s),* as a translation of peasant throughout the article. We have chosen to use the feminine version of this word in Spanish given that this article is about peasant women.

la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003). Within these constraints, Andean women continue to participate within local agglomerations of campesina families that have a shared collective history (Urrutia et al., 2019). In these communities, authorities exercise norms that promote traditional cooperative practices that facilitate the administration of the communities' resources through collective and reciprocal work (Urrutia et al., 2019). However, women—in contrast to their male counterparts—are responsible for tasks both within and outside the home, which renders their work load extremely demanding. Thus, most of the unpaid work in rural areas is assumed by women (Forstner, 2013).

Patriarchal systems and practices configure Andean campesino community life wherein women are subordinated to men. Both at the family and the community levels, men assume leadership positions and women have a subsidiary role, leading to men's concentration of power and decision making (Diez, 2011; Asensio and Trivelli, 2014). These patriarchal dynamics limit women's access to land and other livelihoods (Asensio and Trivelli, 2014). Social, cultural, and economic challenges create multiple barriers preventing women from successfully inserting themselves in the socioeconomic dynamics of their territories, rendering many of them dependent on their spouses or other family members. Many women are therefore more vulnerable to multiple forms of violence. In most Andean communities, machismo is entrenched and male domination contributes to gendered family-based violence (Forstner, 2013; Távara, 2019). Moreover, violence against Andean women persists beyond the home as they face constant discrimination in the Peruvian society more broadly due their position at the intersection of racial, class, and gender hierarchies (Babb, 2018).

The most recent Peruvian armed conflict exacerbated many of these dynamics. Although most of those killed and disappeared were men, women from campesina communities lost spouses and sons, or were left behind when men migrated to coastal cities. Many were forced to assume leadership positions in the community in the midst of chaotic times during which they survived multiple forms of sexual violence at the hands of the military and Shining Path. Although the Peruvian Truth Commission (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003) documented many of these violations including some of the psychosocial effects of forced disappearances as well as forced displacements, scholars and human rights activists argue that violations of Andean women have been seriously underreported and undercounted (Theidon, 2007).

Psychosocial Responses in Post-conflict Contexts

Although the psychological effects of war and other gross violations of human rights are increasingly noted in transitional justice processes, psychologists' responding to survivors typically focus disproportionately on individual symptoms, often described as post-traumatic stress disorder (Figley, 1985), decontextualizing them from the familial and community dynamics described above. This individualistic focus often positions women as victims of sexual violence whose only recourse for redress is through legal court trials or individual testimonies before truth and/or reparations commissions (Piper et al., 2012; Crosby and Lykes, 2019). Although this reflects a much-delayed and critical recognition of sexual violence as a crime against humanity (Ellis, 2007), some scholars have suggested that one effect of the growing centering of sexual violence has been the silencing of multiple other structural gendered and racialized violations (e.g., impoverishment and loss of livelihoods and forced displacement), as well as the women's multiple forms of resistance.

Moreover, transitional justice responses in the wake of armed conflict introduced by human rights activists and psychosocial accompaniers often rely on oral communication, processes unfamiliar to rural campesinas who are disinclined or unaccustomed to discuss openly their thoughts and feelings regarding the conflict and its losses. Furthermore, feminist scholars have pointed out that in cases where survivors are emerging from contested and conflict-ridden contexts, silence is another possible response that should be documented. Parpart and Parashar (2019), among others, have noted multiple meanings of silence, well beyond a lack of speech, arguing that professionals or others who accompany these communities must respect and seek to understand the particularities of diverse acts of silence.

Additionally, psychological responses to war, disaster, and humanitarian crises are typically envisioned as short-term interventions that draw on universalized theories of trauma and recovery (Summerfield, 2001; Lykes and Mersky, 2006). Although those who intervene increasingly recognize the contributions of local knowledge systems and cultural and linguistic practices to healing [Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2007], few remain in the field long enough to learn about or engage with such particularities and lived experiences. The second author, among others, has critiqued these short-term interventions grounded in universalized theories and their widespread applications, and engaged in participatory processes through which those who accompany women over time can facilitate the documentation of their experiences rethreading life and community despite a continuum of ongoing injustice and violence (Women of PhotoVoice/ADMI and Lykes, 2000). Other initiatives through which women have resisted these violations include organizing during the early years of the conflict through women's associations that searched for disappeared family members and demanded justice (Jave, 2014). Others advocated for a means for subsistence for their families in a context of armed conflict, great scarcity, and impoverishment (Reynaga, 2008). The research reported here sought to extend these earlier critiques while documenting women's resistance through accompanying the Andean women of Huancasancos in the formation of their knitting association, one possible contribution to rethreading life in the context of post-conflict.

Capitalist and Externally Driven Transitions

The armed conflict emerged and unfolded in a time in which a neoliberal capitalist economic system was rapidly expanding,

making incursions into rural campesina communities. During the last decades of the 20th century, the expansion of the market economy increased the number of paid jobs. These changes have partly hindered community relationships based on cooperation and reciprocity, and have promoted individualism among community members (Quispe, 2011). This complex and changing scenario has made rural economies more precarious, and many campesinas, or former campesinas, have found it increasingly challenging to insert themselves into these market dynamics. The situation for women is made more difficult due to the structural limitations described above, and thus, the limited resources available in rural economies are unequally distributed between men and women (Asensio and Trivelli, 2014; Babb, 2018).

Another significant change that occurred in the last years of the conflict and in the post-conflict period in rural campesino communities was the greater presence of external agents both from NGOs and from the state. Moreover, the Peruvian transitional justice processes post-conflict led to the implementation of various reparations programs. Many of these collective reparations programs were implemented through economic development or productive projects that brought together groups of victims, including women, in activities through which they sought to create a livelihood, such as animal rearing or craft production. Researchers have documented some of the challenges of collective reparations projects, particularly vis-à-vis the lack of continuous technical and economic support by state agents, and the mistrust community members have felt among themselves, a psychosocial sequel of the conflict that often undermined their capacity to work together in projects where significant material resources were involved (Bunselmeyer, 2020).

NGOs have also had an important presence in rural areas in the years following the conflict through the implementation of economic development projects, many of which have targeted Andean women particularly through craft production (Ruiz-Bravo, 2005; Forstner, 2013). These projects have provided monetary income and technical training, including in topics related to women's rights and gender equity, and provided a female exclusive environment where women could develop bonds among each other and strengthen personal and relational skills while developing self-confidence (Forstner, 2013). Similar to post-conflict situations in other countries (see Yadav, 2021), the Peruvian post-conflict situation in rural communities created scenarios wherein Andean women were able to benefit from resources provided by external agents such as those described above. Andean women of the 21st century are more likely to have greater practical skills, better health, more education, and more awareness about their rights than Andean women from any previous generation, conditions that have increased their chances of providing a better life for their families (Asensio and Trivelli, 2014).

Despite these improvements, Andean women in post-conflict contexts still face multiple challenges. Some of these are related to patriarchal gender systems that are more resistant to change and prevent women's equality. Others reflect the ways in which external professionals working with Andean women often facilitate neoliberal capitalist models for income generation that clash with people's previous indigenous values, beliefs, and practices. Such conflicts sometimes lead to the devaluing and desertion of previous ways of being in rural communities. Below we document how the group of Andean women with whom the authors collaborated engaged and responded to these multiple systems of structural oppression and limited opportunities as well as some of their reflections on the actions they have taken in the formation as well as maintenance of their knitting association, one act of persistence despite the odds.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants in Context

Twelve Andean women from the town of Huancasancos in the region of Ayacucho in Peru participated in this study. The population of Huancasancos at the time of this study was approximately 3,000. Most families are campesinas and are dedicated to farming activities and to their small businesses (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2018). During the past decade, extractivist industries began work on the outskirts of the town, which is located 12,000 feet above sea level, while also approaching diverse community groups, seeking to contribute economic resources that might mitigate objections to their incursions.

Prior to the work described herein, members of the Shining Path (SP) had entered the town and gained support among the younger generations (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003). When the SP took control in the early 1980s, they killed many of the town's authorities and sought to control the community's material resources, acting in violent ways, and attacking anyone who opposed their methods. After several months, the military arrived, engaging in bloody confrontations with the SP. Although the latter's members deserted the town after these initial encounters with the military, sporadic violent confrontations persisted for another decade (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003). As noted above, the Peruvian truth commission (CVR) was established in the wake of the armed conflict and charged with investigating the crimes committed during this period. The CVR identified 100s of people in Huancasancos who had lost their lives, been disappeared, or been injured, and many others who had lost the few material possessions they had before the conflict (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003). A reparation program was implemented granting, among other measures, individual reparations in the form of payments to surviving family members, and collective reparations in the form of economic-productive projects.

Many townspeople have strongly criticized both of these efforts at redress. They found the criteria for qualifying as a victim entitled only some survivors to individual reparation payments and that collective reparation projects failed due to the lack of continuing support by the state (Ulfe and Malaga, 2021). The knitting workshop space that participants in this feminist PAR project were using was initially part of a collective

reparation project. Local informants noted that the project had been abandoned when the funds provided by the initial program ran out and the group was not willing to invest its own resources. With the support of a community-based worker from a local mining company, the women from the knitting association were granted permission by the municipality to use the space. The mining company also provided technical support and training to the emerging women's association and facilitated the first author's introduction to them.

As described above, 12 women from the FPAR process that the first author had been facilitating were interviewed. Their approximate ages were between 30 and 65. All had children and most were married or had a partner; only three were separated and one was a widow whose husband had been killed during the armed conflict. All participants come from campesina families and thus, most were dedicated to a combination of farming activities, selling their home-knitted products, and working in small family businesses, such as shops that sell basic goods in the town when they joined the association.

Most of the participants were children, adolescents, or young adults during the worst years of the armed conflict. They reported vivid memories of these violent events, remembering the killings and confrontations that took place in the town. Some had family members who were killed or disappeared. Although they timidly shared these experiences during the workshops, participants did not discuss their engagement with either side of the conflict either during the workshops or in the in-depth interviews. We argue here that memories of the conflict linger as "ghostly matters" (Gordon, 1997) alongside harsh economic and political realities whose constraints often contribute to campesinas living silently side-by-side with former foes in order to survive. As discussed above, these realities create challenges for human rights activists, psychologists, or humanitarian aid workers who rely heavily on the spoken word as a vehicle for providing resources that are designed to enhance wellbeing and contribute to healing fragmented community ties as they seek to accompany these communities in processes through which they seek to create better lives.

Documenting the Spoken Word as Resource and Its Limitations

The core of this FPAR project included participatory workshops whereby the first author and the participants engaged in action-reflection processes toward the collective construction of knowledge using creative art-based techniques and embodied practices (Távara, 2018). We sought to create a space in which the women could reflect on the actions they were taking as they sought to develop a viable, collectively organized knitting association. As discussed above, the individual interviews with the 12 participants analyzed in this study were initiated during those18 months of fieldwork in which the first author visited the community regularly, seeking to develop a relationship of "just enough trust" (Maguire, 2001) with the participants and other community members to accompany them as they resisted some of the multiple effects of the circulations of power that marginalized the campesina women of Huancasancos.

The guide for these interviews, conducted between July and December of 2017, was developed collaboratively by the authors to further explore the women's experiences of collective work and their perceptions of its benefits and challenges. We also sought to better understand the current situation of women's associations in the town, and how machismo and everyday forms of racialized gendered violence impacted Andean women's capacity to overcome legacies of distrust and work together as they searched to improve their and their families' lives. In this way, the interviews constituted an additional space where the women could reflect individually on their participation in the workshops and the broader collective processes.

Given that memories of the armed conflict, its psychosocial sequelae in the community (e.g., feelings of mistrust and fear, among others) and also current worries and misunderstandings among association members had proven difficult to address with the women in the collective workshops and seemed to be limiting the association's progress, the interviews were designed to offer accompaniment that might facilitate increased meaning making of diverse experiences and understandings of both past and present challenges. As suggested above, rural campesinas are less likely to engage in oral processes that require them to share personal experiences; thus, interviews may be limited in facilitating healing of wounds from fragmented community ties, such as those the women were facing. Despite that, when accompanied by actions through which the women could mend these ties, the spoken word offers a resource, familiar to EuroNorthAmerican-educated researchers, for collaboratively reflecting with the campesinas about their actions as they seek to build a better future.

All the interviews were conducted by the first author in Spanish. Although this is the second language of all participants whose first language is Quechua, they felt fluent enough to express themselves in Spanish. A bilingual Quechua interpreter accompanied the first author during the interviews in case interpretation was required. This young female professional from Ayacucho also contributed to the facilitation of the workshops; thus, she was familiar with the group of women. Only two of 12 participants expressed themselves briefly in Quechua, sharing an idea or two for which they could not find the words in Spanish. The rest of the interviews and the interviews of all other participants were conducted entirely in Spanish.

The interviews took place either in the women's homes or in a private space chosen by them. Before each interview, the first author presented the informed consent, explained the goals of the interviews within the broader FPAR process, and addressed any questions that the participants had. The presence of the Quechua interpreter throughout this process allowed the researchers to address any misunderstanding created by language barriers. Interviews were then transcribed by both the first author and the Quechua interpreter and were analyzed by both authors. The Boston College's Institutional Review Board approved the broader FPAR project of which this study is part.

As mentioned above, the individual interviews were designed to offer an additional space for dialogic relationality that might

better facilitate the co-construction of knowledge with the women, campesinas who typically spoke little of their personal experiences. The subject position of the interviewer vis-à-vis the participants affects the processes that take place therein and informs the data analysis and interpretation processes. Our subject positions as researchers facilitate and constrain these multiple processes of co-constructed knowing. As a Peruvian upper-middle class mestiza, the first author's privileged background has allowed her to benefit from the circulations of power present in the Peruvian society and to be educated in the global north. The second author is a highly educated, white upper middle-class academic from the US who continues to benefit from white supremacy and hegemonic EuroNorthAmerican circulations of academic power. She has worked for nearly three decades with Indigenous women and children in the majority world and with transnational migrant families, seeking to accompany them in their struggles through pragmatic solidarity. Both authors are academic-activists who continuously critically interrogate how our subject positions inform and constrain our understandings of Indigenous women's meaning making processes.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the interviews was informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). This type of analysis is underpinned by line-by-line coding which allows the researcher to stay close to the data and to look across participants from the initial stages of the analysis. It facilitates a process by which the researchers can capture the meanings made from the bottom-up, creating increasingly more abstract levels of analysis, while staying grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2014). Using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software, the first author analyzed the interview transcripts and created approximately 1,700 first level inductive codes. These first level codes were then revised and grouped into 18 axial codes which reflected the shared meanings they contained. The creation of the axial codes took place through an iterative process in which the first author, in consultation with the second author, adjusted the axial codes based on how well they were able to capture the first level codes grouped under them and how well they reflected the meanings made by all participants. Thus, while creating these codes the authors had to continuously go back to the first level codes and the interview transcripts, seeking the best fit. After the 18 axial codes were created, they were organized in two sections that comprehensively represent the women's meaning making processes and respond to the research focus.

ANDEAN WOMEN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR CURRENT SITUATION: SEEKING CHANGES IN THE MIDST OF MACHISTA AND CAPITALIST CHALLENGES

The following presents two sections in which we analyze the in-depth interviews generated with these participants. This first section explains Andean women's understandings of their current situation and includes the changes participants saw in women's work as well as their understandings of how gendered racialized violence and capitalist dynamics were affecting them.

Changes in Andean Women's Work

Participants narrated changes taking place regarding women's work in their town. They explained that women had been previously only dedicated to farming and domestic activities. However, in the last decades, they had progressively started working outside of the home as well, mostly in small family businesses—a movement that had come with challenges. They explained that many women had great difficulties balancing their responsibilities inside and outside the home and had experienced considerable stress. Furthermore, many women described feeling guilty for working outside their homes believing it to be associated with neglect of their children. These transitions can be better understood by analyzing participants' ideas about family and women's roles and place within the family.

Most of the participants upheld the importance of the traditional nuclear family and said it was important to protect it. Moreover, they explained that within the family the women are responsible for the children and for all of the domestic chores, as well as to attend to their spouses. Women are the "cornerstone of the home" because it is "in their nature" to be caring and hardworking, participants said. As noted above, these beliefs are held in Andean communities more broadly, both by men and women. Therefore, even when Andean women are progressively seeking to expand their daily activities by working outside the home, underlying beliefs about their roles within the family might be undermining their efforts.

Machismo and Gendered Racialized Violence

For participants, machismo is very present in Huancasancos. They explained that machismo is expressed through intimate partner violence, both physical and psychological. Some participants mentioned that physical violence was slowly decreasing while forms of psychological violence persisted. They described how men mistreated and humiliated their wives, doubting their capacities and mocking them. Some men also controlled their wives by not letting them leave the house, go to meetings, or work outside the home and, if they left home, they were questioned about their whereabouts upon their return. As one woman mentioned as: "they make them report back, where are they going, what for, until what time, with whom," Some men also control women economically, because they do not have paid jobs and men control all the monetary income of the house. In this regard, participants described how some women have stayed "like children," submissive to their husbands needing them to tell them what to do.

Other women noted that machismo is expressed through structural violence. These included obstacles preventing women's higher education, particularly when they sought to pursue a male dominated field. Other structural obstacles prevented women from assuming leadership positions and/or becoming

community authorities. One participant mentioned as: "There are no women who go out, who develop, we do not see that, to say 'hey look, how she is doing it'. There are no examples to follow."

Despite this discouraging scenario, participants explained that Andean women have begun to resist machismo, contributing to the perceptions of some of those interviewed that it is decreasing. They explained that women increasingly acknowledge forms of machismo in their daily lives. Others described denouncing violence against them by going to the police station or to other state offices put in place to protect women. Other women noted that they had faced and stood up to their husbands and demanded to be treated with respect.

Racism and ethnic discrimination intersect with machismo. Many participants explained how people tended to mistreat and discriminate against Andean women who used traditional skirts and were monolingual Quechua speakers, being called "*polleronas*," an allusion to the skirt or "*pollera*." These women are perceived to be poor and less educated. Participants described that oftentimes people mocked them because they did not speak well, "Maybe they make mistakes when they talk, they fail. Then people start whispering behind their backs. That is the humiliation." Participants also explained that sometimes professionals who work in state offices in the town discriminate against Andean women, treating them poorly. However, other participants said that there was no discrimination or racism in Huancasancos because all were countryside people, campesinas, and thus, they were treated equally.

Participants explained that both racism and machismo had profound effects on women. They narrated how many Andean women are inhibited, fearful, and insecure because of how their partners treat them. These feelings made them anxious about speaking in public or about expressing their opinions with others whom they did not know well, rendering them very self-conscious. Furthermore, participants explained that this inhibition and insecurity made other people, or their spouses, mock Andean women or mistreat them even more, creating a vicious circle. Participants also mentioned that in some cases, women held back from trying new things or embarking on new projects because they feared they would not be able to learn. This sometimes led them to give up on their aspirations and put others' needs before theirs. Along this line, participants described some women as being "adrift" and settling with what they have.

Machismo also prevented women from collectively organizing. Participants explained that some men did not want their spouses to gather and work together with other women or go to meetings, saying that they only went to gossip. Furthermore, men were described as getting angry at their spouses when they gathered in women's collectives because they said they were neglecting their responsibilities at home. Participants described how this constituted an obstacle for women who sought to work together, for instance, in their knitting association, because some preferred not to attend these meetings in order not to upset their husbands. Despite this obstacle, participants emphasized that working together as women and gathering was important as it could help women to counter machismo.

Capitalism's Growing Influence

Another important element to understanding Andean women's current situations are the changes brought by the increasing influence of capitalist development. Participants described how their town had changed rapidly in the past years. They explained that there used to be very few businesses that sold basic goods brought from outside the town and that these had been in great demand. Currently, there are several businesses and also more paid jobs which allow people to buy goods in these businesses. Participants went on to explain that because of these changes people in the town expected others to pay them for things that in the past they did as volunteers or through the reciprocal exchange of work. Women now hired other women to help them care for their children, and families hired people to cook at their parties. They explained that in the past families who were close or part of the extended family would support each other voluntarily in these tasks, while now these reciprocal practices are being lost.

As can be seen, Andean women in Huancasancos have gone through multiple changes during the past several decades. They noted that in addition to the situation of vulnerability and inequality generated by machismo and racism, capitalist dynamics pressured women to secure forms of monetary income. In this scenario, and facilitated by the presence of ideas brought from outside the town by professionals—for instance, from the mining company—a group of Andean women sought to create a women's knitting association that could provide an opportunity to better the future of themselves and their families.

ONE ANDEAN WOMEN'S KNITTING ASSOCIATION: RESPONDING TO CURRENT CHALLENGES

This second section of findings presents the Andean women's response to their changing context and the challenges they were finding along the way, particularly those related to translating their previous skills and knowledge(s) and the interpersonal difficulties they were encountering. The section explores participants' decisions to persist in their knitting association despite these challenges.

Translating Previous Skills and Knowledge(s)

Most of the participants openly expressed enthusiasm and motivation to work in an association. In talking about that process, they narrated challenges they were finding along the way and more of which they feared encountering in the future. One such challenge related to their lack of the knowledge and skills needed to run or be part of an association, affirming that this way of organizing was a new experience for them. As one participant expressed, "I would like someone to explain to me about organizations, how, why…Because we are in this organization, but at least I do not know about organizations." Participants' comments during the interviews conveyed that Andean women have an important set of skills and knowledge(s)

related to their agricultural background; however, they did not perceive that these skills and knowledge(s) would easily translate into the skills required to face these new tasks.

Participants shared how most members of the association are women that come from families that have been dedicated to agriculture and cattle rearing, and they have produced goods mostly for their own subsistence or for trading or selling on a very small scale, that is, not for commercial purposes. Furthermore, participants explained that to conduct these farming tasks, families in the community have relied on principles of reciprocity, including taking care of each other's animals. Also, they explained that when working the land, Andean families have certain practices that seek to stay in balance with nature and respect its cycles. They feared that these principles of balance and reciprocity were quite different from the principles underlying businesses in a capitalist economy where the goal is to produce more and compete with others for individual advantage.

Despite these contradictions, knitting represents a set of skills and knowledge that Andean women have maintained over time and have brought into the present. Participants explained that for many generations women have worked animal fibers and have used them to produce clothing through knitting. In previous generations, this was done using natural fibers and spinning them into yarn with a *puchka*, a traditional spinning needle. As one participant mentioned, "Before we used to make our own threads, we used the puchka to make sheep wool yarn, llama wool yarn… everything." Although in the present there are not many women who still practice this traditional technique (in the association only one of the older women still used a puchka), many women in the town still knit. The group of women who initiated the association had sought to harness that knowledge and organize this women's knitting association, with an expanded agenda of generating income.

The knitting association is, to a great extent, framed by the participants as a business. Most described this association as a business that could help members from the town. As one participant said "… I want [this knitting association] to progress, the younger women who are in it, they have its future, tomorrow they can have a business. They have to have the idea of forming a business, at least a little one, right? That way they can improve their daily life."

This understanding of the knitting association can partly be explained by the influence of outside professionals from the state, private companies, and NGOs, working with town members. As mentioned previously, most of these professionals work in institutions that are focused on training people from Andean communities in skills that can allow them to produce and sell so that they can better insert themselves in a neoliberal capitalist society. Despite acknowledging the losses generated by the influence of capitalism, participants recognized their need to insert themselves in the market economy and thus, many of them expressed great appreciation for these trainings. Therefore, the formation of the women's knitting association responds to, on the one hand, the women's interests and traditional skills in knitting, and on the other, to the influence of a capitalist system and the women's needs to make ends meet, even when this might mean sacrificing previous ways of living.

Some of the women in the knitting organization had previous business experiences, including having worked in small family or personal businesses, e.g., in stores that sell basic goods or booths at the local market that sell yarn and knitting utensils or food. Although they had gained skills from these past business experiences, they perceived that they lacked skills to apply them in the knitting association. The knitting association, in contrast to their earlier, family-based experiences, was developed across families and as a collective endeavor where the assets belong to the association and not to individuals. Participants explained that in the association all women had to contribute with their work and with investing initial seed money. Some mentioned that providing this initial monetary investment was challenging, either because they did not have enough money or because they did not want to take the risks of investing it. They also acknowledged that when money is involved, mistrust can emerge more easily. Moving forward with a collective endeavor required trust in other members and a greater commitment to the project. In light of some of the obstacles of an interpersonal nature, they had previously noted as described above, many found this challenging.

The Interpersonal Challenges of Working Together in Post-conflict Times

The participants of this study were very self-critical about the interpersonal challenges women in their town faced and about the need to heal complex wounds in their relationships with each other. They recognized how several aspects of their collective and personal histories, such as the armed conflict and their continuous experiences of gendered racialized violence, had an impact on their capacity to connect with each other.

Participants mentioned that one of the main relational challenges they faced was their capacity to trust one another. They explained that this mistrust was expressed through their fear of what others would think about them; some noted that they were very self-conscious and also feared being treated poorly. They saw this mistrust as related to previous and ongoing experiences of violence and abuse that Andean women experienced, either in their families or beyond, noting that these experiences create anxieties about future relationships. As one participant mentioned, "Women who are mistreated are fearful, for example, when they ask something. Since their husband mistreats them, they think that maybe others will mistreat them as well (…) They think that all are the same, right? That they can yell at them, or that they will not teach them."

This mistrust was associated with previous negative experiences in other associations in the town. Participants explained how these previous associations had failed because some members took advantage of others, cheating or appropriating the resources and goods of the association for themselves. One of these projects was a collective reparation granted to one of the neighborhoods to set up a chicken farm. Participants explained how 1 day the chickens disappeared,

leaving the members of this group in shock and with a strong sense of mistrust. Participants mentioned that experiences like this affected women's capacity to trust others, believing that this demonstrated how people could be dishonest and selfish.

Women also perceived that their lack of familiarity with other women in the town, despite having lived in Huancasancos practically all their lives, hindered their trust of one another. Participants explained that due to this "lack of closeness" they did not feel very comfortable expressing themselves in meetings of the association and believed this self-silencing could be leading to difficulties in communication and even misunderstandings. For example, one participant mentioned, "If there is a woman who does not talk because she is humble and shy, maybe she is like that, but others will say 'she does not talk or say anything, she must be angry'." Participants believed that this lack of openness in some members could create difficulties in openly discussing issues about their association and how to move forward with their projects.

Feelings of resentfulness among women were also noted as fragmenting relationships among members in the association. They explained that sometimes women could be resentful and "feel bad" when they saw other women progress. These feelings sometimes kept them from providing support and helping each other. Many of the participants perceived that support between women has decreased in the town in the past years and they worried that this would constitute an obstacle for their association.

The armed conflict profoundly affected many of the women in the association. One participant even noted that this violent period had left many in the town "psychologically wounded" and that they continuously felt the effects of the conflict. Some participants feared violence would return. They explained that because of this fear they had learned to stay silent and not talk openly about the conflict, nor speak up when they saw something in the town that seemed wrong or suspicious. As one participant said "We kept quiet. I have stayed like that until now. I do not speak anymore; if I see something I do not speak about it. (…) I have also taught my children [that] 'if you go somewhere, you are not going to talk, you better stay quiet'." Self-silencing during the armed conflict may have reinforced current local tendencies not to speak openly about their feelings. Many feared that speaking would have associated them with one side of the conflict or the other, whereas silence might be perceived as neutrality.

Participants explained that people in the town also felt resentful, and even angry, when they remembered the armed conflict, particularly toward those who people perceived as having supported the Shining Path. The reparation program implementation also deepened feelings of anger and resentment in this town. Some women perceived that reparations were being granted and distributed in an unfair way, explaining that this was further damaging the relationships among people in the town. Thus, as can be seen, feelings of anger and resentment seem to be lingering among members of this community, and some participants perceived this as having an impact on the relationships among those in the association or others who might have wanted to join it.

Despite the above, these participants found it extremely difficult to talk openly about the armed conflict and they noted further that most in the town preferred not to do so. The women in the FPAR workshops had explained how painful it was to remember those years and how they felt that remembering them would hold them back and not allow them to move forward. However, they also mentioned how the violence of the conflict was impossible to forget and how their memories and fears repeatedly come back to them. One woman mentioned, "When I went up to the mountains on my own, when there were no cars, I said 'what if from that cave comes out a terrorist and kills me. Maybe he is living in that cave and I cannot see him, maybe he is looking at me now.' So, it's a fear we have." The armed conflict constitutes an ever-present past whose hauntings continue to circulate among participants in the midst of self and other-imposed silencing that are perceived as eroding community ties and disrupting possibilities for future collective work. Relational difficulties that have emerged from it are threaded through the community's daily life. Yet, within that context, opting for silence may also constitute a proactive strategy for facilitating possibilities of working together. Below, we explore some of the ways in which Andean women persisted in forming a knitting association in the midst of these complexities.

Keeping the Knitting Association Afloat: Andean Women's Persistence

Despite the many challenges, Andean women participants perceived as they worked to initiate and develop their knitting association, they persisted in this endeavor. We noted—and many described—examples of their strategies that contributed to building and sustaining the association. Some narrated stories of sacrifice, of having endured great suffering and losses of family and friends. Most shared how they had started working when very young, either in the field or selling things on the streets of the town. Some narrated how, in their search to make ends meet, they had worked in jobs considered for men (given the demanding physical requirements) and had performed them successfully. Because of these experiences many of the participants believed that they, and women in general, were resourceful and had the ability to solve problems and find alternatives despite their fears if they were determined to do so. As one participant said "even if you are nervous or afraid, you say 'it does not matter, I have to do it'." Participants had also witnessed how their past efforts have yielded fruits; they described how by working hard they had been able to build their homes or set up their small family businesses. Many of these efforts had been undertaken to support their children and their families. Participant's narratives suggest that these experiences of personal sacrifice and effort informed the multiple ways in which they approached the challenges of forming the women's association.

Their interests, desires, and aspirations for the future appear to be another element supporting participants in their collective project of running the knitting association. Despite having lived through adversity, participants were able to articulate

goals in the midst of taking actions for themselves, their families, and for women in their town. They explained that women in their town liked to, and knew how to, knit and that they knitted well. Moreover, they emphasized that women could continue learning about knitting and other skills and topics and that they could work to move forward. Furthermore, participants identified many qualities in the women in the town, explaining that some were determined, responsible, mature, and resourceful. They noted leadership skills in some, clarifying that a few had even occupied important positions in the town. They explained that the association needed that type of leadership.

Recognizing Benefits From Women Associating With Each Other

Despite the many challenges noted regularly, participants identified benefits and strengths of a women's association. They explained that by working in groups, women learned and taught new things to each other, not only about knitting but about life in general, providing guidance, and giving each other advice. As an association they could invite professionals outside their group to train them in new skills, for example, about women's rights. As one participant mentioned, "By being in an association, we can know more about our rights (…) talking with others, we can clear our doubts [about] what is good, what is bad. I used to be all the time up in the mountains and caring for my children, so I did not know."

Participants also explained that when women worked in groups they dared to do more things because they encouraged each other to do so. They hoped that through these processes they would enhance their self-esteem and recognize what they could accomplish. Gathering in the association also helped women feel less stressed or unhappy because they could be with other women and step outside of their homes, disconnecting from their domestic chores, at least for a while. As one participant said, "Working in groups, among women, we feel better because we can leave the stress of our homes for at least a while, and be with friends." It seems that being part of a women's group can bring important benefits to women and support their wellbeing as well as their personal and collective development.

Participants also emphasized how, through their association, women could combine their strengths and abilities in knitting, knit in greater quantities, and respond to bigger orders for their products. They hoped that this would allow them to generate monetary advantages for themselves and thus create changes in their families' dynamics; they sought to provide for their children and not be dependent economically on their husbands. As one woman mentioned, "There is a lot of work here, they come asking [for knitted products]. So, we call other women to knit as well. That way we do the job more quickly and (…) at least women can take home a little bit of money for their children." Moreover, for some participants, this first women-only association in the town was proof of what they as women were capable of doing. These participants felt encouraged to see other women interested in joining the association and wanting to work in and be part of it. For them, this revealed that women liked to work together, encouraging their belief in the potential of the association.

Others persisted in the women's knitting association as they appreciated it as providing new ways in which women were participating, both at an individual and collective level. Since they had started the association, women had begun to "open up a bit"; they now can speak more easily in the group and voice their opinions because they have the opportunity to practice in the group. Being less submissive was evidenced through their going out of their homes and meeting with other women. Some noted that women have "conscientized" and have "opened their eyes," women now want to change. They explained that these changes are fairly recent, and some say they might be brought by the younger generations, because in the past, women did not talk about working and participating in groups of women. In the past, women were quiet, stayed at home and did not know their rights. Now, women wanted to work with other women, organize, and have more freedom.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This study reveals how significant changes have taken place in the lives of Andean women in this rural community as they progressively positioned themselves beyond the home, in the public sphere as economically active agents. However, in this process, women were encountering persistent and new challenges. Among the former was racialized gendered violence in the form of machismo reflected in the ways women were mistreated and abused by their husbands, and in the profound intrapersonal wounds created in them. Importantly, as many noted above, these asymmetrical gender relationships were also sustained by Andean women themselves as reflected in the ways in which they positioned themselves in traditional gendered roles within the family. For many Andean women from rural communities, a significant part of their identity is founded on the belief that they have a central role as mothers and care-givers, a role that many women have come to strongly value and from which they derive great strength (Ruiz-Bravo, 2005; Reynaga, 2008).

This study confirms that these beliefs are becoming more complex as some women realize that they are also capable of working outside of their homes, a change that will contribute to their independence from their spouses. However, women noted tensions they experienced as they sought to work outside their homes while sustaining ideas about their role as the "cornerstone" of the family. Despite the benefits, their campesina identity has provided for Andean women; in this changing context, it has also brought several challenges, with some noting that they found it difficult to share or let go of these tasks and roles in the home while seeking to be part of the association. Thus, change is both a resource and a challenge, and for some among the older generation, letting go of being a "cornerstone" within the family is often perceived as too steep a cost for participating in a neoliberal capitalist association.

EuroNorthAmerican-educated feminists have often times criticized this essentialized identity of women as mothers and care-givers, perceiving it to limit women's protagonism or their capacities to struggle for women's equality and liberation (Boesten, 2010). Recognizing the importance of contesting essentialized identities that might be supporting Andean women's oppression, it is also important to acknowledge that changes in Andean women's identity and roles must be driven and configured from the bottom-up, that is, by Andean women themselves as active agents. As recognized by the participants, these changes in socially gendered dynamics have already begun, facilitating women's agency on the one hand, while also giving place to losses on the other (Charrad, 2010). The exercise of their agency, in and through these changes, require Andean women to decide for themselves what aspects of their previous identities they leave behind, which ones are transformed and what new aspects are incorporated into how they position themselves within and beyond the family. As outsider feminist activist-researchers our role is to accompany Andean women as they enact these changes while facilitating spaces in which they can reflect on them and, in this way, decide how they seek to move forward.

As seen in this study, changes in Andean women's lives are also being brought by capitalist dynamics many times promoted by outside professionals and their interventions. The relationship and work conducted with these professionals have brought several benefits to these Andean women, including, among others, knowledge about women's rights and training in skills through which they enhance their self-confidence. However, this work has also brought—knowingly or unknowingly—new forms of interaction among people, influenced by capitalist dynamics, that are perceived by the participants as having detrimental consequences for Andean women both at individual and collective levels. These new ways of interacting require the ability to produce and sell goods or services that are valued in a capitalist economy. They have required the participants to acquire new abilities and skills, many of which they value. However, they have also required them to leave behind previous ways of being in the world and with others rooted in their Indigenous and campesina identities. Participants are aware of these losses and sometimes feel that their Indigenous knowledge(s) and practices are being devalued. However, they are also aware of the need to adapt to these new market logics in order for them and their children to have an opportunity to better respond to their material needs.

Change is inevitable and will continue to take place in Andean communities; their members will continue to acquire new skills, knowledge(s), and practices—many of them informed by capitalist dynamics—as they leave others behind. However, these processes of systemic change should by informed from the bottom-up by Andean communities. To this end, as outside mental health professionals and activist-scholars it is important to facilitate processes in which Andean women and their communities can reflect on the actions they are taking vis-à-vis these changes, and how they want to respond to them. In this way, Andean women, particularly those of the younger generations, and their communities might have greater chances to inform these changes and engage with outside professionals in ways that advocate for change in the way they wish to see it.

This study presents some limitations, including a small sample which means that the findings may not generalize to processes in other post-conflict Indigenous contexts. Moreover, language differences also place significant limitations given that the first of language of participants and researchers differ and the findings were analyzed in Spanish, the first language of the first author, but were written in English, the first language of the second author. These linguistic complexities are challenging and some of nuances of the meanings co-constructed by participants and researchers might be lost in translation.

The limitations presented above add to those discussed throughout the article about the spoken word as a means for redressing the wounds created by armed conflicts in Indigenous communities. The findings presented herein place at the forefront a significant challenge for mental health professionals and activist-scholars who work with these communities. These professionals need to find alternative ways of accompanying individuals' and groups' healing processes that do not rely exclusively on the spoken word while also being challenged to reconceptualize dominant understandings of silence as a constraint and of talking as healing. For women in this study, like many Indigenous women in other post-conflict situations (see Crosby and Lykes, 2019), silence in lieu of talking among each other or about the armed conflict and its psychosocial sequelae is frequently a dominant or preferable strategy. As explained above, memories and feelings created by the violence of the conflict linger as ghostly matters with limited possibilities of being openly discussed. However, this should not be interpreted as a failure to heal or to move past previous fragmented ties. As argued by Parpart and Parashar (2019), in contested social terrains, silence can be a creative way to adapt to difficult circumstances and can become a source for healing. Along these lines, we argue that the participants were opting for actions over words as they sought to mend these fragmented ties and work through previous conflicts. We suggest here that the women perceived the formation and persistence of women in their association as one such action, as a way to invest in and bet on their capacity to rethread life and move forward as they seek to heal together from past and ongoing racialized gendered violence and impoverishment. Thus, their silence should not be interpreted in isolation but rather as accompanied by their performances through which they sought to create change and enhance wellbeing in their post-conflict community (Parpart and Parashar, 2019). As mental health professionals and activist-scholars who are interested in working with these communities, our challenge is to recognize these alternative ways of healing through action when they occur, while creatively envisioning ways to accompany and strengthen them.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because per requirement of the Boston College IRB, the data collected for this project must be destroyed by November 2022.

Requests to access the datasets should be directed to gtavara@pucp.edu.pe.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board, Boston College. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

GT collected the data, conducted the fieldwork for this study, including the conduction of individual interviews, consulted with MBL throughout the data collection and fieldwork process to make decisions regarding it, and with regards to the data analysis, she conducted the first level analysis of interview transcripts in consultation with MBL. GT and MBL conducted the second level analysis and the creation of the axial codes, wrote the manuscript, and designed the individual interview guides. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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"There Is Nothing I Cannot Achieve": Empowering Latin American Women Through Agricultural Education

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Higher education, a key driver of women's empowerment, is still segregated by gender across the world. Agricultural higher education is a field that is male-dominated, even though internationally women play a large role in agricultural production. The purpose of this study was to understand the experience, including challenges and coping strategies, of women from 10 Latin American countries attending an agricultural university in Latin America. The participants were 28 women students with a mean age of 20.9 ± 1.8 years. Following informed consent and assurance of confidentiality, four focus group sessions (one for each year of study with a mean duration of 81 min) were conducted in Spanish. The central question was, "what has been your experience at the university?" Sessions were recorded and transcribed. Thematic coding was performed independently by two teams of researchers (from Latin America and North America), with the resulting schemas combined through mutual discussion. Member checking, auditing, and reflexivity contributed to trustworthiness of the process. Students reported that the personal qualities needed for success included determination, persistence, and self-efficacy. Many described an empowerment process, including increased discipline and self-efficacy from the first to fourth year of study. University life encompassed six themes: university structure and discipline (part of the exosystem), two supportive microsystems (friends and classmates and institutional support) as well as three challenges (academics, peers, and machismo). Cultural influences instantiated in students' daily experiences included familism, machismo, and religious faith. Students anticipated futures involving further education and contributions to society. We conclude that higher education in agriculture can serve as an effective means of empowering women to feed the world.

Keywords: agricultural education, women, machismo, empowerment, self-efficacy

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INTRODUCTION

Education is the key driver of women's empowerment. Education reduces women's poverty (McCarthy, 2015), allows them better employment opportunities (Spierings et al., 2010), empowers them to have the number of children they desire (Poelker and Gibbons, 2018), improves women's health (Alsan and Cutler, 2013), and increases their political participation

(Fanny and Oluwasanumi, 2014; Bird, 2019). Despite decades of efforts to achieve equality, higher education is still segregated by gender across the world (Charles and Bradley, 2009). One educational field dominated by men is agricultural and rural development (Acker, 1999; Dunne et al., 2021). In a 1990 study of agricultural education in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, only 10% of students, professors, and graduates were women (Macías-López, 1990). Although women's access to agricultural education has undoubtedly increased since 1990, women continue to be under-represented (Acker, 1999; Dunne et al., 2021). The purpose of the present study was to document the experiences of women attending an agricultural university where they represent only one third of the student body and to understand both the factors that impede their growth and the factors that empower them.

Women play major roles in farming and agriculture around the world. Although their participation varies by region, crop, ethnicity, and economic status, women represent approximately 43 percent of the agricultural labor force internationally (FAO, 2011). Compared to men they have less access to resources such as land ownership, technology, and control over production and sales (FAO, 2011). The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) assesses women's agricultural empowerment in five domains, including, "(1) decisions about agricultural production, (2) access to and decision-making power about productive resources, (3) control of use of income, (4) leadership in the community, and (5) time allocation" (Alkire et al., 2013, p. 71).

The education of women in agriculture and rural development has been implemented most broadly through extension courses rather than through formal university degree programs. Extension is an educational process for rural populations that aims to improve their livelihoods rather than provide a degree or certification (Oakley and Garforth, 1985). Extension varies widely and is adapted to local crops, climate, and culture. As is the case with formal agricultural education, compared to their male counterparts, women have significantly less access to extension (Peterman et al., 2014) and programs may be designed for and directed toward men, ignoring the constraints on women's participation (Stern et al., 2016). Those gender inequities are important and far-reaching because extension education is an effective means of empowering women in agriculture. A study in Uganda concluded that "Overall, our findings suggest that extension programs aimed at providing women with information—thereby addressing intrahousehold information asymmetries—may be a first-best means of empowering women in agriculture" (Lecoutere et al., 2019, para. 1). An intervention in Bangladesh that included agricultural extension education improved women's WEAI scores (Quisumbing et al., 2022). Women's empowerment in agriculture, primarily through extension education and development projects, can also lead to increased food security (Murugani and Thamaga-Chitja, 2019; Ogunnaike et al., 2019), better nutrition for mothers and their children (Malapit et al., 2015; Malapit and Quisumbing, 2016), dietary diversity (Malapit and Quisumbing, 2016), and improved growth in children (i.e., increased height for age scores) (Malapit et al., 2015). In addition, women's empowerment in agriculture mitigates some of the negative consequences of low diversity in crops (Malapit et al., 2015) and can impel a shift from subsistence farming to commercialization (Uwineza et al., 2021). Further education, especially higher education, in agriculture could potentially empower women in all five domains measured by the WEAI – to make decisions about production, gain access to knowledge and other resources, control income, serve as community leaders, and allocate their time more effectively.

The objective of the United Nations' sustainable development goal 5 (SDG5) is achievement of gender equality. The provision of agricultural education to women can contribute to that goal, as well as to the elimination of poverty (SDG1), zero hunger (SDG2) and good health and well-being (SDG3). Those goals are mutually reinforcing, with education being a fundamental means to achieve them.

Although Latin America is extremely diverse with respect to geography, language, culture, economic condition, and gender roles, virtually all Latin American countries have a history of colonization, high indices of Christianity, and cultures that highlight the family as the basic unit of society. In cross-cultural studies most countries of Latin America were deemed to be collectivistic (Hofstede, 2001; Krys et al., 2022). As collectivism was unpacked and Latin American cultures studied more extensively, Latin Americans have been found to endorse collectivistic values toward in-groups, and to express their emotions openly, especially socially-engaged emotions that promote interdependence (GLOBE, 2020; Krys et al., 2022; Salvador et al., 2022). Latin American countries also evidence a wide gender-gap, especially in the domain of political empowerment and to a lesser extent economic participation and opportunity (World Economic Forum, 2021). The World Economic Forum (2021) estimates that at current rates of change, it will take 68.9 years to reach gender parity. The vulnerability of women to gender-related violence, climate change, and poverty also threatens their well-being (Bott et al., 2012; Goh, 2012; Bradshaw et al., 2019).

Latin America is a critical region of the world for women in agriculture because they are severely underrepresented; women make up about 20% of the agricultural labor force in Latin America (FAO, 2011). Moreover, they are disadvantaged, compared to their male counterparts, with respect to resources such as land ownership, access to new technologies, as well as formal and extension education (Deere and Leon, 2003; FAO, 2011).

The present study was designed to document and understand the experience, including challenges and ways of meeting those challenges, of women from 10 Latin American countries attending an agricultural university in Latin America. A phenomenological approach using focus groups allowed a deep understanding of the essence of women's experience in agricultural higher education. What obstacles did the women confront and what were their sources of strength and adaptation?

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory was applied as a conceptual framework to structure the findings. According to that theory the environment of the individual person consists of microsystems (those settings in which the individual directly participates) as well as exosystems, mesosystems, and

macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Bronfenbrenner added a time dimension, the chronosystem, in a later formulation (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). In addition, like Vélez-Agosto et al. we see culture, not as separate and distal from the settings of everyday life, but rather embedded in everyday practices (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). The content of the women's experiences, the specific challenges and coping strategies represented in codes and themes, were revealed using a bottom-up thematic coding process.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The participants were 28 women students attending an agricultural/rural development university in Central America. Their mean age was 20.9 ± 1.8 years of age. They represented all four years of study and the three scholarship statuses (full, partial and none). See **Table 1**.

Context

The university where the study took place enrolls students from many parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. Although it was founded in 1942, the first women (6) were admitted in 1981 and represented 3.9% of the class. In 2018, the year the data were collected, there were 397 women students at the university, representing 33.4% of the student body.

Procedure

After approval by the IRB of Hope College and the research office of Zamorano University, a random sample of 45 female students, drawn from the enrollment list and stratified by year in school and scholarship status, was invited to attend focus group sessions. Except for 17 students with scheduling conflicts, all those invited agreed to participate. Both informed consent and a promise of confidentiality (to protect other participants) were obtained. The research team had developed the focus group protocol and questions in meetings in which we also reviewed the procedures for conducting focus groups and coding qualitative data. Moderators of the focus groups were professional women administrators and staff from the agricultural university. Four focus group sessions, one for each year of study, were conducted in Spanish in a conference room at the university. The central question was, "what has been your experience at the university?" and follow-up questions queried about participants' goals, challenges, perceived sources of support, and advice to women students arriving at the university. The mean duration of the sessions was 81 min. All sessions were recorded and transcribed in the original Spanish.

Coding

Thematic coding (in Spanish) was performed independently by two teams of researchers, one team of six women from Latin America and a second team of three women from the United States, all fluent in Spanish. We applied thematic coding according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) method and elements of consensual qualitative research (Hill, 2012) in that the coding was done in teams. Each team worked independently to identify significant statements and repeating ideas labeled as codes. Those codes were recorded throughout the transcripts and then grouped into themes. Within teams, discrepancies were reconciled by discussion. Each team developed a hierarchical schema of how women students achieved success at the university. Those schemas from the two teams were then reviewed and the themes integrated and revised through mutual discussion by the entire research group. At that point the findings were structured according to Bronfenbrenner's (1986) theory and in a final step the report was prepared. See **Figure 1** for the stages of the coding process.

Trustworthiness

We engaged in a number of procedures to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Krefting, 1991). The interview transcripts and manuscript were reviewed by an outside auditor, who agreed that the findings were faithfully represented in the manuscript. A participant in the research study also reviewed the manuscript, and replied, "I read it and found it excellent. Really good work. I believe that it addresses the responses of the focus group."

The members of the research team, all women professionals, reflected on their own positions with respect to the research process and topic. The first author, a European-American woman originally from the United States, has lived in Central America for over 20 years. She is deeply involved in documenting the experiences of women around the world and has reflected that her lens privileges the strengths of women, rather than their lack of agency. The second author is Honduran with more than 15 years of experience in the management and planning of social, recreational, and educational activities for training young people from diverse cultural backgrounds. She has worked in psychosocial intervention on issues of education, employability, youth, gender, and social vulnerability in international cooperation organizations. The third author is Honduran, passionate about education, mother of two children who, through her own experience, has witnessed the challenges that women must overcome to grow in the professional world and is a faithful witness of how education changes lives. The fourth author is Honduran, an educator for more than 25 years at different educational levels; "that experience has allowed me to know that if women are given participation and empowerment, it affects the quality of their lives and their families." The fifth author is a Bolivian who has lived in Honduras for the last 22 years. She has raised a family in that country, has two children and dreams of making Honduras a country with many opportunities for women and their families. She has worked for many years on projects to improve the food and nutritional security of children in the Central American region. The sixth author, a Honduran with more than 15 years of experience as a Human Resources professional, wrote, "I believe that all of us have the opportunity to generate positive changes in our environment. I firmly believe in the role of women making organizations warmer and more harmonious places."

TABLE 1 | Participant Information.

Pseudonym	Year in university	Country of origin	Age	Scholarship status	Field of study
Ana	First	Honduras	23	Partial	Agricultural Engineering
Aquira	First	Ecuador	19	None	Environment and Development
Cinthia	First	El Salvador	22	Full	Agricultural Engineering
Diana	First	Dominican Republic	19	Full	Food Science and Technology
Estephany	First	Honduras	19	Partial	Agribusiness Management
Gaby	First	Panama	20	Full	Food Science and Technology
Ruth	First	Honduras	19	Partial	Agricultural Engineering
Rubi	First	Haiti	22	Full	Environment and Development
Sandy	First	El Salvador	24	Full	Food Science and Technology
Sarai	First	Nicaragua	19	None	Agricultural Engineering
Aisha	Second	Ecuador	20	Full	Agricultural Engineering
Amatista	Second	El Salvador	21	Full	Food Science and Technology
Elizabeth	Second	Ecuador	20	Partial	Food Science and Technology
Jessy	Second	Haiti	21	Total	Agribusiness Management
Scarleth	Second	Guatemala	20	None	Food Science and Technology
Soraya	Second	Ecuador	19	Partial	Agribusiness Management
Gloria	Third	Honduras	22	Total	Food Science and Technology
Hazul	Third	Panama	20	Total	Agricultural Engineering
Jessica	Third	Dominican Republic	25	Total	Environment and Development
Juliana	Third	Dominican Republic	20	Total	Environment and Development
Julieta	Third	Honduras	22	None	Food Science and Technology
Rosalina	Third	Guatemala	20	None	Agribusiness Management
Ana	Fourth	Honduras	19	Partial	Agricultural Engineering
Jeni	Fourth	Guatemala	21	None	Agricultural Engineering
Juana	Fourth	Dominican Republic	22	Total	Agricultural Engineering
Silvana	Fourth	Colombia	24	None	Environment and Development
Tutis	Fourth	Guatemala	20	Partial	Agricultural Engineering
Victoria	Fourth	Ecuador	22	Partial	Food Science and Technology

Because two students chose the pseudonym Ana, they are identified in the text by the year in school.

RESULTS

According to the Bronfenbrenner ecological model, the chronogram is an essential system to track the relation between person and environment over time. Because the participants constructed coherent narratives of the past, present, and future, significant statements and coding are presented separately for each of three time periods: before attending the university, while attending the university, and predicted/desired futures.

Prior to Enrolling at the University

Even before enrolling at the university, participants expressed determination. Parents were most often supportive of their daughters' plans. "Jessica[1]", a third-year student, explained, "my mother has always helped me and when I told her I wanted to come here, there was no hesitation, but on the contrary she encouraged me more." Sometimes extended families made sacrifices to pay the student's tuition. Victoria, a fourth-year student had the support of not only her parents, but also grandparents, aunts, and uncles, who even sold property to fund her education. Some messages from family members referred to greater difficulties for women in agriculture than for their male counterparts. Soraya, a second-year student said, "most people told me that [agriculture] was men's work" and Amatista said, "my parents told me. . . that one would have to work and it would be more difficult for a woman." Juliana, a third-year student said, "neither my mother nor my father helped me, they didn't want me to be so far from home.... I had to find transportation to get here myself, but I said, 'I'm going' and I bought what I needed." Thus, the primary microsystem of students before entering the university was their families, who provided both support and cautions about potential difficulties. Other challenges prior to attendance including passing the entrance exam and acquiring the finances necessary for tuition. **Figure 2** presents a graphic of the ecological systems of the student pre-enrollment.

The University Experience

The Woman in Agriculture

Figure 3 depicts the ecological systems of the student during her studies at the university. At the center of Bronfenbrenner's schema (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) is the individual person. Participants agreed that the personal qualities necessary for success were to be focused, prepared, respectful, persistent, proud to be a woman, positive, and able to confront intrapersonal

[1] *All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.*

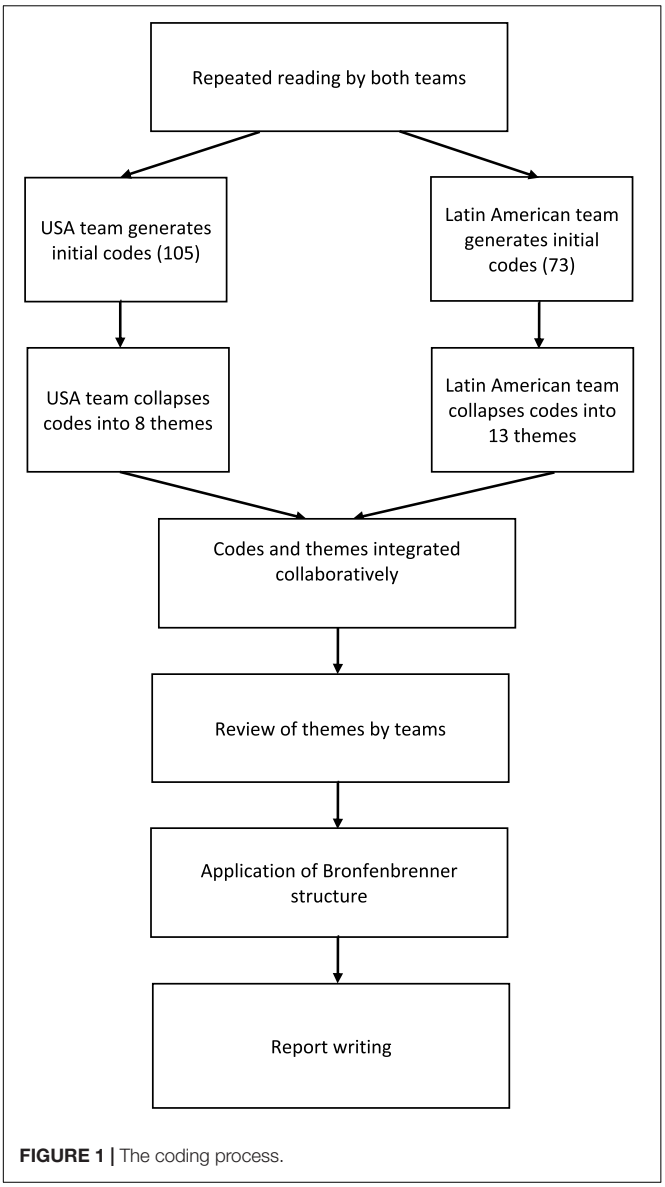

FIGURE 1 | The coding process.

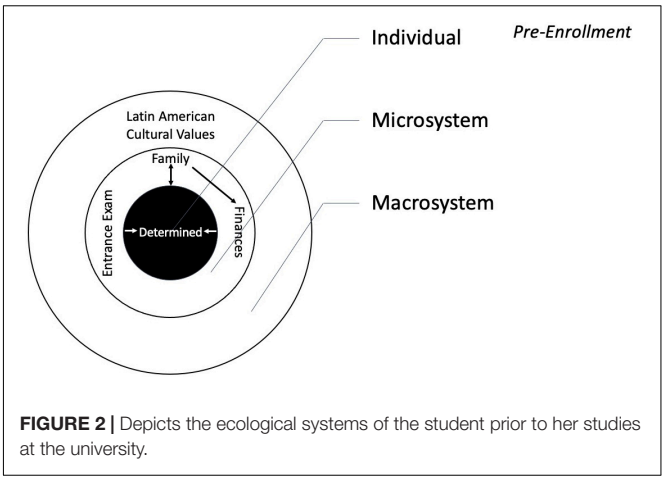

FIGURE 2 | Depicts the ecological systems of the student prior to her studies at the university.

challenges, including self-doubt and uncertainty. A sense of self-efficacy was central. A second-year student, Amatista, said, "[We have to] take off that blindfold that there are things that women can't do," and "if I persist, I can achieve what I want." A third-year student, Gloria, said, "Here, with dedication, one can always move forward," and "if you set your mind to it, you can always achieve it." Juana of the fourth year said, "Everything is a matter of organization, and if I want to I can," and Tutis, also in the fourth year, said, "There is nothing that, with effort, cannot be done; there are no stupid human beings, only undisciplined ones." Many described an empowerment process, including increased discipline, and self-efficacy from the first to fourth year of study. Ana, a fourth-year student, said, "Before, I was very insecure, I can't do it, not this, always I was like that, but even in fieldwork, I learned to know my capabilities, to exceed my expectations." Sometimes lapses in self-confidence were met with determination or by support from friends. Julieta, a third year student, said, "I was saying [to myself] 'yes, I can', this has been a challenge for me, telling myself every day, 'I can.'" Jenny had support from her woman friend, "you can, you can get through this, you can."

Noteworthy was the personal growth mentioned by many participants. Amatista said this most succinctly, "I think that one grows as a person during these four years." Soraya replied, "I grew as a person. . ...[I became] more responsible, and accustomed to making decisions for myself without depending on others. For me this was a great leap forward." Victoria said, "being here at the university makes you mature," Both Rubi and Tutis expressed what has been referred to as a growth mindset (Dweck, 2008), "I always try to be a better person. . ..not only as a student, but in my relations with others, and in that way I think I can achieve my dreams," and "there is nothing that one cannot achieve with effort."

University Life

University life was the richest and most salient of the components of students' lives, and comprised six themes, (1) university structure and discipline, (2) academic challenges, (3) institutional support from fieldworkers, instructors, and university counseling center, (4) peer support from classmates and friends, (5) peer challenges in the social environment (e.g., gaining social acceptance), and (6) machismo.

The strict rules and discipline imposed on students' lives was seen as both a valuable tool for growth, and as an irritating constraint on autonomy. Stephany from the first year said, "I think I have progressed because one learns to organize one's time. With 10 min free time one does a mountain of things. And the discipline as well, one knows what time they have to be there and at [this university] one has to arrive 5 min early." Jeysul of the third year said, "I have learned a mountain. . .. discipline, that I can't just make excuses." "In my case I had to self-discipline better," said Gloria. Silvana said, "studying and discipline were always a bit difficult for me." Amatista described how her sleeping and studying routines were altered by the university rules, "I used to go to sleep at 8 in the evening and wake up at midnight to study until 4 am, and then sleep another hour and wake up again; this was my study habit and here you have to go to sleep at 11:30."

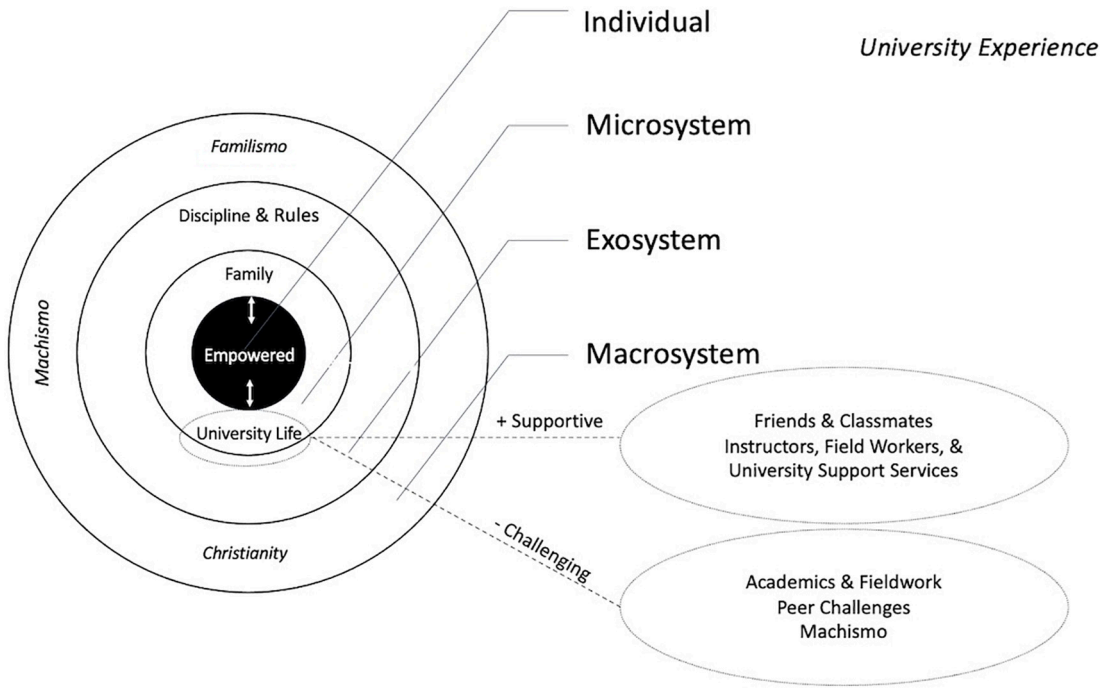

FIGURE 3 | Depicts the ecological systems of the student during her studies at the university.

Soraya gave an example of the limits placed on laboratory use, "We want to experiment more and have the space and create our future," but it was against the rules that dictated specific hours for laboratory work. Or phrased differently by Aysha, "I think, yes, we can make our own decisions, but based in the regulations."

Academic classes and practica (fieldwork) were sometimes a challenge, but students reported receiving help from multiple people, including instructors, other students, and fieldworkers. Rubi expressed help she received from a number of sources, "Always instructors tried to take me aside to ask if there was something I didn't understand in class, if I had questions to take advantage of [their help] and also my classmates also help me and they ask me if I know if we have homework, and if they can help me with homework or study habits in order to understand and succeed." Jenny described her response to difficult classes, "you have in your mind that this class is difficult [one that can lead to you failing out], and I'm going to fail it, but no, no class is that difficult, that we are all capable of learning this material." Skarleth pointed out that if you are too embarrassed to ask the instructor something the fieldworkers answer questions, "the truth is that they are very kind and they say, 'come' and they begin to explain, and because they are in the fields, they know a great deal, and they explain it." Here [at the university] they give you all the resources you need to succeed....for example, they give you the time, the hours to study, tutorials.... I think that here they give you the confidence to come and be able to achieve all your goals," said Jenny.

Faculty, staff, the counseling center, and a religious ministry provided emotional support as well as academic support to students. Jenny underwent a personal crisis while a student at the university. "People from the religious ministry, the counseling center, many times, no matter the hour, when I was crying and feeling bad, they came and opened up, we would talk, and they would try to see what I could do to feel better." Jessica said, "I can speak to this because [two women from the counseling center] have been there in my moments of crisis; last year in a difficult moment without the help of those two, I would not have been able to control it; the help has been enormous."

Peer support from classmates, roommates, and friends was vital to students' social and emotional well-being. Soraya claimed that her roommate was a pillar of support, "because it is with her that I share experiences and. . . if one feels bad in the night or begins to think about things, because one is always going to miss the family or something bad will happen that is very difficult, well, she is always there to listen. In praising help from instructors, Aysha pointed out that, "A while ago, I had a family problem and other than my roommate and three classmates that I consider my best friends [they also supported me]. So, for Aysha the primary sources of support were her roommate and friends. Ana, in her 4th year at the university, received support from a [male] friend, "well, I wasn't friends with him in the first or second years, but when we were in the third year of studies, he saw I was having difficulties with some things, and he was very available and attentive and he has helped me a lot." A fourth year student underscored the importance of friendship, "My best friends during these four years I suppose are [always] going to be my best friends and they are people in who I confide my experience and I don't hesitate to ask them something I don't know and I am not afraid to be myself."

The women sometimes faced challenges in the social environment. "[I had challenges] in social relations, relating to people, because at the beginning I didn't know anyone, and then I came to know many people," said Ana, a first-year student. Cultural differences were sometimes problematic, "how to live in a different country, different from your country. Even though we are all Latinas, we have differences. This is something shocking, both the food and the culture," said Sandy. "I had to get to know new people, other cultures," said Juana, a fourth-year student. Soyaya, in her second year, said, "[When I arrived] I was not very focused on land or agriculture, and they were making fun of me, and one of the seniors came over and said, "You can do it; if I can, why not you?" In her advice to incoming students, Jessy admonished, "Sometimes you will be bullied, and things like that, but be strong and persist."

Machismo on the part of classmates was a common experience at the university. Tutis expressed this strikingly, "Ugly as it sounds [new women students] are entering the lions' den; they are the fresh meat." She continued, "[My advice is] don't let them sweettalk you, because all lions want to take advantage of you." A milder form of machismo was reported by the first- year student, Gaby, "the boys from the other years, they view us like objects, they don't see us as people, with feelings." Machismo was most prevalent during fieldwork that often required physical strength. According to Aquira her male classmates would complain that she was small and thin. Skarleth pointed out that men paired with women in work groups complained, "[women] don't work, arrive late and [men] do the work." Sometimes tasks were assigned according to gender, "they divide us by work, girls in light work and boys in more arduous work." On the other hand, women were sometimes preferred as co-workers for academic tasks, "I think that in the academic domain, in class, [men] give us more responsibility, because they prefer working with women. . .. Because they are a little more distracted let's say, and it's more difficult for them," said Elizabeth. The women reported determination in confronting machismo, "We are more determined when we set a goal, it is women who give advice here to men on how to behave, how to study. Although we are a minority I think we are better," said Sarai, a first-year student. And in response to men who said, "You women are not good for anything, not for falling in love or taking to bed," Jeysul replied, "I came to study, not to fall in love or to go to bed with anyone." Soraya said, "Even though we are not men, we have the same strength as them, everything depends on our willpower and the effort we make."

Family Relations

Although all students resided at the university, their families continued to play a prominent role in their lives. Families provided emotional and financial support, but also were a source of stress and responsibility. Victoria expressed the centrality of family, often called *familismo*, in Latin American culture, "I believe that the fundamental pillar in my life is my family." In response to a question about who has helped them achieve their goals, the most prevalent answers were parents, family, and siblings. Jeysul a third-year student said, "Every time I feel like I can't do it. .. .. . I call my mother. . .. It's like 'mamá, I feel like I can't, I feel tired,' and she is like, 'lie down and sleep. . .. drink some sugar water;' for me my mother is that help, she has always been that support for me." Many students reported missing their families while attending the university. According to Soraya, "you are always going to miss your family." "It is difficult because you don't have your brother, even to fight with or to bother you, but you have to overcome that." Advice from family members often took the form of proverbs: "The immensity of sacrifice matches the immensity of success," was the pithy saying in Skarleth's family. Being apart from one's family could also be stressful when the family experienced problems, For Ana, in her fourth year of university, the biggest challenge was having an aunt who was sick with terminal cancer, and she feared the worst with every phone call. Tutis, also in her fourth year of studies, said, "you are part of the family problems, but at the same time not [present], so all those things, those conflicts, the news, those impulses where you can't do anything because you're so far away. . .. I'm the oldest daughter so I get four versions of the problems at home – my mother, my father, and my siblings."

Faith and Religion

Although religion was not a prominent theme, it was mentioned as a support system in each focus group. Sarai used the common phrase "primero Dios [God willing] I will graduate," as an expression of hope. As reported above, Jenny received support from the church ministry. Gloria, a third-year student noted that going to church helped her deal with stress. And Soraya, a second-year student was grateful to God for the opportunity to study, "[it] was an opportunity that life has given us, that God has given us."

Aspirations for the Future

A sense of empowerment was highlighted in the students' future goals and aspirations. **Figure 4** graphically depicts the anticipated systems of the student post-graduation. The widely-shared immediate goal was to graduate from the university. Julieta, a third-year student said, "right now my goal is to graduate." Beyond graduation, two objectives were prevalent: to acquire further education, including a masters and doctorate, and to use the skills acquired to help others. Victoria was one of several respondents who planned to earn masters and doctoral degrees. She was inspired by fieldwork because, "it helped me to understand the focus on research, I loved it and want to continue with it." A desire to help others in one's country of origin was prominent. For Rubi, a first-year student, her main target was the street children of her country, "In my country there is a problem with children who live on the street because they don't have parents; these children have to seek food alone; [this university] has given me [the means] to do something for these children and to help them." Jessica also focused on the children of her country, "My idea is that when I return to [my country] to motivate young people to get better grades." Jessy (second-year student) said, 'my country is essentially agrarian; I want to return to my country to help people." Elizabeth explained that it was not just theory that students learned at the university, but, "we can solve the problems of our countries, we can help agriculture in our countries to become more sustainable, and we can feed the world because that is what they are teaching us. Juana said, "My country has

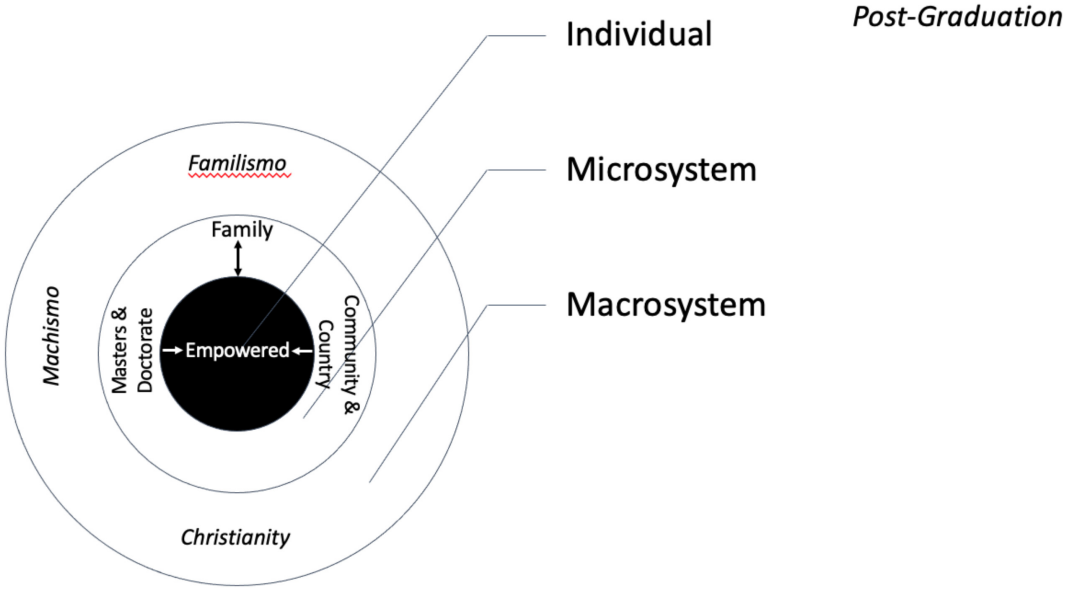

FIGURE 4 | Graphically depicts the anticipated systems of the student post-graduation.

the potential, in which one can work to help people with scarce resources, giving them the knowledge one has obtained here." Like many students, Julieta was focused on her family, " I want to help my family, my mother, to see the new horizons that I have." For Tutis, expanding her father's business was important, "It had never been my intention to work for a big company, I prefer to start from the bottom-up. . .. [as the oldest child] I feel a great responsibility I want to bring animal husbandry to my father's business." However, even personal goals sometimes merged with community well-being. According to Stephany, "I want to establish my own business, generating employment in the community."

DISCUSSION

Empowerment has been defined as, "the ability to exercise choice" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 436). Women studying at the agricultural university asserted their empowerment, not only in the title quote, "there is nothing I cannot achieve," but also in similar statements, such as, "we can, there is no limit." Their advice for incoming students was, "they also have the capacity, like us, to come here and confront the daily challenges and forge ahead." According to Kabeer (2005), there are three critical components to empowerment: Resources, agency, and achievement. The valuable education women are receiving is a critical resource that will serve them in the future. Their sense of agency is highlighted in their repeated references to self-efficacy, and the participants, having demonstrated academic achievement through success at the university, aspire to greater achievements in the future. Thus, the process of empowerment was evidenced by students' gains in all three components of the concept.

Although the data for this study were collected at a single point in time, students' reflections on their previous and anticipated experiences allow a glimpse at the process of change, labeled as the chronogram by Bronfenbrenner (1977). Before arriving at the university their personal qualities of determination and perseverance were already present. Some women reported taking the entrance exam more than once and making intense efforts to attain scholarships and the necessary funding. Their major microsystem was the immediate family who provided support, but sometimes cautioned that being a woman studying agriculture would be arduous.

At the university, the personal quality of persistence despite obstacles was prominent. A major theme was the expression of self-efficacy, confidence in one's capability to carry out actions and achieve goals. Although self-efficacy, per se, was not specifically encompassed in the original Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), it was incorporated as a part of agency in a revised version of the WEAI (Martinez et al., 2021, and can be seen as central to women's empowerment at the university. Self-efficacy theory, proposed by Bandura (1977) posits that self-efficacy is promoted by mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, supportive others in the environment, and specific internal states. Mastery experiences were prevalent among the women students; for example, Gloria said, "and last trimester I was able to do it better." Although vicarious experiences were not frequent, several third-year students reported looking to graduates of the university for advice and support. Having social support from others at the university, including classmates, instructors, fieldworkers and counselors was a major theme that emerged from the analysis. Jessica reported helping her classmates by urging them to be calm (and confident). Soraya pointed out that the female students "have serenity when it comes to doing the homework." In sum, it seems

that the conditions that promote self-efficacy were present in the environment.

The salient microsystems during the university experience included the social environment of peers, classmates, and friends, the classroom experiences, fieldwork, university services such as the counseling center, and continued relations with families. Among the themes that were identified in those microsystems were challenges with respect to academics and fieldwork, peer challenges as such gaining social acceptance and dealing with cultural differences, and machismo. Support was provided by the institution from fieldworkers, instructors, and university counseling center and also from peers, especially classmates and friends. Determination, self-efficacy, will-power, and persistence were strategies that helped them cope with the challenges, as well as the utilization of helpful others in their social networks. Machismo, in particular, was addressed by maintaining a positive attitude, recognizing women's strengths, and gaining the respect and affection of their male classmates through their own competence and interpersonal skills.

The strict regulations and discipline dictated by the university might be considered an exosystem in Bronfenbrenner's terms (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), given that students did not participate in their formulation. Those stringent regulations impacted classwork, fieldwork, and interpersonal relationships. Students saw both advantages and disadvantages to the rules. Although the rigid rules helped them to set priorities and manage their time, they constrained, to some extent, students' autonomy in pursuing their own academic (and other) goals.

Widely-shared cultural values are considered by Bronfenbrenner (1977) as part of the macrosystem. For the students in our study, the Latin American cultural features of *familismo* (familism), machismo, and religious faith were evident and as pointed out by Vélez-Agosto et al. (2017) instantiated in their everyday experiences.

Familismo or familism is a central feature of Latin American culture, defined as, "[placing] the family ahead of individual interests and development. It includes many responsibilities and obligations to immediate family members and other kin" (Ingoldsby, 1991, p. 57). The three dimensions of familism — family as referents, family as support systems, and familial obligations (Sabogal et al., 1987) — were highlighted by the participants. Among many others who used the family as a referent, Jessica said, "I am the first in my family to have an international scholarship." Extensive familial support, the second characteristic, was not only emotional, but also tangible, as illustrated in the response of Victoria's extended family to her tuition needs. They rallied to provide the funds, even selling property to raise money. The responsibility that the women felt toward their families of origin was unmistakable. Tutis was distraught when she could not address the problems of her family, given her physical distance from them. In her statement that, "I'm the oldest daughter so I get four versions of the problems at home," she not only referred to her position in the family but her obligations to them. Familism, especially family obligations, may be more salient in the lives of women than in their male classmates (Campos et al., 2014).

Women's roles in Latin America are also shaped by the concept of marianismo, the view that the ideal woman should emulate the Virgin Mary (Castillo et al., 2010). A central feature of marianismo is that women are expected to be the pillar of the family and to assume the primary responsibility for family well-being. Although familism is generally considered a protective factor for Latinos and Latin Americans (Corona et al., 2017) and some forms of marianismo may be empowering (Maegli et al., 2022), responsibilities to the family may weigh more heavily on women students, resulting in more complex and mixed consequences for their well-being and academic achievement (Vega, 2014; Zhu et al., 2021).

While machismo, an exaggerated, hypersexual, and aggressive masculinity that is based in men's power over women and often involves subordination of women, is recognized as a core part of Latin American culture (Toro-Alfonso, 2009), it may be more glaring and weighty in the agricultural educational environment. During fieldwork students are called to carry 100 pound sacks, to wield machetes, and to manage large farm animals. Tutis admired a female classmate, who although tiny, could carry as much as her male classmates. She concluded that, "And I think that [this university] should focus on the idea that we can all do it, that we [women] have the ability." Agricultural studies, because of the physical work involved, may pose additional challenges compared to other fields of study, such as engineering, in which women face being a minority.

Although widespread, machismo is not uniform nor universal among all communities or individual men in Latin America (Arciniega et al., 2008; Sara-Lafosse, 2014; Gibbons and Luna, 2015). In our study, Gaby emphasized individual differences among her male classmates, "it depends on the personality of the [men] whether they help you or not." Jenny noted their assistance, "the support of my [male] classmates takes place not only in the educational realm and learning by doing, but also in supporting [my] emotional well-being." Cinthia said, "Well, they help us a lot in fieldwork when they see, for example, that we can't do something …. Or they think it is very dangerous for us to do it. They are considerate at times." And Soraya noted that her male classmates could be protective, "When we leave the university on the weekend, and we are with our male classmates, the men are the ones who take care of us, 'she is my colleague, my classmate,' and if something happens they defend us, so one feels safe with them." These two examples illustrate another side to machismo, labeled "caballerismo' by Arciniega et al. (2008). The benevolent dimension of machismo dictates that men should be chivalrous; they should protect and defend women and their families (Arciniega et al., 2008). Overall, however, there were many everyday examples of machistic behaviors, and the second-year student Elizabeth commented, "I believe that we still live in a machistic society, that puts aside women and believes that because of strength or other abilities that we don't have, that we are less, and I believe that this has to change."

Christianity is the dominant religion among Latin Americans. In 2020, over 80% of Latin Americans claimed a Christian faith (Statistica, 2020). Moreover, the majority of people in most Latin American countries say that religion is very important in

their lives (Pew Research Center, 2014). Although religion and faith were present in the group discussions of students, they did not assume a primary role. In fact, most of the codes for religion came from short phrases that allude to God (e.g., *Gracias a Dios, Si Dios quiere, Primero Dios*), and are colloquialisms, rather than indicators of religiosity. For the university students, attending church was an extracurricular activity and served as a support group. These findings might reflect the current decline in religiosity, especially among middle class youth, in Latin America (Rodríguez Cuadros, 2018). Nonetheless, it is critical to mention that for two students, Gloria and Victoria, faith in God was a major support. Gloria said, "it helped me a great deal to go to church. . ..it is a moment for the person and God." Victoria said, "you feel as if God is always with you and that he is going to influence the decisions you make." Even though religion *per se* may not have been a dominant force in students' lives, some of the basic tenets of Christianity seemed to permeate their thinking. Many anticipated a life of service to others and described gender roles derived from Christianity.

There were dynamic interactions among the ecological systems of the women students. Their roommates, classmates, friends, and instructors encouraged them in both academics and fieldwork. Instructors and fieldworkers sometimes served as proxies for parents and older siblings, dispensing support and advice. Support from others was seen as essential to women's achievement and thriving at the university. Ana in her first year said, "I think that here in this environment I have learned that we need other people, that we need one another; on my part my classmates have helped me, have helped me a great deal, teachers also, the counseling center of the university." Reliance on others to thrive may be a universal need, but may also be exaggerated by cultural collectivism in Latin America (Hofstede, 2001; Krys et al., 2022; Salvador et al., 2022).

Everyday experiences of differential gender roles, reciprocity, and close familial relationships reflected cultural values of Latin America. The contrast between fieldwork, where men often disparaged women's work and the classroom, where they preferred working with women and often assigned them leadership roles may relate to the familism and gender role ideologies prevalent in Latin America. The outside fieldwork may be analogous to the public sphere where men often dominate and can assert their power, whereas the classroom may resemble the private sphere, in which Latin American women have exercised relative power (Stevens, 1973; Smyth, 2008; Maier, 2010). The marianismo ideology positions women as the pillar of the family and women's leadership in the academic work groups may stem from that underlying belief system.

With respect to their futures, the female agricultural students saw their horizons expanding. They anticipated further education, establishing their own businesses, as well as contributing to their families, communities, and countries. Some wished to travel abroad and explore other nations and continents. The women's desire to make a contribution, both to their families and their countries may stem, in part, from the familism and marianismo values, both of which emphasize service to others.

The students in our study are well-positioned and empowered for their futures. As accomplished graduates, they will be able to serve as role models for other women working in agriculture (Stern et al., 2016). As role models they may encourage more women to engage in agricultural work, moving Latin America beyond the current 20% of female agricultural workers (FAO, 2011). Because of the students' extensive fieldwork, they have practical as well as theoretical knowledge to share. Moreover, they are practiced at addressing machismo, a skill that will undoubtedly be useful in their futures. Those skills and activities position women with an agricultural education to contribute to the United Nations SDGs, not only with respect to gender equality (SDG5), but also to the elimination of poverty (SDG1), zero hunger (SDG2) and good health and well-being (SDG3).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study documented the experiences of a group of women students attending an agricultural university, but it cannot be generalized to other situations or conditions. And despite attention to the trustworthiness of the findings and the employment of reflexivity, member checking and auditing, the investigators were prepared to notice the growth and transformation of students, rather than their mistakes and missteps. The researchers' shared commitment to women's empowerment may have inadvertently influenced the focus group discussions, as well as the coding and interpretation of the findings. Although a sense of empowerment was clearly expressed in the focus group discussions, the specific personal and environmental factors fostering empowerment are unknown. According to the participants, the keys to success included physical and emotional effort, maintaining a positive attitude, not trusting too readily, relying on friends and family, recognizing that this is not a "feminine" life, and keeping a focus on the future. More research is needed to further document the preconditions for empowerment and to explore the women's future challenges and successes as professional agriculturists in Latin American cultures. In addition, to fully understand gender interactions and processes at the university, the views of men and persons who are non-binary with respect to gender should also be queried about their gender attitudes and the factors that promote equity across all gender categories.

The findings have implications for university policies and initiatives. The recruitment of women students could be prioritized to achieve gender parity in enrollment. Moreover, women students relied heavily on social support from many others – including male and female classmates, faculty, and fieldworkers – to achieve empowerment. Therefore, initiatives to maintain or increase sources of support are essential. Workshops or programs on gender equity might be initiated, perhaps aimed primarily at men (Acheson and Kelly, 2021). Universities might celebrate women's accomplishments, for example, on International Women's Day, through their newsletters and announcements. A code of conduct could be established, expanded, or promoted to prohibit machistic or sexist behavior.

In sum, a number of ways have been proposed to empower women in agriculture. Among those are initiating agricultural development projects (Johnson et al., 2018), establishing women's

agricultural cooperatives, (Pastran, 2017), integrating gender issues into agricultural research, (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2010), and providing extension courses aimed at women participants (Diaz and Najjar, 2019). However, it is clear that higher education in agricultural and rural development can provide a transformational experience to women, empowering them to feed the world.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the transcripts of the focus groups contain potentially identifiable data. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to JG, judith.gibbons@slu.edu.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Human Subjects Research Board, Hope College. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JG designed the research study and wrote the manuscript, participated in the construction of the interview questions, the coding of the blinded transcripts, and the data analysis. ZE-F, AM-A, GM-F, IV-M, and AA-S participated in the construction of the interview questions, the conducting of the focus groups, the coding of the blinded transcripts, the data analysis, and reviewed the manuscript for accuracy and completeness. ZE-F led the local team with respect to the research conduct and coding. AM-A served as the liaison with the university administration. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Psychological Resilience and Career Success of Female Nurses in Central China: The Mediating Role of Craftsmanship

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Background: Nurses' career success is an important factor affecting the quality of nursing services and the stability of the nursing workforce, and enhancing nurses' career success level is of key significance to the development of the nursing discipline. As psychological resilience and craftsmanship are important spiritual traits in the process of nurses' career development, it is important to understand the mechanism of their effects on nurses' career success level.

Objective: To explore the current situation of craftsmanship, psychological resilience and career success levels of female nurses in central China, and to verify the mediating role of craftsmanship between psychological resilience and female career success using structural equation model.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted among 2359 female nurses from three hospitals in central China through an online questionnaire, including craftsmanship, psychological resilience and career success scale. The data were analyzed by Z-test and Spearman rank correlation with SPSS 23.0 statistical software, and the mechanism of the effect of craftsmanship and psychological resilience on career success was completed by AMOS 23.0 statistical software.

Results: The scores of career success, psychological resilience, and craftsmanship of female nurses in central China were 68.00 (61.00, 75.00), 74.00 (64.00, 84.00), and 83.00 (79.00, 95.25). Spearman rank correlation analysis showed that Chinese female nurses' career success was positively correlated with craftsmanship ($r = 0.511$, $P < 0.01$) and psychological resilience ($r = 0.595$, $P < 0.01$). Craftsmanship played a mediating role between psychological resilience and career success, accounting for 39.3% of the total effect ratio.

Conclusion: The scores of career success and psychological resilience of female nurses in central China are at a moderate level, and craftsmanship plays a mediating

role between psychological resilience and career success. It is suggested that nursing managers should pay attention to the importance of career success to nurses' self-development and nursing team stability, and improve their sense of career success by effectively improving nurses' psychological resilience and craftsmanship.

Keywords: career success, nurses, psychological resilience, craftsmanship, mediating effect

INTRODUCTION

Today, with the development of the times and the improvement of human health awareness, people's demand for health level is increasing day by day, which not only brings new challenges and requirements to the quality of nursing services, but also brings greater professional pressure to clinical nurses, which in turn leads to the increase of nurse turnover rate (Wang et al., 2019). Nursing as an important part of modern medicine, the stability and sustainable development of the nursing team is related to the guarantee of nursing quality (Nibbelink and Brewer, 2018). However, for a long time, the problems such as high turnover rate of nurses and manpower shortages have existed in countries around the world (Wan et al., 2018). According to the survey, the turnover rate of nurses around the world is between 15 and 44%, and especially under the impact of COVID-19, nurses have a higher tendency of stress and burnout than before (Pang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022). The high turnover rate and mobility of nurses are not conducive to their own professional growth, and even more so to the stability and development of the nursing community in various countries. In recent years, with the improvement of medical standards, although nursing health care in China has been improved, there are still problems such as high turnover rate and uneven development of nurses compared with foreign countries (Liu et al., 2018; Zhang and Tu, 2020). Therefore, it is of great importance for Chinese clinical nurses to clarify their career development plans, improve their sense of career success so as to reduce their turnover rate.

The sense of career success refers to the positive psychological feelings gradually accumulated by individuals in the course of their career and the related achievements made in their work. It includes both subjective and objective success, and is an important indicator and variable to evaluate individual career development (Seibert et al., 1999; Eby et al., 2003). Currently, studies on career success are mostly focused on the field of management, but in recent years, the number of studies on career fulfillment in the field of nursing field has gradually increased (Wu et al., 2022). Previous studies have shown that career success has a significant positive predictive effect on nurses' career identity and individual values, which is conducive to motivating nurses' enthusiasm for work, improve the quality of nursing service, reduce the turnover rate of nurses and stabilize the nursing team (Dan et al., 2018; Zamanzadeh et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2020).

Psychological resilience is a good psychological performance of an individual in the face of adversity, stress or trauma (White et al., 2008). Psychological resilience of nurses refers to the protective resources developed by nurses in their professional experience to safeguard the psychological dynamic balance, and it is a comprehensive psychological process of cognitive, emotional and behavioral tendencies. It is well known that nursing is recognized as a high-stress and high-risk profession, and the tremendous occupational stress and tense doctor-patient relationship not only bring physical and psychological burnout to nurses, but also further deepen the turnover intention of individual nurses (Foster et al., 2020). Research shows that psychological resilience can effectively protect nurses' psychological boundaries, enabling them to overcome various stresses at work and actively cope with workplace adversities, and that nurses with high psychological resilience have stronger adaptive and regulatory abilities, and will actively seek coping methods in the face of adversity to effectively relieve individual stress and thus achieve their own growth and career development (Rees et al., 2015; Mcdonald et al., 2016).

Craftsmanship, also known as professionalism, spirit at work or vocational culture, refers to the spirit and attitude of individuals in pursuit of excellence and perfection formed in the production process (Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2004; Sapta et al., 2021). Research shows that individuals with the quality of craftsmanship can not only improve the quality of their products, but also have an advantage in professional competition, thus promoting their career development and success (Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2008). As a discipline with equal emphasis on knowledge and technology, rigor and science have become the connotation of clinical nurses' work. Internalizing craftsmanship into all aspects of their work can effectively improve clinical efficiency and nursing service quality (Tanaka et al., 2016; Park and Jung, 2021).

In recent years, with the economic and social development, women's career development has been valued and extended. However, in the context of Chinese male-centered value system and patriarchal culture, although there is a unified view on the career success of both genders in academic circles, a large number of empirical studies still define career success in terms of male external outcomes, and the research related to women's own career success is still insufficient (Kirchmeyer, 2002; Xiao and Luo, 2015). Moreover, research has found that nurses' career success is generally low in the predominantly female Chinese nursing workforce. Therefore it is still necessary to strengthen the research on nurses' career success (Huang et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2022). In the current nursing practice environment in China, focusing on the career success development of female nurses and seeking their career-family balance can effectively reduce the turnover rate and stabilize the nursing workforce. Therefore, this study proposes the hypothesis that there is a positive association between craftsmanship, psychological resilience, and

career success among female nurses, and that craftsmanship has a mediating effect between psychological resilience and career success. By verifying the above hypothesis, it provides a theoretical basis for promoting the career success of female clinical nurses and provides a reference for nurses themselves to reasonably plan their career development and achieve their career success. It also provides a reference for nursing managers to improve nurses' work enthusiasm and nursing quality, so as to stabilize the nursing team, reduce the turnover rate of clinical nurses, and promote the healthy development of hospitals.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Participants

The study was a cross-sectional survey and 2359 participants were recruited from three tertiary hospitals using convenience sampling method from January to February 2022. The inclusion criteria were: (1) having obtained the qualification certificate of nurses of People's Republic of China and (2) having given informed consent and voluntarily participating in this study. Nurses' questionnaires were answered and collected using a network platform method, and the person in charge of the hospital nursing to be surveyed was contacted before the questionnaire was distributed to obtain their cooperation, and the link to the questionnaire was sent to the hospital through the network. The questionnaire was filled out following the principle of informed consent and in an anonymous form, and the method of filling out the questionnaire, the purpose and significance of the study were explained together on the front page of the online questionnaire to ensure that the data was unbiased.

The sample size formula shows that at least 817 nurses are needed for this study, and the sample size is 10 times of the questionnaire entries, which is calculated as $N = (7 + 19 + 20 + 25)^{*}10 = 710$. Considering the invalid and missing questionnaires, the sample size is expanded by 15% based on the original sample size, so at least 817 participants are needed for this study. A total of 2359 questionnaires were collected and 2266 were valid with an effective rate of 96.06%.

Ethics Statement

The study did not involve human clinical trials or animal experiments, and the investigation was conducted anonymously and voluntarily. The date of the subject was strictly confidential and used only for scientific research, which is in line with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, and therefore did not require ethical approval.

Measures

Demographic

Subject demographic characteristics were designed by the researchers, including age (Less than or equal to 25 years old, 26∼30 years old, 31∼35 years old, 36∼40 years old and over 40 years old), education level (Junior college, Undergraduate and Master degree or above), years of experience (Less than or equal to 5 years, 6∼10 years, 11∼15 years and over 15 years), technical title (Primary title, Intermediate title, and Senior title), department type (Internal Medicine, Surgical, Obstetrics and Gynecology, Pediatrics, Outpatient and Emergency, Intensive Care Unit, and Operating Room), relationship status (Married, Single, and Widowed or separate) and positions(Head nurse and Nurse).

Women's Career Success Scale

The Women's Career Success Scale (WCSS) was developed by Chinese scholar Xiao Wei in 2015 based on relevant theories from home and abroad (Xiao and Luo, 2015). The scale consists of 19 items in 5 dimensions: Intra-organizational career competitiveness (WCSS1, four items), Extra-organizational career competitiveness (WCSS2, four items), Intrinsic satisfaction (WCSS3, four items), Relationship network (WCSS4, three items), and Work-family balance (WCSS5, four items). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree, and the scale had high content and structural validity. In this study the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.927, and its five-dimensional Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranged from 0.767 to 0.924.

Craftsmanship Scale

The craftsmanship scale (CS) is designed to assess the specific values and internal behavioral norms held by individuals at work (Zhao et al., 2020). It consists of five dimensions: Personal growth (CS1), Taking responsibility (CS2), Seeking perfection (CS3), Cherishing reputation (CS4), Determination and persistence (CS5), with a total of 20 items, of which each dimension contains 4 items. The items score from very unimportant to very important on a 5-point Likert scale, with a total score of 100, the higher the score, the higher the level of craftsmanship. In this study the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.968, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the five dimensions ranged from 0.816 to 0.973.

Psychological Resilience Scale

The psychological resilience scale (CDRISC) was translated and revised by Xiaonan Yu in 2007 and has been proved to have good reliability and validity in the psychometric measurement of Chinese nurses (Yu and Zhang, 2007). The scale consists of 25 items with 3 dimensions, namely, Tough (CDRISC1, 13 items), Self-improvement (CDRISC2, 8 items), and Optimism (CDRISC3, 4 items). Each item is rated on a 5-point positive scale from 0 to 4, representing "never," "rarely," "sometimes," "often," and "always." The higher the total score, the better the psychological resilience. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.967, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the three dimensions of resilience, self-improvement, and optimism were 0.937, 0.925, and 0.850 respectively.

Statistical Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0 was used for data statistics and analysis, and descriptive statistics such as frequency and composition ratios were used for analysis of count data, and metrological data of non-normal distribution were described by $[M(P_{25}, P_{75})]$.

Independent sample Z tests were used to compare statistical differences in career success scores among nurses with different demographic profiles, and the correlation among craftsmanship, psychological resilience, and career success was explored by Spearman rank correlation. AMOS 23.0 statistical software was applied to construct structural equation models to analyze the mechanisms of the effects of craftsmanship and psychological resilience on career success, and Bootstrap test was used to test the significance of the mediating effect, with the number of self-sampling set at 5000, and if the 95% confidence interval did not contain 0, the mediating effect was significant. α was taken as two-sided, and the difference was considered statistically significant at $P < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Basic Characteristics

Among the 2266 participants surveyed, female nurses under the age of 40 accounted for 94.17% of the total, and the most of the subjects had worked less than 5 years, of which 90.2% were academic degrees. The univariate analysis of career success scores showed that there was no statistical difference in scores on career success by age and education level ($P > 0.05$), and clinical nurses with administrative positions and senior titles generally scored higher (**Table 1**).

Scores of Craftsmanship, Psychological Resilience, and Career Success Among Participants

The results of this study showed that the median total scores of career success, craftsmanship, and psychological resilience of female nurses in central China were 68, 83, and 74 respectively, and the dimension scores of each questionnaire are detailed in **Table 2**.

The Correlation Among Craftsmanship, Psychological Resilience, and Career Success

The results of spearman rank correlation analysis showed that the career success of female nurses in central China was significantly and positively correlated with craftsmanship ($r = 0.511$, $P < 0.01$) and psychological resilience ($r = 0.595$, $P < 0.01$) (**Table 3**).

The Mediating Effect of Craftsmanship Between Psychological Resilience and Career Success of Female Nurses in Central China

Based on the above correlation analysis results and literature review, this study assumes that the structural equation model was constructed with psychological resilience as independent variable, craftsmanship as mediating variable and career success as dependent variable, and confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the fitness of the model. The modified model fit indices were: $\chi^2 = 796.208$, df = 53, Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) = 0.946, Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI) = 0.907, Standardized Fit Index (NFI) = 0.969, Incremental Fit Index(IFI) = 0.971, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.971, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.958, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.079, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.0451. The specific model paths, convergent validity and discriminant validity are shown in **Tables 4**, **5**. In this study, the large sample size caused too much freedom in the chi-square values (Xie et al., 2018). Although the chi-square values are not significant, all other indicators meet the requirements, indicating that the model fits well. As shown in **Figure 1** and **Table 6**, the mediating effect value of craftsmanship was 0.138, accounting for 39.3% of the total effect value of 0.353. In summary, craftsmanship plays a part in mediating the effect between psychological resilience and career success among female nurses in central China.

DISCUSSION

Current Status of Career Success, Psychological Resilience, and Craftsmanship Among Female Nurses in Central China

Nurses' career success refers to the unity of positive subjective feelings and objective outcomes of clinical nurses in their career (Heslin, 2005). Studies have shown that career success, as a key protective factor for nurses' career development, has positive effects in reducing nursing brain drain and ensuring the quality of nursing service (Sönmez et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021). The results of this study show that the median total score of career success of female nurses in central China is 68, which is in the medium level, lower than the results of Dan's study on career success of nurses in mainland China, indicating that there is still some room for improvement (Dan et al., 2018). The reasons for the low career success of nurses may be related to the low income level, complex working environment and lower social status of domestic clinical nurses (Huang et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019). In China, while undertaking high-intensity work, clinical nurses have to face the mental stress caused by the increasingly tense doctor–patient conflict. Meanwhile nursing work is only mechanical repetition in the cognition of most people in China is that, far lower than the social status of doctors. Therefore, it is still important to actively explore the current situation and influencing factors of female nurses' career success and improve their career success level.

In this study, it can be found that there are significant differences in demographics in terms of nurses' years of work, title, administrative position, marital status, and department. As can be seen in **Table 1**, the career success scores of nurses with advanced titles are significantly higher than those nurses with other titles, which may be related to the fact that nurses with advanced titles are more mature and stable in terms of work experience, knowledge, and technical level compared to nurses with other two titles (Sönmez et al., 2021). Moreover, with the improvement of titles, the salary and competitiveness of nurses within the organization will be further improved, which

TABLE 1 | General information and univariate analysis of career success of female nurses (n = 2266).

Variables		*N* (%)	Career success	*Z*	*P-value*
Age (years)				5.218	0.266
	≤ 25	498(21.98)	69.00(61.75,74.00)		
	26∼30	528(23.30)	69.00(62.00,75.00)		
	31∼35	692(30.53)	68.00(61.00,74.00)		
	36∼40	416(18.36)	68.50(61.00,74.00)		
	>40	132(5.83)	69.50(62.00,76.00)		
Educational levels				0.913	0.633
	Junior college	216(9.53)	68.00(60.00,75.00)		
	Undergraduate	2044(90.20)	68.00(61.00,75.00)		
	Master degree or above	6(0.27)	73.00(52.00,75.00)		
Working years(years)					
	≤ 5	852(37.60)	69.00(62.00,75.00)	8.895	0.031
	6∼10	472(20.83)	68.00(61.00,74.75)		
	11∼15	636(28.07)	68.00(60.00,73.00)		
	>15	306(13.50)	69.00(61.00,79.25)		
Job title				6.284	0.043
	Primary title	1580(69.73)	68.00(61.00,74.00)		
	Intermediate title	642(28.33)	68.00(61.00,75.00)		
	Senior title	44(1.94)	72.00(63.00,78.00)		
Department				12.603	0.027
	Internal Medicine	758(33.45)	68.00(61.00,74.00)		
	Surgical	440(19.41)	67.00(60.00,74.00)		
	Obstetrics and Gynecology	128(5.65)	69.00(64.00,75.75)		
	Pediatrics	82(3.62)	70.00(64.00,75.25)		
	Outpatient and other	520(22.95)	68.50(62.00,75.00)		
	Emergency, Intensive Care Unit and Operating Room	338(14.92)	67.00(60.00,72.00)		
Relationship status				6.938	0.031
	Married	1410(62.23)	69.00(61.00,75.00)		
	Single	824(36.36)	68.00(61.00,74.00)		
	Widowed or separated	32(1.41)	61.50(57.50,72.50)		
Positions				–2.627	0.009
	Head nurse	118(5.21)	71.00(63.00,76.00)		
	Nurse	2148(94.79)	68.00(61.00,74.00)		

is more conducive to their career development and therefore they have higher career success scores. In the score of career success of administrative position, it can be found that nurses with administrative positions have better scores than general nurses (Wu et al., 2022). This may be due to the fact that head nurses, as management staff, have a certain level of status in the hospital and have the opportunity to participate in hospital policy-making, and that nurses with administrative positions have relatively more time and opportunities to study and pursue further training, so as to improve their career success. In addition, previous studies have shown that the older the nurses are, the greater their sense of professional success (Asegid et al., 2014). However, the statistics of this study showed that there was no significant difference in the career success among female nurses of different ages, which may due to the balanced number of nurses in the four age groups of 20–40 included in this survey. In Notzer's study, it was concluded that nurses with higher education tended to have higher levels of career success (Notzer et al., 2004), and the results of Osuji's study were the opposite (Osuji et al., 2014). However, in the present study it can be found that there is no significant difference between nurses' education level and career success, and the analysis may be due to the fact that 90.2% of the subjects in this survey had a bachelor's degree in education. The findings of effect of education and age on nurses' career success differed in different studies, so further verification about the effect of age and education on career success needs to be done in future studies. In conclusion, nurses' career success is influenced by title, administrative position, years of experience and marital status, and a good level of career success for nurses can effectively stabilize the nursing

TABLE 2 | Scores of 2266 nurses on each dimension of psychological resilience, craftsmanship, and women's career success [$M(P_{25}, P_{75})$].

Items	*M*	P_{25}	P_{75}	*Minimum*	*Maximum*
Psychological Resilience Score	74.00	64.00	84.00	19.00	100.00
Tough	39.00	34.00	45.00	10.00	52.00
Self-improvement	24.00	20.00	26.00	5.00	32.00
Optimistic	12.00	10.00	13.00	2.00	16.00
Craftsmanship total score	83.00	79.00	95.25	20.00	100.00
Personal growth	16.00	16.00	20.00	4.00	20.00
Taking responsibility	18.00	16.00	20.00	4.00	20.00
Seeking perfection	17.00	16.00	20.00	4.00	20.00
Cherishing reputation	16.00	15.00	19.00	4.00	20.00
Determination and persistence	16.00	15.00	19.00	4.00	20.00
Female Nurse Career Success Score	68.00	61.00	75.00	19.00	95.00
Intra-organizational career competitiveness	14.00	12.00	16.00	4.00	20.00
Extra-organizational career competitiveness	12.00	11.00	14.00	4.00	20.00
Inner satisfaction	16.00	14.00	16.00	4.00	20.00
Relationship network	12.00	12.00	14.00	3.00	15.00
Work-family balance	15.00	12.00	16.00	4.00	20.00

TABLE 3 | Correlation analysis of female nurses' professional identity with psychological resilience and craftsmanship (r, n = 2266).

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
(1) CDRISC1	1.000															
(2) CDRISC2	0.843**	1.000														
(3) CDRISC3	0.782**	0.831**	1.000													
(4) CDRISC Total Score	0.965**	0.936**	0.874**	1.000												
(5) CS1	0.468**	0.397**	0.437**	0.462**	1.000											
(6) CS2	0.441**	0.355**	0.404**	0.425**	0.883**	1.000										
(7) CS3	0.462**	0.407**	0.452**	0.461**	0.822**	0.900**	1.000									
(8) CS4	0.343**	0.328**	0.348**	0.353**	0.570**	0.600**	0.660**	1.000								
(9) CS5	0.503**	0.467**	0.499**	0.514**	0.643**	0.643**	0.715**	0.654**	1.000							
(10) CS Total Score	0.511**	0.456**	0.493**	0.513**	0.878**	0.896**	0.910**	0.797**	0.835**	1.000						
(11) WCSS1	0.384**	0.388**	0.372**	0.407**	0.317**	0.272**	0.301**	0.324**	0.364**	0.366**	1.000					
(12) WCSS2	0.185**	0.193**	0.180**	0.197**	0.078**	0.037	0.047*	0.136**	0.142**	0.111**	0.502**	1.000				
(13) WCSS3	0.558**	0.494**	0.517**	0.564**	0.533**	0.489**	0.491**	0.349**	0.516**	0.536**	0.543**	0.331**	1.000			
(14) WCSS4	0.538**	0.470**	0.467**	0.535**	0.589**	0.580**	0.553**	0.389**	0.531**	0.586**	0.448**	0.177**	0.710**	1.000		
(15) WCSS5	0.558**	0.535**	0.540**	0.578**	0.443**	0.394**	0.425**	0.313**	0.500**	0.472**	0.466**	0.219**	0.633**	0.624**	1.000	
(16) WCSS Total Score	0.578**	0.540**	0.542**	0.595**	0.482**	0.429**	0.446**	0.373**	0.519**	0.511**	0.767**	0.600**	0.824**	0.722**	0.778**	1.000

*The CDRISC, Psychological Resilience Scale; CDRISC1–CDRISC3 represent the dominant variables of Tough, Self-improvement, and Optimistic; CS, Craftsmanship Scale; CS1–CS5, are Personal growth, Taking responsibility, Seeking perfection, Cherishing reputation, Determination and persistence; WCSS, Women's Career Success Scale, WCSS1–WCSS5, are Intra-organizational career competitiveness, Extra-organizational career competitiveness, Internal satisfaction, Relationship network, and Work-family balance. *P < 0.05; **P < 0.01.*

workforce and improve the quality of nursing services. Therefore, nursing managers should focus on the career development of female nurses with low seniority and low titles and strengthen theoretical and skill training for young nurses, encouraging them to actively participate in various academic activities, so as to improve their intra-organizational competitiveness and help them to achieve career success.

From **Table 2**, it can be found that the median total score of psychological resilience of female nurses in central China is 74, which is at a medium level and is consistent with the results of Klink's study (Kılınç and Sis Çelik, 2021). Analyzing the reasons, we can see that nurses, as an important group in the hospital, work with high intensity and heavy load, and in this survey the subjects were all female, who compared to male nurses, need to balance their family while completing their work in the hospital within limited time and energy, and the continuous stressful state will not only lead to their negative emotions, but also is not conducive to individual psychological health development. Especially in the current COVID-19, the nursing groups, as one of the main forces to fight against the epidemic, is facing the epidemic directly and at the same time is under great physical and mental pressure (Karabulak and Kaya, 2021; Wahlster et al., 2021). Therefore, in view of the current situation of nurses' psychological resilience, nursing managers should actively pay attention to nurses' psychological status and enhance their anti-frustration ability through flexible scheduling,

TABLE 4 | Model parameters of the structural equation for the career success status of female nurses (n = 2266).

Path Relationships	Unstd.	*SE*	C.R. (t-*value*)	*P-value*	Std.	CR	AVE
Optimistic ← Psychological Resilience	1.000				0.904	0.943	0.846
Self-improvement ← Psychological Resilience	2.111	0.028	74.635	<0.001	0.946		
Tough ← Psychological Resilience	3.004	0.044	68.529	<0.001	0.909		
Personal growth ← Craftsmanship	1.000				0.934	0.937	0.751
Taking responsibility ← craftsman spirit	0.961	0.012	83.509	<0.001	0.964		
Seeking perfection ← Craftsmanship	0.935	0.012	78.443	<0.001	0.953		
Cherishing reputation ← Craftsmanship	0.658	0.018	37.039	<0.001	0.644		
Determination and persistence ← Craftsmanship	0.807	0.018	45.896	<0.001	0.793		
Intra-organizational career competitiveness ← Women's Career Success	1.000				0.597	0.816	0.499
Extra-organizational career competitiveness ← Women's Career Success	0.487	0.039	12.574	<0.001	0.250		
Inner satisfaction ← Women's Career Success	1.407	0.043	32.511	<0.001	0.865		
Relationship network ← Women's Career Success	1.028	0.035	29.213	<0.001	0.869		
Work-family balance ← Women's Career Success	1.487	0.055	27.214	< 0.001	0.757		
Women's Career Success ← Craftsmanship	0.340	0.016	20.860	<0.001	0.506		
Women's Career Success ← Psychological Resilience	0.214	0.014	15.835	< 0.001	0.344		
Craftsmanship ← Psychological Resilience	0.407	0.019	21.549	<0.001	0.439		

organizational training and psychological guidance. Nurses can achieve family-work balance and appropriate decompression by actively improving their personal knowledge, professional ability and spiritual strengths to maintain optimal physical and mental health.

The findings of this study show that female nurses in central China have a high level of craftsmanship. Exploring the reasons can know that, as nursing is a discipline with equal emphasis on knowledge and technology coupled with the particularity of clinical work in hospitals, nurses need to maintain operational rigor and science. Meanwhile, due to the renewal and supervision of medical and health institutions, nurses must continue to study and maintain rigor in order to ensure the precise completion of their work, which coincides with the craftsmanship of excellence, preciseness and truth-seeking (Park and Jung, 2021). And for women in China, compared to other professions, nursing has relative stability which is in line with most women's pursuit of work. At the same time, since all the nurses included in this study were women, compared to male nurses, women are naturally meticulous and cautious, and therefore have a higher level of craftsmanship score.

Psychological Resilience, Craftsmanship, and Career Success Correlation Among Female Nurses in Central China

The results of this study showed that the psychological resilience of female nurses in central China was positively correlated with career success (r = 0.595, P < 0.01), and the better their psychological resilience, the higher their level of career success. In clinical work, nurses with higher psychological resilience tend to have higher enthusiasm and initiative in work and can deal with emergencies in clinical work actively and effectively. Nurses with higher psychological resilience can effectively maintain individual physical and mental balance when suffering from adversity and stress, and have stronger resilience and rebound ability, so that they are more likely to be competent in their jobs and achieve career success (Kim and Yoon, 2018; Foster et al., 2019). Therefore, nursing managers should pay attention to nurses' psychological state, create a good working atmosphere for them, actively guide them to change their psychological resilience, and finally improve their sense of professional success. In this study, it can be found that nurses' craftsmanship is also positively correlated with their career success (r = 0.511, P < 0.01), that is, nurses with high levels of craftsmanship are more likely to achieve career success. In clinical work, nurses with a high level of craftsmanship can more deeply appreciate the meaning of nursing work and reflect the rigor and scientific nature of nursing work. They are willing to devote more energy and emotion than other nurses to continuously pursue individual breakthroughs and work excellence in their nursing career, so as to gain higher recognition and promotion and achieve career success. Therefore, in the career development of nurses, managers should not only focus on the personal growth of nurses, but also pay more attention to the development of their professionalism, so as to improve their sense of career success by enhancing their inner craftsmanship. Moreover, by mastering the correlation between nurses' professional success, psychological resilience and craftsmanship, nursing managers can more effectively carry out reasonable career planning and development for nurses.

TABLE 5 | Structural model discriminant validity.

Variables	AVE	CDRISC	CS	WCSS
CDRISC	0.846	0.920		
CS	0.751	0.439	0.867	
WCSS	0.499	0.566	0.657	0.706

Craftsmanship Partially Mediates the Relationship Between Psychological Resilience and Professional Success Among Female Nurses in Central China

The results of the mediating effect analysis showed that craftsmanship partially mediated the relationship between

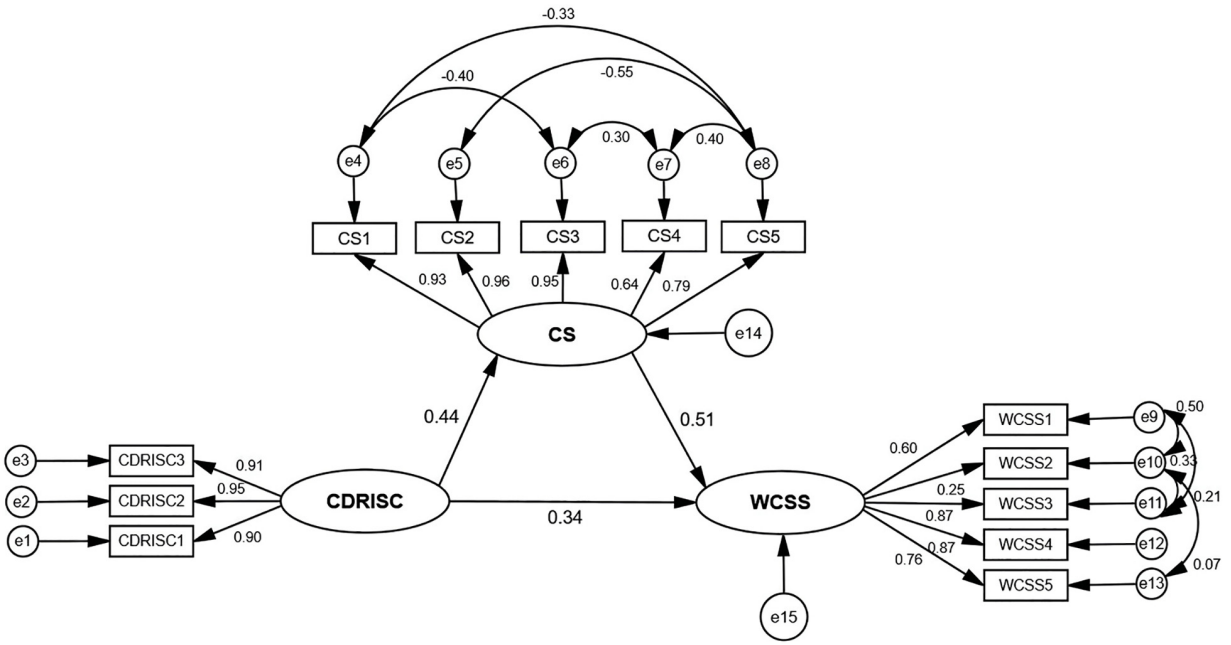

FIGURE 1 | A model of mediating the relationship between psychological resilience and career success among female nurses' craftsmanship in central China.

TABLE 6 | Confidence intervals for structural model mediation effects (5,000 bootstrap samples).

Model path	Estimate	95%CI		*P-value*	Boot SE	Effect ratio (%)
		LLCI	ULCI			
Psychological Resilience → Women's Career Success	0.214	0.179	0.250	0.000	0.018	60.7
Psychological Resilience → Craftsmanship → Women's Career Success	0.138	0.120	0.159	0.000	0.010	39.3
Total effect	0.353	0.314	0.389	0.000	0.019	100

psychological resilience and career success among female nurses in central China, with the mediating effect value of craftsmanship being 0.138, accounting for 39.3% of the total effect, indicating that nurses' career success can be predicted not only by psychological resilience directly, but also by this mediating variable of craftsmanship level. Nurses with higher psychological resilience have better work stability and motivation, and are not only better able to adapt to their work, but also more able to actively regulate their own state and rationally seek solutions when facing difficulties and pressures at work, so as to achieve better work results and career success (Xu et al., 2021); and for individual nurses, a better craftsmanship enables them to seek higher professional values in the work process, exercise and develop their personal abilities while completing their work, and thus achieve their professional goals and values (Jang et al., 2016). Thus, it shows that the craftsmanship, psychological resilience and career success of female nurses play a positive role, and craftsmanship has a significant mediating effect between psychological resilience and career success. The verification of the above model hypotheses further provides a theoretical basis for promoting the career success of female clinical nurses. Therefore, it is suggested that nursing managers should actively pay attention to the relationship between nurses' psychological resilience, craftsmanship and career success, make full use of internal hospital resources, and develop psychological aids that are in line with the actual situation of nurses in hospitals as a whole, so as to enhance nurses' psychological resilience. In daily work, hospitals should do a good job in on-the-job training for nurses to enhance their professional identity and confidence, stimulating their love and persistence for their work, so as to improve their sense of career success.

Limitations

This study still has some limitations. Firstly, this study was conducted in the form of a self-report questionnaire, which is somewhat subjective; secondly, only three tertiary hospitals in central China were selected for the survey, and the sample may have been geographically diverse; finally, due to limited funding, only convenience sampling was used in the study, and only a cross-sectional study was conducted, failing to conduct a random sampling and intervention study based on demographic information. Therefore, in future studies, we will use a stratified sampling method to conduct a multi-regional, multi-center study in China to obtain more scientific findings and provide a basis for further intervention studies on the career success of female nurses in the future.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we conducted a cross-sectional survey on career success, psychological resilience and craftsmanship of female nurses in central China through a convenience sampling method in an attempt to understand the level of scores and the structural model relationship among the three. Finally, we found that their psychological resilience and career success were at moderate levels, psychological resilience and craftsmanship had positive predictive effects on the level of career success, and craftsmanship played a partly mediating role between psychological resilience and career success. Therefore, proper psychological and craftsmanship-based interventions should be provided to female nurses to enhance their frustration resistance and craftsmanship in the practice setting, and improve their career success by increasing the level of psychological resilience and craftsmanship. At the same time, it was suggested that nursing managers should actively pay attention to changes in the psychological and career success levels of female nurses, help them to plan their career development rationally and cultivate their craftsmanship by organizing career planning training and creating a positive work environment, so as to improve their career success, reduce the turnover rate and enhance nursing quality, achieving the goal of promoting healthy hospital development. these findings may provide effective references for further improvement of nurses' career success in the future.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/**Supplementary Material**, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

HX, XSi, and FZ completed the conception and design of the study. XSo and KZ performed the data collection and collation. HX and XSi wrote the first draft. FZ, HW, and XL performed the manuscript revision. HX completed the statistical analysis. All authors actively participated in the study and reviewed and agreed on the final manuscript.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.915479/full#supplementary-material

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH
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Are Your Employees Hopeful at Work? The Influence of Female Leadership, Gender Diversity and Inclusion Climate on Japanese Employees' Hope

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There are two well-known truths about Japan: one is that Japan is one of the most advanced economies, which takes pride in its highly advanced technology, social infrastructure and system; the other is that Japan ranks lowest at women's social participation among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. Even though the Japanese government has initiated programs to promote female participation and advancement in society, these initiatives have not yet borne remarkable fruit. This study intends to address this issue by investigating the effectiveness of female leadership in Japan, specifically its effect on organizations' gender diversity and inclusion (D&I) climate and employees' task-related positive attitudes. Synthesizing social information processing theory and social identity theory, the study examines 306 Japanese employees working with their female supervisors in medium- and large-sized manufacturing companies. The findings show that female ambidextrous leadership contributes to shape and strengthen a gender D&I climate and ultimately enhances employees' hope on their work. In addition, the positive effect of a gender D&I climate on employees' hope is the same for all employees regardless of gender. The findings clarify the role of female leadership and the underlying psychological mechanism through which female leadership influences employees' positive work attitudes. This first empirical study in Japan contributes to the research on female leadership and D&I management.

Keywords: female leadership, ambidextrous leadership, gender diversity and inclusion climate, hope at work, Japan, employees' gender

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INTRODUCTION

Responding to social awareness and the movement toward diversity, workforce diversity and inclusion (D&I) has become a significant topic in human resource management (Farndale et al., 2015). As part of sustainable development goals, ensuring fairness and embracing diversity in managing employees have become imperative for business. The younger generation is particularly conscious of corporate social responsibilities that include companies' endeavors regarding the fair and equal treatment of employees (Alonso-Almeida and Llach, 2019). Building a corporate

D&I brand identity by establishing and implementing D&I practices is becoming more important in terms of attracting talent (Jonsen et al., 2021). Despite the increased focus on D&I and its importance, research on the topic is in the embryonic stage, thus its effective formulas and practical implementation in companies are not clearly disclosed yet.

Generally, workforce diversity encompasses demographic aspects including gender, age, race, disability, and sexual orientation. Of these, gender diversity is an immediate issue in Japan (Ichikohji, 2016; Namakura, 2017). Since the start of the millennium, there has been practical discussion about embracing a female workforce and the potential economic benefits of female participation in Japan. In 2014, the Abe administration adopted the idea of Womenomics[1] and initiated nationwide programs to support women's participation and advancement in Japan. Such attention and initiatives on gender D&I have drawn some progress. The rate of female workers aged 15–64 has gradually increased from 63.63% in 2012 to 72.77% in 2019 (The World Bank, 2021). However, this quantitative increase in female participation has not come with qualitative growth in women's advancement. Japanese women continue to suffer from disadvantages in rewards and career development in companies. They are paid 32% less than their male counterparts and face obstacles to promotion to senior positions. Women occupy only 12.6% of corporate board positions in listed companies in 2021, which is far below the average of OECD countries (28%) and very low compared with that in other advanced economies, such as Canada (32.9%), France (45.3%), and the United Kingdom (37.8%) (OECD, 2022).

Against this background, this study deals with gender D&I in the business sector of Japan. Specifically, the study focuses on female leadership and investigates its effectiveness on gender D&I climate and employees' hope in Japan. Synthesizing ambidextrous leadership theory (Rosing et al., 2011), social information processing theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), and social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), the study clarifies how female ambidextrous leadership helps shape and strengthen a diversity climate and thus increases employees' hope on their work. Even though studies on female leadership have been gradually increasing, these have been confined to the expected advantages of female leadership (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Stoker et al., 2012), the effectiveness of such leadership (Szymanska and Rubin, 2018), and female leaders in specific sectors and contexts (Girdauskiene and Eyvazzade, 2015). These explorations have endeavored to illuminate why more women deserve assignment to management positions and provide evidence of the benefits that can be anticipated from the promotion of women in organizations. They have added value to female leadership research, but they have not clearly answered the fundamental question of how female leaders should behave. That is, the most effective female leadership qualities and their effects have yet to be determined. To cast light on this issue, the current work adopted the concept of ambidextrous leadership in investigating female leadership qualities and the mechanism expected to underlie it.

This study also focused on employees' hope, a component of psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007), which pertains to a positive psychological status that is important in determining individuals' work attitudes, behaviors and task performance (Avey et al., 2011; Alessandri et al., 2018). Hope toward work, as an element constituting psychological capital, is related to work motivation and thus holds particular importance for the achievement of work goals. Hope among employees increases positive energy at work and directs them to engage in productive and creative job activities, thereby elevating the possibility of success (Rego et al., 2009; Anwar et al., 2019). Hopeful employees are also intrinsically motivated and perseverant, so when they face obstacles and problems in the workplace, they endeavor to take a positive stance and find a different pathway, which in turn helps them overcome risks and generate favorable outcomes.

Social information processing theory posits that an organization's socio-environmental factors influence the shaping of employees' positive psychological states (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). Employees' information processing and appraisal of their work environment determines their levels of psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007; Srivastava and Maurya, 2017), which is also significantly determined by the leadership of supervisors, among various organizational factors (McMurray et al., 2010; Rego et al., 2012). Notwithstanding the insights provided by previous research, however, the effects of leadership from female supervisors on employees' positive psychology have rarely been studied. This paucity is particularly serious in Japan. Some academic attempts have been made to inquire into female leaders in Japan, but these efforts have been limited to discussions of the necessity or urgency of cultivating female entrepreneurs and female leaders in business (Miyake, 2015; Takada, 2009). No study has addressed the leadership characteristics required for women to take on this position, the effectiveness of female leadership, and its potential influence on employees in the business sector in Japan.

Correspondingly, the present work was intended to identify effective female leadership styles and their influence on employees' perceptions regarding the diversity climate of organizations and hope toward work. Considering the flexible, balanced, and open characteristics of female leadership (Girdauskiene and Eyvazzade, 2015; Sueda et al., 2020), this study centered on ambidextrous leadership among women and its effects on employees in Japanese manufacturing companies. The findings can contribute to the development of female leadership studies by shedding light on unanswered questions and doubts related to female leadership's expected effects in Japanese organizations. By providing empirical evidence from the analysis of survey responses, this study offers practical advice and solutions to companies' decision makers who are unconvinced about women's leadership abilities, thereby aiding companies in facilitating the implementation of effective gender D&I management. This research is a timely initiative

[1]The term was first introduced in a Goldman Sachs' research report titled "Womenomics: Buy the Female Economy" (Matsui et al., 1999). The research shows that female participation could contribute significantly to economic growth in Japan. The research was continued, and the recent "Womenomics 5.0" report argues that resolving the gender gap in employment could increase Japan's GDP by 10% and that if the ratio of female to male working hours rose to the average OECD level, Japan could achieve a 15% increase in GDP.

that is expected to add value to current theoretical studies, businesses, and society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender D&I Management in Japan

The concept of D&I is no longer new; in fact, it has been advocated globally. D&I in companies has been discussed by critics of serious and prevalent social problems such as unfair treatment, stereotyping, prejudice, social discrimination, and social stratification due to demographic differences among individuals (Shore et al., 2009). Individuals' demographic features are not chosen, but naturally given; however, these factors play roles, explicitly or implicitly, in terms of determining the boundaries of individuals' social activities, such as job choice, wage range, chance of promotion, and so forth. Such restrictions on free will and choices discourage individuals, hindering their growth and development, which ultimately leads individuals' counterproductive behaviors, increasing problems and costs. Recently, stakeholders involved in companies' business activities are more concerned about companies' D&I practices (Alonso-Almeida and Llach, 2019; Jonsen et al., 2021). They request fair treatment of employees maintaining diversity and consequently, D&I management has become imperative in the business world (Madera et al., 2018; Jonsen et al., 2021). This implies that companies should take a strategic approach in D&I by investing in building a D&I brand image as a part of impressment management to attract their stakeholders.

D&I management in Japanese companies is not progressive compared to the one in other advance economies. This stagnancy in gender D&I management is partly because of Japan's distinctive cultural values and societal–contextual characteristics. In pursuing group harmony and not causing noise or conflict, unanimous decision making based on the so-called Ringi (稟議, the decision-making process in which a proposal or suggestion is reviewed and approved by all participants in a group) system is commonly implemented throughout Japanese society (Genzberger, 1994). Moreover, this tendency to maintain harmony in a group is made possible and is strengthened by the ethnic homogeneity of Japanese society. As of 2020, 97.71% of the population was Japanese, with only 2.19% being non-Japanese, mostly from Asian countries whose cultures have something in common with Japan. Current statistics (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022) indicate that people of an Asian nationality account for 84.12% of the total foreign population in Japan. The socio–contextual homogeneity of Japanese society strengthens its appreciation of the values of harmony and oneness and the need to avoid conflict situations. These values fundamentally collide with the values of individuality and variety that underlie D&I management in which conflict and discord are inevitable, so conflict situations should be encouraged from the outset to be solved not to be avoided. The contradictions cause a considerable gap between the founding values and the reality faced by Japan, thus delaying the comprehension, adoption, and implementation of D&I management in Japanese companies.

In Japan, gender D&I management has been gaining momentum since the start of the millennium due to the internal and external pressures. Japan's population is aging, and the country is faced with a reduced workforce and a limited supply of young talent. This shortage is associated with the high possibility of the diminishing competitiveness of Japanese companies, which will put the Japanese economy at risk. This national demographic imbalance necessitates that companies embrace a more diverse workforce. Also, Japanese global firms are pressured to follow the global standards by assuring gender equality. Led by global Japanese companies, which are under high normative pressure to conform to advanced global standards in managing human resources, awareness of gender D&I management in Japan has increased. Since the enforcement of the act promoting female employment in 2015, large Japanese companies (with over 300 employees) have been obliged to make their gender diversity management plans public. Specifically, companies must report to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare about whether they provide equal opportunities to women and about the extent to which their organizations' working environment is ready to embrace female workers. The act will be extended to medium-sized companies (with over 100 employees) in April 2022 (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2022). Due to this coercive and normative pressures from the world business, government, and the social need for diversity management, Japanese companies have become more engaged in devising and practicing gender D&I management. Thus, women's social participation in Japan has been gradually increasing, showing the quantitative growth in number of female workers.

Social Information Processing Theory and Female Leadership

According to social information processing theory, an individual is an "adaptive" entity (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). Individuals are influenced by the social environment in which they work, and therefore their attitudes and behaviors are determined by their perceptions and interpretations of the nature of the organizational environment. As Salancik and Pfeffer (1978, 226) state, "One can learn most about individual behavior by studying the informational and social environment within which that behavior occurs and to which it adapts." This implies the importance of understanding the social context of organizations to understand and predict employees' attitudes toward works. In particular, affective attitudes toward work are highly related with organizational characteristics (O'Reilly and Roberts, 1975). Of the various organizational factors that revolve around employees, leadership has an especially influential impact (Kim and Shin, 2019; Hu et al., 2020) due to the frequent and proximate interactions between employees and leaders. Leadership behaviors send a signal to employees about the values and direction the organization is pursuing and thus shape employees' attitudes toward work. As a result, certain leadership behaviors can motivate employees and guide them toward achieving the organizational goals.

Female leaders are argued to have specific characteristics (Girdauskiene and Eyvazzade, 2015; Sueda et al., 2020).

Sueda et al. (2020) studied female leaders in four different countries and found they have distinctive characteristics; for example, they have long-term views, set higher and broader vision, embrace the different ideas of others, and exhibit flexible behavior. Similarly, Girdauskiene and Eyvazzade (2015) found that female leaders are flexible and open minded and that these characteristics are very effective when managing people. Related research argues that female leaders are more transformational, communal, and relational than male leaders (Lipman-Blumen, 1992; Eagly and Carli, 2003) and further, researchers discovered that female leadership is as effective as male leadership (Eagly, 2007; Kim and Shin, 2017). Even if there is no specifically named leadership style that describes female leadership, previous studies have consistently argued that female leadership is characterized as being balanced, flexible, and open minded. Building on these findings, the present study focuses on ambidextrous leadership in investigating the effectiveness of female leadership in Japanese organizations.

Female Ambidextrous Leadership, Gender D&I Climate, and Employees' Hope

Rosing et al. (2011) define ambidextrous leadership as "the ability to foster both explorative and exploitative behaviors in followers by increasing or reducing variance in their behaviors and flexibly switching between those behaviors" (p. 957). The explorative behaviors of allowing and providing autonomy to employees and letting them generate and test new ideas are referred to as opening behaviors. The exploitative behaviors of managing and controlling employees by monitoring and evaluating their progress and achievements are referred to as closing behaviors. These two kinds of behaviors exhibited by ambidextrous leaders are argued to be complementary and to have an integrative effect on enhancing employees' task performance by clarifying their role and increasing self-efficacy (Hu et al., 2020). As argued in the literature, ambidextrous leaders allow flexibility and autonomy to employees when they work, such relationship with ambidextrous leaders have employees feel confident and passionate regarding their work (Ma et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2021). Thus, ambidextrous leaders help employees shape positive psychological state at work and such psychological capital of employees results in the increase of work performances (Zacher et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2020).

Given the proven positive effects of ambidextrous leadership on employees' work attitudes, ambidextrous leadership of female leaders is expected to increase employees' hope. As one component of psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007), hope on work is defined as "a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy) and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)" (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 287). Employees' hope on work is achieved when they are clear about the work goals and at the same time when they have room to think about how to achieve these goals and to test alternative work paths (Snyder, 2000). Employees exert hopeful and positive energy at working when they are confident about what should be achieved and also their ideas and thoughts are appreciated. Female leaders' ambidextrous leadership behaviors are open to individual different ideas and allow flexibility at work with clear guidelines about work goals and providing feedback. Such opening and closing behaviors flexibly exhibited by female leaders influence employees to be confident and positive at their work, which contributes to increasing their hope on work. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Female ambidextrous leadership positively influences employees' hope on work.

However, if the gender of leaders is considered, that is, if ambidextrous leadership behaviors are exhibited by female managers, the underlying mechanisms through which female ambidextrous leadership affects employees' work attitude can differ due to the distinctive information gained from such female leadership. According to social information processing theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), individuals recognize salient information, and their perception and interpretation of the information determines their work attitude. Because leader gender is salient for employees in less diverse organizations (Stoker et al., 2012), female ambidextrous leadership (a combination of "female leader" and "ambidextrous leadership") sends a particular signal about the organization's gender D&I climate; that is, how female workers are treated. Along with the existence of female leaders, their implementation of balanced leadership behaviors and flexibility in practicing exploitative and explorative behaviors signal organizations' pro-gender D&I climate. As such, female ambidextrous leadership shapes employees' perception that their organization treats employees fairly and has a favorable environment in which individuals' different needs and values are supported through the implementation of inclusive policies and practices in pro-gender D&I climate. Such a perception improves employees' organizational identity, thus motivating them to devote more energy to their work. This implies that female ambidextrous leadership helps create a gender D&I climate where fair treatment and valuing different ideas are encouraged and different ways of working are accepted in order to achieve employees' work goals. Consequently, the flexible leadership behaviors of female leaders motivate employees to be positive and proactive in their work through their perception of pro-gender D&I climate. This suggests the potential mediating role of a gender D&I climate in the relationship between female ambidextrous leadership and employees' hope on work. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Gender D&I climate mediates female ambidextrous leadership and employees' hope on work.

The salient organizational information and its relative importance are different depending on individual social groups (McKay et al., 2008; Newman et al., 2018). According to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), people tend to seek an environment that is of immediate interest, and if they perceive that environment is supportive, its expected positive effect is relatively greater for them than for those in other social groups.

Generally, minority groups are exposed to discrimination and experience unfair treatment in their organizations; therefore, they are more sensitive to D&I climate, and their perceptions in this regard have a greater effect on their attitudes and performance compared to majority groups (McKay et al., 2008; Newman et al., 2018); Newman et al. (2018) found that diversity climate increases employees' psychological capital, thus elevating organizational commitment and reducing turnover intentions. However, this positive effect of diversity climate is moderated by ethnic identity. In studying sales employees in the US, McKay et al. (2008) found that diversity climate has considerable effects on employees belonging to ethnic minorities. Such climate enhances the employees' perceptions of fair and equal treatment of human resources in organizations, thus reducing discrimination and conflicts among ethnically different groups and enhancing sales performance. Companies' gender D&I climate denotes employees' perceptions of companies' structured and implemented practices and policies regarding the treatment of female employees. The organizational information of gender D&I is more salient for female employees who are generally under-represented and less well treated compared to male employees. Therefore, companies' efforts in supporting and embracing female employees will be more important to female employees and will enhance their organizational identity and have a greater positive effect on their motivational and positive state at work. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. The positive link between gender D&I climate and employees' hope on work depends on employees' gender such that the positive effect of gender D&I climate is greater on female employees than male employees.

This develops the following research model. **Figure 1** illustrates the hypothesized research framework.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, quantitative longitudinal survey data was collected from employees working for manufacturing companies in Japan. Initially, the study targeted large manufacturing companies with over 300 employees; however, the criteria should be revised because it was difficult to find participants working in large manufacturing companies in Japan whose direct supervisor is a woman. Therefore, the bar was lowered and participants whose companies employ more than 100 people joined. The data collection was conducted in collaboration with an established survey agency in Japan. Two surveys were conducted, with a two-week gap between them to determine the causal effect of leadership on employees and also to minimize common method bias (MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012). Before the first survey, a screening test was conducted to select only participants whose direct supervisor is a woman. Direct supervisor was defined as the leader who the participants contact, report to, and consult with on a regular basis in their organization. This definition was given to the participants in advance. In the first survey, the participants were asked about the ambidextrous leadership behaviors of their female direct supervisor and their perception about the organization's gender D&I climate. The second survey asked about the participants' hope on work.

From the two surveys, 311 responses were collected. After removing five survey responses that had the same answers for all questions, 306 responses remained for the analysis. Of the remaining respondents, 156 were men and 150 were women. The average age of the respondents was 43.8 years old. The majority held employee-level positions (183, 59.8%), followed by assistant manager positions (69, 22.55%). Most respondents were highly educated; 206 (67.32%) were graduates of a four-year university program.

MEASURES

Ambidextrous leadership was measured using the 14-item scale developed by Rosing et al. (2011). The scale describes leaders' opening and closing behaviors. Sample questions relating to leaders' opening behaviors are "My direct supervisor gives possibilities for independent thinking and acting" and "My direct supervisor allows different ways of accomplishing a task." Sample questions relating to leaders' closing behaviors are "My direct supervisor establishes routines" and "My direct supervisor monitors and controls goal attainment." Survey respondents were asked to answer each question by thinking about the frequencies of behaviors exhibited by their leaders using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5

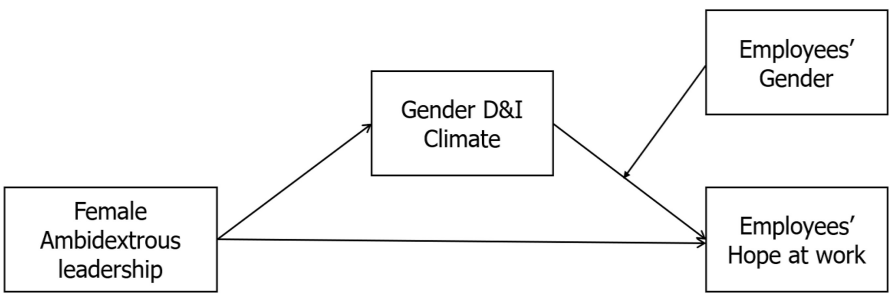

FIGURE 1 | Hypothesized research framework.

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics among variables (N = 306).

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	0.51	0.50	1								
2. Age	2.96	1.07	0.56**	1							
3. Education	3.14	0.63	0.19**	−0.01	1						
4. Position	1.68	1.02	0.34**	0.31**	0.17**	1					
5. Total tenure	5.19	0.84	0.40**	0.75**	−0.06	0.29**	1				
6. Leader tenure	3.32	1.08	−0.06	−0.01	−0.02	0.11	0.10	1			
7. Ambidextrous leadership	2.94	0.85	0.12*	0.04	0.07	0.03	0.03	−0.03	1		
8. Gender D&I climate	3.09	0.84	0.12*	0.11	0.03	0.09	0.07	−0.15**	0.37**	1	
9. Hope on work	3.44	1.03	0.22**	0.32**	0.14*	0.25**	0.29**	−0.00	0.24**	0.29**	1

Gender: male = 1, female = 0; Tenure: unit = ln(month).
Total tenure: the total period of working to date; Leader tenure: the period of time working with the current leader.
$^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$.

(almost always). The Cronbach's alpha for the ambidextrous leadership is 0.93.

Gender D&I climate was measured using questions developed to represent the concept due to the unavailability from prior studies and the concept's contextual dependency. Referring to prior research on diversity climate (Pugh et al., 2008; Newman et al., 2018) and interviews with Japanese employees, questions relating to fair and equal treatment of the genders and female career support and advancement in organizations were developed. The five questions are "My company has quite a number of female managers," "My company has diversity practices to support female employees," "My company motivates female employees to work better," "My company treats employees fairly regardless of gender," and "My company is a good place for women to work." This concept was rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.85, showing the internal consistency of the questions used in the study.

Hope on work was measured using the 6-item scale developed by Luthans et al. (2007). This scale was adapted from the questions developed by Snyder et al. (1996). The questions were intended to measure how hopeful respondents feel about achieving their work goals by developing flexible ideas. Sample questions are "At the present time, I am energetically pursuing my work goals" and "If I should find myself in a jam at work, I could think of many ways to get out of it." The items were rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this concept is 0.92.

Control variables were added to the analysis; respondents' demographic variables were included in the models. Gender was dummy coded as 1 for the male participants and as 0 for the female participants. Age was a categorical variable coded from 1 to 5 (1 for the 20s to 5 for the 60s), and education was coded as 1 to 5 (1 for high school graduates, 2 for graduates of a two-year college program, 3 for graduates of a four-year university program, 4 for graduates of a master program, and 5 for graduates of a doctoral program). Position was coded as 1 to 5, with a high number indicating a high position. Organizational tenure was measured as the total work period expressed in months. Leader tenure was measured as the period of time working with the current female leader expressed in months.

RESULTS

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to ensure distinctiveness among the variables, and the model fit of a three-factor model was compared with that of nested models. The goodness of fit indices of the three-factor model confirmed that it fits the model and that the three variables are distinctive [comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.891, tuker-lewis index (TLI) = 0.880, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.066, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.061]. **Table 1** presents the mean values, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables. Significant correlations were found among the main independent, dependent, and mediating variables. Female ambidextrous leadership is significantly correlated with gender D&I climate (r = 0.37, $p < 0.01$) and employees' hope on work (r = 0.24, $p < 0.05$). Gender D&I climate is also significantly associated with hope on work (r = 0.29, $p < 0.01$).

Table 2 shows the results of the hierarchical regression analysis of the variables. Model 1 included only the demographic variables and the finding shows that the included six demographic variables explain 14.8% of total variance of hope on work (R-squared = 0.148, F value = 8.663**). Specifically, it shows that employees' age is related to hope on work (β = 0.195, $p < 0.05$). In addition, education and position have significant effects on employees' hope on work (β = 0.197, $p < 0.05$; β = 0.146, $p < 0.05$, respectively).

Female ambidextrous leadership was incorporated into Model 2, and the finding showed that it has a significant positive effect on employees' hope (β = 0.266, $p < 0.01$), explaining an additional 4.7% of the total variance in hope toward work [ΔR-squared (Model 2-Model 1) = 0.047]. The significant change in the model fit confirmed the significance of the variable on the dependent variable [change in ΔF (degree of freedom) = 17.530 (1, 298), p = 0.000]. This result supports Hypothesis 1. To determine the mediating effect of gender D&I climate, female ambidextrous leadership was regressed on gender D&I climate in Model 3. The results show that female ambidextrous leadership influences gender D&I climate positively (β = 0.358, $p < 0.01$). Model 4 was tested by adding

TABLE 2 | Regression analysis among the variables, female ambidextrous leadership, gender D&I climate, and hope on work (N = 306).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	Hope on work	Hope on work	Gender D&I Climate	Hope on work	Hope on work
Constant	1.396**	1.458**	0.296	1.388**	1.468**
Gender	–0.020	–0.073	0.033	–0.081	–0.103
Age	0.195*	0.200*	0.036	0.192*	0.198*
Education	0.197*	0.178*	–0.018	0.183*	0.181*
Position	0.146*	0.148*	0.059	0.134*	0.126*
Total tenure	0.133	0.130	0.014	0.127	0.106
Leader tenure	–0.024	–0.018	–0.116**	0.009	0.016
Ambidextrous Leadership		0.266**	0.358**	0.182**	0.181**
Gender D&I Climate				0.234**	0.126
GenderXGender D&I Climate					0.235
R-squared	0.148	0.195	0.171	0.226	0.235
Adjusted R-squared	0.131	0.177	0.152	0.205	0.211
ΔR-squared	–	0.047**	–	0.031**	0.009
F-Value	8.663**	10.340**	8.812**	10.830**	10.080**

Gender: male = 1, female = 0, Tenure: unit = ln(month).
Total tenure: the total period of working by now, Leader tenure: the period of working with the current leader.
***$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.*

D&I climate to Model 2, and the results show that the significant positive effect of female ambidextrous leadership on employees' hope on work in Model 2 decreased considerably in Model 4 (from β = 0.266, $p < 0.01$ in Model 2 to β = 0.182, $p < 0.01$ in Model 4), which suggests the potential of the mediating role of gender D&I climate. Sobel (1982)'s test results indicate that the mediating effect of gender D&I climate is significant ($Z = 3.388$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, the bootstrapping technique suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2004) was employed to reconfirm the significance of the mediation effect. The test results indicate that the mediation effect of gender D&I climate on the link between female ambidextrous leadership and employees' hope on work is significantly valid (β = 0.102, $p < 0.01$; bootstrap normal-based 95% confidence interval (CI) [0.041, 0.176]). Therefore, hypothesis 2 that assumed the mediating role of gender D&I climate between female ambidextrous leadership and employees' hope on work is supported. Model 5 added the interaction term of gender and gender D&I climate to test the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between gender D&I climate and hope on work. Hypothesis 3 assumed that gender D&I climate is more critical for female employees than male employees; therefore, the positive effect of gender D&I climate on employees' hope would be more considerable among female employees than among their male equivalents. However, Model 5 uncovered a non-significant moderating effect of gender (β = 0.235, n.s.), and the interaction term (Gender X Gender D&I climate) explains only 0.9% of the total variance in the dependent variable [i.e., hope on work; (ΔR-squared (Model 5-Model 4) = 0.009]. The non-significance of the value change in model fits also indicated that the moderating term does not determine the dependent variable [change in ΔF (degree of freedom) = 3.426 (1, 296), $p = 0.065$]. This finding means that no support was derived for Hypothesis 3.

DISCUSSION

The study investigates Japanese employees who work with female supervisors and examines the relationships among the ambidextrous leadership of female supervisors, gender D&I climate, and employees' hope on work. Female leadership studies have focused only on examining the perceptions and appraisals of female leadership and the potential organizational benefits of the increases in female leaders (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Stoker et al., 2012; Girdauskiene and Eyvazzade, 2015; Szymanska and Rubin, 2018). However, the prior studies ignored the specific and qualitative aspects of female leadership, such as its characteristics and the underlying mechanism through which employees are influenced. Addressing this gap, this study focuses on the ambidextrous leadership style of female leaders and its effect on shaping organization's gender D&I climate and ultimately its influence on employees' hope on work. This first empirical findings contribute to enhance understanding of the effectiveness of female leadership style vis-à-vis employees' perception of organizational environment and their psychological state regarding their work in Japan.

An interesting and unexpected finding should be addressed. The study assumed that the effect of pro-gender D&I climate on hope would be greater among female employees than male employees (Hypothesis 3). Contrastingly, the results showed a non-significant effect of gender on the relationship between gender D&I climate and employee hope—a phenomenon that contradicts the view advocated in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; McKay et al., 2008). A possible explanation for this result lies in the diversity of individual social identity, which thus means that the extent to which a certain social identity is shaped depends on individuals (Newman et al., 2018). In the same vein, the recognition of female identity by women varies

per person. Therefore, the extent to which gender D&I climate influences on female employees is contingent on their level of female identity. That is, females who have strong female identity are more remarkably influenced by gender D&I climate than those with low female identity. Such individual differences in female identity among female employees might draw such result.

Another reason for the above-mentioned result is that gender D&I climate is an immediate and relevant issue not only to female employees but also to their male counterparts. Pro-gender D&I climate signifies an organization's choice to treat employees fairly by fostering an open and flexible organizational climate, in which differences in ideas and needs among employees are allowed and accepted. Such a climate is therefore meaningful to all employees; that is, it exerts the same effects, with no considerable differences, whether an employee is female or male.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The significance of this research should be addressed. First, this study contributes to advancing the prior female leadership studies (Girdauskiene and Eyvazzade, 2015; Miyake, 2015; Szymanska and Rubin, 2018; Takada, 2009). In particular, this is the first attempt that disclosed the effectiveness of female ambidextrous leadership in Japan. The study highlights that female ambidextrous leadership sends a positive signal about companies' gender D&I management, helps shape the perception of pro-gender C&I climate among employees, and consequently, increases employees' hopeful and positive energy regarding their works. This finding lends a support of ambidextrous leadership theory (Rosing et al., 2011) and social information processing theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). Considering the paucity in empirical evidence of female leadership effectiveness and its underlying process, particularly in Japan, the findings of showing the positive and procedural effect of female leadership on employees' hope on work have a particular academic value, contributing to the development of female leadership studies.

In addition, the study contributes to the understanding D&I management in the HRM studies (McKay et al., 2008; Newman et al., 2018). As pointed by Farndale et al. (2015), the diversity concept and relevant diversity issue vary across counties. The broad-defined concept of diversity prevalent in the West is not applicable in Japan because of its specific socio-contextual characteristic. Therefore, this study focused on one aspect of diversity, gender D&I that is the most relevant to the Japanese context. Referring to prior studies (Pugh et al., 2008; Newman et al., 2018) and interviewees' responses regarding their perceptions on companies' gender D&I climate, the study developed the five-item scale measuring gender D&I climate. This context-contingent approach in D&I management can capture and explain better the effect of diversity management. Also, the context-contingent approach with a focus on gender D&I can be applied to other Eastern contexts such as South Korea in which gender D&I is the most relevant and immediate diversity aspect as similar as Japan. Taking the context-contingency view, this study broadens the perspective understanding D&I management, contributing to developing the current D&I management studies.

Related to this, given that human resources are a valuable source of organizational growth and sustainability, the finding regarding the positive effect of gender D&I climate on employees' hope has a significant implication. Organizations' initiatives in terms of gender D&I and shaping gender D&I climate indicate they are making an effort to treat their employees fairly and equally. Such efforts are favored by employees; thus, employees show optimistic and hopeful attitudes at their work. This psychological process implies that organizations' stance about gender D&I management signaled by female ambidextrous leadership shapes pro-gender D&I climate, which thus is linked to the increased work motivation of employees. More importantly, the lack of moderation from gender on the effect of gender D&I climate on employees' hope reflects that such a positive effect of pro-gender D&I climate on shaping employees' positive work attitudes is not confined to a particular gender. In other words, favorable perceptions about D&I practices and management in Japanese companies can benefit and increase all employees' hope, regardless of gender. The finding further signifies that Japanese employees are conscious of and favor D&I management. If they believe the climate in their organizations to be gender inclusive, they are more motivated and engaged in their work. Therefore, companies should actively implement gender D&I management to shape a climate that favors gender D&I. Such efforts not only increase the psychological capital of employees but also enhance their productivity and financially benefit companies (Ali, 2016). In clarifying the direct influence of gender D&I climate on employees' hope, the study contributes to the development of prior diversity management studies in Japan (Miyake, 2015; Takada, 2009).

Expected practical implications are also worth noting. First, the findings may motivate Japanese companies to embrace and cultivate female leaders and welcome the advantages of implementing gender D&I management. Japan has a strongly stereotyped view of gender roles and a firm belief in role congruity, with leadership seen as equivalent to direction by males (Eagly and Karau, 2002). This stereotype and the reluctance to initiate changes have delayed the implementation of gender D&I management in Japanese companies. This delay, in turn, has given rise to explicit and implicit disadvantages for women, discouraging female talents from aspiring for career advancement. The upshot of all these is the loss of company competitiveness. The results of this study can serve as reference for Japanese companies that want to eliminate the long-standing social misunderstanding of gender roles and concerns about female advancement. The finding on the positive effects of female leadership on employees' work motivation and energy can convince Japanese companies that it is advisable to embrace gender diversity and that they can expect potential benefits from this initiative. The acceptance of gender diversity shapes institutional norms regarding gender D&I management in Japan. As the institutional normalization of gender diversity facilitates its direct and indirect financial benefits by assuring stakeholders of the advantages of such management (Zhang, 2020), industry- and society-wide social acceptance is expected to bear fruit for Japanese companies who engage in gender D&I actively.

The findings can also be useful in the leadership development of Japanese companies. The results indicated that the ambidextrous leadership skills of female leaders enable them to effectively increase perceptions regarding on pro-gender D&I climate and enhance employees' hope on work. This finding can be utilized to companies to identify, educate, and train female employees for leadership positions. Focusing on the ambidextrous nature of leadership, companies can find female employees who are capable of exhibiting such leadership behaviors or they can foster such leadership skills of potential leaders by designing and providing leadership training programs. Such efforts will benefit companies to achieve diversity management effectively and thus draw successful and sustainable outcomes from it.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the aforementioned implications, the study has some limitations. First, the study only focused on the ambidextrous behaviors associated with female leadership. Even if the findings indicate that female leaders exhibit such ambidextrous leadership behaviors and that such leadership influences employees positively, the study did not consider other female leadership styles. Prior studies revealed that female leaders exert transformational behaviors more than male leaders and also, such female transformational leadership is as effective as male leadership (Eagly et al., 2003; Stempel et al., 2015; Kim and Shin, 2017). Therefore, future studies should investigate other female leadership styles together with ambidextrous female leadership. By comparing and contrasting different female leadership styles, future studies can clarify the exact attributes of female leadership and the effects on employees.

Second, this study investigated only employees' hope on work as a consequence of female leadership. However, other work-related concepts, such as work commitment, psychological empowerment, organizational citizenship behavior, and innovative behavior, may be associated with female ambidextrous leadership. Considering the potential relationship between female ambidextrous leadership and other positive attitudinal and behavioral concepts, future studies should examine other potential target variables that female ambidextrous leadership may influence. Adding these variables and determining their relationship with female ambidextrous leadership will enhance the understanding of this leadership style and its potential and practical impact on employees.

Related to this, the research model may be inapplicable to other research contexts. The study showed that direct ambidextrous leadership by females denotes organizational diversity management and shapes employees' perception of pro-gender D&I climate in organizations. This indicates that female leaders serve as change agents of organizations, not merely cogs in a machine (Szymanska and Rubin, 2018). However, depending on the social cognition of gender in organizations and general viewpoints regarding female leadership, this research model may or may not be supported. Therefore, to generalize the research model, it necessitates investigating female leaders' roles, along with general perceptions and evaluations of female leadership in the future studies.

Finally, this study did not control for organizational factors. Given that the attitudes of individuals about their organizations and jobs are influenced by socio-environmental factors, researchers should explore other social and environmental determinants, such as the quality of the relationship between employees and their female supervisors, organizational structure, organizational support, and work design, as these may influence how employees view their organizations and shape their attitudes toward work. Future studies should incorporate and regulate the potential effects of such factors to validate and generalize the research model put forward in the current work.

CONCLUSION

Japan, the homogenous and aging society is facing the shortage in their workforce, which diminishes their business competitiveness. One effective solution that Japanese companies can choose may be to engage in and implement gender D&I management effectively. Focusing on the significant meaning of gender D&I in Japan, this study addresses this issue. Building on social informational processing theory and social identity theory, the study examined female ambidextrous leadership's effect on employees' hope on work and its underlying mechanism. Findings showed that female ambidextrous leadership strengthens employees' perception on pro-gender D&I climate of their organizations. This improved perception of pro-gender D&I climate contributes to increase employees' positive and hopeful energy at work. In addition, the positive effect of pro-gender D&I climate on employees' hope is the same for all employees regardless of gender. The findings highlight the effective female leadership style and its positive effect on shaping employees' positive work attitude. Therefore, the study contributes to the development of female leadership and diversity management studies in Japan. In addition, the study provides empirical evidence of the positive effects of female leadership on employees and highlights the potential benefits of gender D&I by advancing and cultivating female leaders in Japanese companies.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton in psychobiography: Sense of coherence and faith across her lifetime

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This article focuses on the coping skills of one selected, extraordinary woman, Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton (1757–1854) during the founding of the United States of America. This work contributes to theory on two different levels. First, it contributes to psychobiographical research on women in diverse spheres of society, thereby strengthening the aspect of gender and coping strategies in terms of psychobiographical perspectives. Second, it contributes to theory-building in psychobiographical research anchored in positive psychology, promoting the idea that a multiplicity (crystallisation) of theories should be used to explore and analyse the lifespan of extraordinary individuals. The psychobiography responds to the question how Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton coped with life's challenges and tragedies through the lenses of sense of coherence and faith development theory. The article uses a psychobiographical case study design within the research paradigm of modern hermeneutics. First- and third-person data on the subject were collected and evaluated through thematic analysis, including articles, documentation, letters, film material, and political scripts. Customary ethical standards for psychobiographical research were followed, thereby ensuring an ethical, respectful, empathetic and accountable research approach. The article presents findings on the coping skills, sense of coherence, and faith development in the life of Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton which strongly influenced her resilience and support for others during her long and extraordinary life. Conclusions are drawn with regard to the way women cope in different sociocultural, sociopolitical and socio-economic spheres using historical and contemporary retrospectives. Recommendations are provided for future psychobiographical research on women in diverse contexts and in psychobiographical, gendered practice.

KEYWORDS

coping, sense of coherence, faith development theory (FDT), positive psychology (PP), women in psychobiography, USA women leaders

Look around,
look around,
how happy we are
to be alive right now.
Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton

Introduction

Previous research, both historical and contemporary, has shown that in comparison to men, women leaders are seldom recognised for their strong contributions to leadership, organisational success, social change and welfare, and societal flourishing (Milazzo and Goldstein, 2019; Mayer, 2022; Women U. N., 2022). Often, they have remained unacknowledged and "invisible" in supporting their husbands' careers and affecting different spheres of society (Christensen, 2019). However, recent research shows that these women were often supporters of their husbands, typists of their written accounts, defenders of their work, assistants, muses and managers who contributed to the work of their husbands in creative and intellectual ways, although often hidden and suppressed (Christensen, 2019). Simonton (1996) has pointed out that presidents' wives (First Ladies) often gain distinction through their relationships with their husbands while staying in traditional gender roles. In history and until recently, there has been limited research on the wives of presidents and other famous men (Whitton, 1948; Barzman, 1970; Caroli, 1987; Boller, 1988). However, being in the role of the daughter or wife of a famous man comes with challenges (Wade, 2021). Oakley (2021) emphasises that women are often reduced to gendered roles and stereotypes and live accordingly. In her research, Oakley (2021) analyses the lives of four wives of famous British men in the middle and upper classes during the 21st century and highlights how marriage determines the economic position, psychology, physical and mental health of men and women in different ways. Through marriage, wifehood becomes a political and institutionalised status in which women are often "forgotten" – a term that includes aspects of being ignored, devalued, marginalised and distorted (Oakley, 2021, p. 3).

Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton (ESH; 1757–1854), nicknamed Eliza or Betsey, was an extraordinary woman who first became famous through marriage to one of the founding fathers of the United States of America (US), Alexander Hamilton (Miller, 1959; Knott, 2002; Chernow, 2004; Miranda, 2015). She married Hamilton when she was 23, and was a great supporter of his political work during and beyond his lifetime. She also supported his political career, negotiated for him with his publishers, raised their eight children, and paid off his debts after his death. Furthermore, she helped to raise funds for the Washington monument, and co-founded the first private orphanage in New York City (Kenyes, 1931; New Netherland Institute, 2020). She was often referred to in her role as Hamilton's wife (Randall, 2003; Chernow, 2004), although several brief biographies exist on her life as a philanthropist and social activist (Presnell, 2004; History of American Women, 2022). Nevertheless, Presnell (2004) observes that most of the information on her needs to be extracted from biographies written about her husband (McDonald, 1979; Hendrickson, 1981; Emery, 1982) and these often only mention her briefly (Miller, 1959; Knott, 2002).

The present psychobiographical account focuses on the life of ESH, who managed to cope with many challenges and tragedies in her life – such as the early death of her first-born son and her husband – and to remain "incredibly strong of spirit" (Esme, 2022).

In this article, the theoretical foundation used to analyse the coping skills of ESH during her lifetime, is based on two theoretical approaches which are part of the positive psychology theoretical paradigm: the salutogenetic theory, and in particular the sense of coherence (SOC) of Antonovsky (1979), and Fowler's faith development theory (FDT) of 1981 and 1984. Both of the theories have been previously applied to psychobiography. Salutogenesis and the exploration of SOC were used in the psychobiography of Steve Jobs (Moore, 2014) and of Viktor von Weizsäcker (Mayer and Bahrs, 2021). The FDT has been used in psychobiographies such as those of Mother Theresa (Stroud, 2004), Beyers Naude (Burnell, 2013; Fouché et al., 2016), Anne Hutchinson, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Blaise Pascal and Malcom X (Fowler and Lovin, 1979), John Wesley (Fowler, 2001), Paulo Coelho (Mayer, 2017), Barach Spinoza (Mayer and Fouché, 2021) and Angela Merkel (Mayer, 2021a).

This study contributes to the psychobiographical literature on women by making the life and coping skills of one selected woman more "visible" through salutogenesis and SOC, as well as the development of faith in coping with all of her challenges. Coping is thereby viewed as an interactional process between the individual person researched and her environment (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). It has been defined as the effort to exert by individuals to deal with demands from the environment to reduce stress and contribute to individual health and well-being (Braun-Lewensohn and Mayer, 2020). Coping includes also the cognitive process to deal with stress and challenges (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Salutogenesis and faith can be seen as resources to cope with life's challenges, as shown in previous psychobiographical and mixed-method studies (Mayer, 2017; Mayer and Fouché, 2021; Mayer et al., 2021a).

This psychobiography further contributes to positive psychology accounts in psychobiography by using two theories which are anchored in a positive psychology framework (Mayer, 2017, 2021a). The main research question which this psychobiography responds to is: *"How did Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton cope with life's challenges and tragedies through the lenses of sense of coherence and faith development theory?"* The question "how" ESH coped is here of utmost importance to explore the coping mechanisms and skills, as shown in previous psychobiographical research (Mayer et al., 2021b).

Salutogenesis and sense of coherence

The question of what keeps people healthy has been asked continuously since its initial implementation by Antonovsky in 1979. The medical sociologist developed and pioneered the concept of salutogenesis (the development of health) which is anchored in its main concept, the SOC (Antonovsky, 1987).

The SOC is a basic life orientation which is connected to an individual's sociocultural experiences across the lifespan. It consists of three sub-components, namely comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness (Lindström, 2006; Mittelmark and Bauer, 2017). Experiences of consistency, regularity and repetition lead to a high SOC, while experiences that are viewed as uncontrollable, uncertain and unpredictable might lead to a low SOC (Morrison and Clift, 2006). The sub-components are defined as the sense of comprehensibility (referring to how one understands the world), the sense of manageability (how one copes with challenges) and the sense of meaningfulness (how one is motivated and how one defines one's meaning in life; Antonovsky, 1979, 1987; Mayer, 2011).

Individuals who have a strong SOC normally perceive their environment as predictable, consistent and stimulating (Mayer, 2011) and are found to be encouraging, engaging and good listeners (Mitonga-Monga and Mayer, 2020). They further believe that they are able to cope with challenging situations by activating their own resources. Additionally, they are able to see meaning in their lives and can manage their own emotions and motivations (Strümpfer, 1995) without feeling threatened or anxious when experiencing stressful events or situations (Braun-Lewensohn and Mayer, 2020).

According to Antonovsky (1987), women from lower societal backgrounds are at greatest risk of having a low SOC. Recent research has found that SOC is quite comparable across gender (Grevenstein and Bluemke, 2022). Gender and class differences, however, may play an important role in influencing SOC in its development (Lindström and Eriksson, 2005). For women especially, SOC seems to be reduced when women lack social support (Volanen, 2011). Although SOC is mainly developed in childhood, it continues to develop across the lifespan (Mayer, 2011) and it supports individuals in remaining healthy and in coping with complex or challenging situations.

Faith development

The FDT was originally developed by James Fowler (Coyle, 2011) who was an American theologian and a Professor in Theology and Human development in the US. Fowler wanted to increase the comprehensibility of human values, meaning in life, and also belief in God (Fowler and Dell, 2004). Faith, according to Fowler (1986), is about creating meaning in life which might be religion-based, but does not necessarily have to include a religious or Christian belief system. It affects the orientation in life, changes over time (Fowler, 1984), and improves the understanding of extraordinary individuals (Runyan, 2006). According to the theory, individuals develop in three parts: the pre-stage during childhood, the lower stages (1–3) during childhood to adulthood, and the higher stages (4–6) in adulthood, although they might not be ultimately attained (Ashdown and Gibbons, 2012). The stages have been extensively described in the psychobiographies mentioned above and are therefore only summarised here (Fowler, 1981, 1984). Further, it can be highlighted that in these previous psychobiographies the assumptions of critical aspects of the theory have been discussed (e.g., Streib, 2003; Coyle, 2011; Ashdown and Gibbons, 2012, Mayer, 2017) which include, for example the critique of Coyle (2011) regarding Fowler's definition of faith being broad and unspecific and aims to change from the idea of faith as being connected to God, towardsdefining faith as faith as a dimension of human meaning-making and understanding. Additional critical aspects are that Fowler's theory is strongly influenced by his socio-cultural, gender and religious background (Baxter, 2006), while he also uses a sample that is mainly recruited in North America (Fowler, 1981). Slee (2004, 2021) has also recently pointed out that faith needs a gendered perspective – which is not addressed in Fowler's theory. In summary, critical voices addressed shortcomings in the theory with regard to theoretical, structural methodological foundations (e.g., Coyle, 2011). The criticisms regarding Fowler's theory were consciously taken into consideration in this study.

According to Fowler (1981, 1984) as for example cited in Mayer (2017), Stage 0 (Primal faith)[1] occurs between ages of 1–3 years, and develops based on trust, loyalty and meaningful commitments with primary caregivers. Stage 1 (intuitive-projective stage) involves increasing meaning in emotional and perceptual ordering of experiences and faith, being based on symbols and images of visible power. Stage 2 (mythic-literal stage) provides a faith concept based on stories of self and other, where God is personalised and where goodness is rewarded and badness is punished. Here, the "11-year-old atheist" concept (Fowler, 1981) often brings disbelief in God and the idea of the individual in the context of the collective gains in importance. Increasing self-awareness and meaning are created in Stage 3 (synthetic-conventional stage) through relationship and role development, and the importance of faith and social perspectives. God is represented with personal qualities of

1 It needs to be taken into account that different theoretical approaches to FDT deal with stages, life phases and age ascriptions in different and varying ways. Discrepancies can be recognised in the literature (e.g., compare Fowler (1984; Fowler and Dell, 2004; Coyle, 2011), as acknowledged in Fowler et al. (2004).

acceptance and nurturing. Many individuals remain at Stage 3, while others move toward Stage 4 (individuative-reflexive stage, between 20 and 40 years) in which the individual authority is experienced within the self and personal values and belief are developed and reflected. At this stage, social relationships are evaluated, coherence of faith is built and boundaries are clarified. During Stage 5 (paradoxical-conjunctive stage), which hardly ever occurs before the age of 30, the individual develops multiple perspectives and acceptance of paradoxes. Faith is integrated with life as a deep belief. Own sociocultural boundaries are overcome and a new relationship with God is developed while meanings beyond one's own traditions increase. A humble awareness is developed which then leads to the final stage, Stage 6 (universalising faith), in which individuals are viewed as whole individuals, independent of social class, gender, race, religion, nationality, age and political ideology. Here, tensions are embraced and transformed. An overall love for each and every person is experienced, and boundaries are overcome.

Generally, individuals can transition stages which are interconnected and which are viewed as flexible (Ashdown and Gibbons, 2012; Coyle, 2011; Mayer, 2017; Jones, 2022). Besides the stages, Fowler (1984, 1987) emphasises the importance of vocation in life which plays an important role in building the relationship with God. Vocation refers to the development of the personal identity and its vocation to find answers to who one is (in young adulthood), the aim to respond to questioning life's vocation on deeper levels while waiting for God's calling (middle adulthood), and finally to the setting of new priorities while dealing with one's personal calling (older adulthood). The awareness of life's vocation and spiritual transcendence refers to the relationship with God through caring for the environment (1), through God's governance, justice, lawfulness and relationship-building (2), and finally, through God's liberation from socio-economic and political ideologies and boundaries, bringing the fulfilment of feeling blessed by God.

Research methodology

Research design

The research methodology used in this article is qualitative in nature and defined as a psychobiography which is a biographical account which deals with the life of an extraordinary individual based on the use of a selected psychological theory (Ponterotto, 2017a; Mayer and Maree, 2018). According to Ponterotto (2017b), the life of a person can be uncovered and reconstructed by implementing the theory for analysing the life of the subject. The research paradigm is based on a hermeneutical-interpretative understanding (Creswell, 2013). The theories applied in this single-case research design (Yin, 2018) are salutogenesis and FDT.

The sample

The sampling process in psychobiographies is anchored in the choice of a psychobiographical subject (Du Plessis, 2017). This study uses a non-probability, purposeful sampling approach, relying on the researcher's judgement to determine the desired theory-based aspects of the life of the sample and ensuring that the analysis is rich and in-depth (De Vos et al., 2005).

ESH was selected for study by means of purposeful sampling because, as an extraordinary woman of the 18th and 19th centuries, she was well established, not only through her husband's political career, but also through her own legacy. In her life she had to cope with various losses and tragic setbacks; however, she coped with them and conducted an impactful, long life in and for US society.

The researcher chose this subject based on her interest in women and her coping, sense of coherence and failth development in different socio-cultural, political and historical contexts. Thereby, her main focus of interest is the question how women cope in society and how they stay healthy and well while experiencing major life challenges. ESH seemed to be a very interesting person to be studied with regard to her life history and her ways to overcome challenges. The author is aware of the criticisms of both theoretical approaches which are used in this study and, e.g., that FDT was criticised as socio-culturally biassed and gendered. However, the theories used still seemed to be valuable to be used with regard to the subject since a lengthy literature analysis and interpretation showed that ESH's life, faith development (FD) and SOC could be interpreted with regard to the stages and models, considering the critical aspects of it consciously.

Data collection and analysis

Mainly secondary sources were used to explore and understand ESH's life, her coping skills, SOC and faith in more depth (Du Plessis, 2017). The researcher used secondary sources, articles and biographies, especially of ESH's husband, Alexander Hamilton (Allport, 1961; Fouché and Van Niekerk, 2005; Noack, 2021). As described, only publicly available data and information was used (e.g., Kenyes, 1931; Miller, 1959; Knott, 2002; Chernow, 2004; Miranda, 2015; New Netherland Institute, 2020). The study displays a low risk of ethical considerations (Noack, 2021).

The researcher's interested in the subject started in 2016 with the release of the musical "Hamilton." Over the years, she spend time reviewing literature on the subject chosen and the US-American context and then interpreting literature on ESH in the context of SOC and FDT. The researcher has worked on SOC since 2006 and on FDT since 2014 and could therefore read

and interpret the literature on the life of ESH from a SOC and FDT perspective.

Mainly secondary literature – biographies, interviews, and articles (e.g., Presnell, 2004; History of American Women, 2022) – not only on ESH, but also on her husband (e.g., McDonald, 1979; Hendrickson, 1981; Emery, 1982) – was used due to the lack of primary literature, such as letters or autobiographies.

Data evidence was extracted, categorised, and analysed using SOC and faith as strategies to identify salience (Demorest, 2005; Yin, 2018). For the data analysis, thematic analysis was used to ensure hermeneutic interpretation and reconstruction of the life (Dilthey, 2002). The researcher familiarised herself with the data and theories. By doing so, different themes and categories emerged and the categories of the theories used were applied to and matched with the findings regarding the life of the subject. Surely, the interpretation is informed by the socio-historical context of the subject interpreted (Ponterotto, 2014; Fouché et al., 2018), however, the socio-historical context is not in the centre of this psychobiographical interpretation.

Methodological imitations with regard to the data analysis and interpretations include the lack of primary data and that often her life has been described through the lens of her husband's life (e.g., McDonald, 1979; Hendrickson, 1981; Emery, 1982).

Quality criteria and ethical considerations

Ethical guidelines for psychobiographies were followed throughout the study (Ponterotto and Reynolds, 2019). To ensure ethical standards were maintained, only data from freely accesible public domains was used (Ponterotto et al., 2017). Founded on ethical considerations, the study is intended to contribute to learning about the life of extraordinary individuals and their deeper understandings (Ponterotto and Reynolds, 2019). ESH is explored in this study in the most ethical, empathetic, accountable and respectful way (Schultz, 2005; Ponterotto, 2015). This ethically founded approach aims to contribute to expanding the public knowledge of ESH and her ability to cope with life's challenges, based on her SOC and her faith. As described by Wegner (2020), potential harm to the researched individual is therefore avoided.

The study is built on trustworthiness to enhance consistency and reliability (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation of data was applied to enhance trustworthiness and rigour, as previously done in psychobiographies (see Du Plessis, 2017; Mayer, 2021b). The researcher engaged with the biographical data and the life history of the subject and created a conscious awareness of the subject, as well as of the relationship of the subject and the researcher (Ponterotto and Moncayo, 2018). The subject's life and contexts were investigated and facilitated through the analysis and interpretation of the subject's unique life and living contexts (Ponterotto, 2014). Finally, the researcher considered the connection of the methodological competence and ethical considerations in psychobiography (Ponterotto and Reynolds, 2019). The eight best practices of Ponterotto (2014) were taken into consideration, e.g., using thick descriptions, including an understanding of the socio-cultural and historic context, conducting an accurate and balanced assessment, and keeping the researcher's bias and horizon and understanding into consideration, as well as considering various ways of interpretation and considering alternative explanations during interpretations.

Although this study provides a deep insight into selected particular aspects of ESH's life, it also has limitations. The research is descriptive and idiographic, using the unit of analysis as being a single case study (Fouché and van Niekerk, 2010) which is analysed holistically (Carlson, 1988), and the researcher used English and German literature from the public domain for analysis. Finally, the interpretations of the researcher might have led to a subjective bias (Yin, 2018) which could be informed by the researcher's nationality, her cultural background, her gender and her professional background. The researcher is female, of German origin, living in South Africa and strongly interested in women leaders and the roles of women in leadership in different cultural contexts. The potential bias has been addressed through self-reflection and inter-subjective validations (Yin, 2018) in discussions with other psychobiographical and qualitative researchers.

Findings and discussion

In the following section, the psychobiographical findings are presented with regard to the integration of the SOC and development of faith in ESH's lifetime (9 August 1757 to 9 November 1854). She was born in Albany in the US state of New York, the daughter of Philip Schuyler and Catherine Van Rensselaer Schuyler (Presnell, 2004; Roberts, 2010). Both of her

TABLE 1 Sense of coherence (SOC) in ESH's life perspective.

SOC	In life development perspective
Comprehensibility	Predominant in childhood and teenage years: –Understanding the world in its socio-economic and political complexity
Manageability	Predominant during her marriage: –Managing marriage, life, children –Managing husband's career and political moves
Meaningfulness	Throughout her life, but predominant after her marriage: –Through faith –By establishing her husband's legacy –By restoring her husband's reputation and life –Through children and social contacts –Through building an orphanage and a school across social class barriers

TABLE 2 Faith development (FD) in ESH's life.

Lifespan	FD stages of ESH						
	Stage 0	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5	Stage 6
Childhood	x	x	x				
Teenage years			x	x			
Her twenties				x			
Her thirties				x	x		
Her forties				x	x	x	
Her fifties				x	x	x	
Her sixties					x	x	
Her seventies					x	x	
Her eighties					x	x	
Her nineties					x	x	

parents were among the most wealthy and politically influential families in the American colonies who had arrived "from the Netherlands and had been well established in New York since the mid-1600s" (Reiser, 2017, p. 14). Her mother came from an established, wealthy and influential family background. Her father was a revolutionary war general and shared similar political interests with Alexander Hamilton, whom ESH first met at her Aunt's house when she was 22 years old in 1780. They were married within the same year and according to one of ESH's letters, their love grew throughout their marriage (American Experience, 2022).

During her marriage to Hamilton (between 1780 and 1805), ESH was described as being sickly, suffering from nervous attacks and many miscarriages. She gave birth to numerous children of whom eight survived (Flexner, 1977). While she felt strained during their marriage owing to her husband's infidelities, the loss of their eldest son and various socio-economic crises, she improved in health after Hamilton's death and lived until she was 97 years old (Flexner, 1977).

In the following the life, SOC and faith of ESH will be presented in chronological order from childhood to old age. An overview of the development of her SOC will be provided in **Table 1**; a summary of her FD will be shown in **Table 2**, and her vocation in **Table 3**.

Childhood and teenage years

ESH grew up in a very elegant mansion in Albany and was raised by one of the wealthiest families in the US (Chernow, 2004). During childhood and teenage years, ESH did not receive much formal schooling and had only received some tutoring (Chernow, 2004). However, as the daughter of a soldier, general and statesman, she was educated in political and public affairs (Chernow, 2004). When she was 13, her father took her to a conclave of "Chiefs of the Six Nations" at Saratoga, where she was given an Indian name, "One-of-us" (Ogden and Meredith, 1980, p. 9). Through the political affairs of her father, she must have developed a broader understanding of politics, the military, societal relations and military actions (*comprehensibility*). ESH was described as being deeply devoted to her Christian faith (People and Events, 2007; *meaningfulness*), warm, strong-willed, robust, empathetic and delightful (Chernow, 2004).

The marriage

ESH met Alexander briefly in her teenage years and met him again when she was 22, shortly afterward marrying him. According to Smucker (1858):

The bride was beautiful, accomplished, talented, and well-born. Her vivacity, intelligence, and amiability, had rendered her a universal favourite in the polished circles of Albany, at that time one of the most select and cultivated towns in the country.

The marriage to Alexander Hamilton took place in 1780. McLane (1911, pp. 95–96) points out that her main "talents were domestic and she is best remembered as a loving wife and devoted mother." Kaveney (2018), however, counter-argues that ESH represented immense strength by demonstrating character development throughout her life, going beyond the expectations of women during that period.

ESH supported her husband and counselled him with regard to his political affairs, and helped him to manage his papers (Wilson, 2018). Chernow (2004, p. 130) states that ESH did "everything in her power to focus the spotlight exclusively on her husband" (*manageablity*).

During her marriage, ESH conducted close friendships with her husband's friends' wives, such as Martha Washington, the

TABLE 3 Vocation in Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton's (ESH's) life.

Vocation in life	Throughout ESH's lifespan
God's creation and caring for others and the environment	• Caring for her children and husband • Helping others in more challenging positions • Building an orphanage • Building a school
God's governance and his justice and lawfulness within societies	• Supporting her husband's politics
God's liberation from socio-economic and political ideologies and boundaries	• Keeping her political ideologies and boundaries, but overcoming her socio-economic boundaries by marrying Hamilton (lower socio-economic class) • Supporting children from lower socio-economic classes

wife of George Washington (Griswold, 1867). So she seemed to have a network of friends and kept close family bonds with her parents and siblings (Chernow, 2004).

ESH gave birth to eight children and had several miscarriages. Accordingly, she displayed a strong meaningfulness with regard to her family roles and her personal interests in supporting her husband and bringing up their children (*meaningfulness*).

When Hamilton joined the army, they had already six children. ESH was unhappy with his new career path, since he had lost income from his private law practice and was not paid for several months after he joined the army (Harper, 2004). However, she managed, and he promised to build a house for them, called "The Grange" in the countryside *(manageablity)*. When Alexander Hamilton had an affair and after the revelations in 1792 and again in 1798 that Alexander was involved in a love affair, ESH suffered (Harper, 2004) and seems to have been deeply shocked. However, she was "determined to cope, in her typically Spartan way" (Harper, 2004, p. 204; *manageability*).

In the year 1801, life became tragic for ESH when her younger sister Peggy died aged 42 and her eldest son Philip was shot in a duel (Reiser, 2017). She then gave birth in 1802 to her last child, called "Little Phil," in honour of his late brother. In 1803 ESH's mother died suddenly and in 1804 her husband was wounded in a duel against Aaron Burr, who was the vice president at that time (Chernow, 2004). Shortly, after the death of her husband, her father died and she had to cope with all of these losses within a short time, finding peace in life through God (Reiser, 2017; *meaningfulness*).

Life after her husband's death

After her husband's early death, caused by a duel with his political rival, ESH managed to a degree to rescue her husband's historical reputation and aimed to restore it for the rest of her life, being "committed to one holy quest above all other: to rescue her husband's historical reputation" (Chernow, 2004, p. 2). To cope with his early death, ESH founded two institutions in New York to support lower-income children, the Hamilton Free School and the Orphan Asylum Society, the first orphanage in New York (Kiger, 2020). According to Mazzeo (2019), ESH was passionate about the welfare of children and she focused on finding solutions throughout her life as soon as problems occurred (*manageability*). Reformational and charity schools have been discussed critically in the United States of America and represent the moral ideas of "upper-class New Englanders in response to population growth, immigration, and other social changes" and the moral and righteous society (Encyclopedia, 2022), ESH's perspective was most probably partly influenced by these ideas and value sets, which can be viewed as critical. However, her engagement might have also been anchored in her own experience of growing up without a formal schooling (Acton Institute, 2016) and her idea to give this opportunity to others and contribute to a better life.

ESH had a strong faith, purpose and meaning throughout her life. She was described as having "a sharp intelligence, a fiercely indomitable spirit, and a memory that refused to surrender the past" (Chernow, 2004, p. 1). Chernow (2004) describes her life as passionate and deeply religious and based on the humanist idea that all children should be literate (*meaningfulness*). Her strong faith in God helped her to overcome challenges and obstacles in her own life and to deal with crises while helping others in more challenging positions, such as orphans and individuals from lower classes.

After the death of her husband, ESH's purpose in life was multifold (*meaningfulness*): she aimed to elevate her husband's reputation, created his biography – which was later published by her son, John C. Hamilton – and engaged in social causes such as building the first orphanage for children in New York (Flexner, 1977). In addition, ESH focused on her connection to her children, which kept her alive and contributed to her meaningfulness (Kiger, 2020). She further derived a powerful meaning in life by helping children and families from lower-income classes to receive education. She managed to do so by activating women from wealthier families who supported her projects financially (Kiger, 2020). Reiser (2017, p. 99) points out that the story of ESH has been told in different ways, but that only recently has it been acknowledged that she played an important part in the American consciousness, changing from a "stereotypical widow of the late 18th and early 19th centuries to a robust and powerful keeper of her late husband's legacy."

Table 1 presents a summary of the development of her SOC in terms of the sub-components of sense of comprehensibility, sense of manageability and sense of meaningfulness which developed across her lifespan.

Faith development across her lifetime

ESH grew up in a religious family with a Christian background. Her upbringing therefore reflects Fowler (1981, 1984, 1986) approach that is anchored in the Christian belief. It may be assumed that ESH grew up with her primary caregiver at home, particularly since she did not attend formal schooling, but was instead educated by her parents. Her parents therefore most probably represented her primary approach to her faith and fostered her strong belief (Stages 0–3) which was based on trust, loyalty, meaningfulness and commitment (Stages 0 and 1). She was known as "the little saint" (Acton Institute, 2016) and was described as stoic, religious and averse to self-pity (Chernow, 2004). She was considered to be "good-natured though somewhat serious [. . .] at ease in the outdoors and devout in her Christian faith" (American Experience, 2022). She was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church and it

was important to her to bring up her own children with strict religious instruction (Acton Institute, 2016). Part of this religious approach to life was reading from the Bible every morning, which reflects Stage 3 of the FDT. ESH's developed passionately her role as a wife and mother (Stage 3).

For ESH, Stage 4 of the FDT is represented quite clearly in her life since her personal values reflected her focus on social relationships and her strong desire to nurture and care for others. She demonstrated deeply held values in fostering relationships and clarifying her own boundaries. For example, she struggled for many years with her husband's infidelity and his love affair, but she managed to overcome it and stay with him by redefining her personal boundaries, the strengthening of her values and her self-coherence (Stage 4).

After the death of her husband, ESH redefined her sociocultural boundaries by opening up an orphanage and by developing a meaning beyond her own traditions (Stage 5).

ESH did not reach Stage 6 which proclaims the universalising faith, in which individuals are viewed as independent of social class, gender, race, religion, nationality, age and political ideology. On the contrary, ESH retained the focus on her political, national and religious ideologies and it was not her personal aim to broaden them. However, it might be highlighted that she carried an overall love for humanity and a general non-violence through which her boundaries were overcome.

Table 2 provides an overview on the FD across ESH's lifetime.

Vocation in life

It is appropriate to assume that ESH's identity and strong meaningfulness were anchored in her upbringing, which was based on education and developing a deeper understanding of the world, and the complex sociopolitical circumstances as seen through her parents' eyes (Mazzeo, 2019). ESH, growing up in a wealthy and influential American family, aimed to develop herself, trying to find answers to who she was. Various literature accounts highlight that she was very settled in her own identity, aware of her abilities, interested in social activism with a philanthropist mission (Presnell, 2004; History of American Women, 2022), and showed strong spirit (Esme, 2022). It seems that, from a very young age, ESH was self-aware and self-conscious and her belief and faith was anchored in God and shaped by political insights (Chernow, 2004; People and Events, 2007).

During her marriage and middle adulthood, ESH supported her husband and brought up her children (Chernow, 2004). From the death of her husband onward, ESH set new priorities, managed to pay off the debts of her husband, bring up her children and support social activities, such as building the first orphanage and the first school for children from lower social strata.

It appears that ESH's life was fully guided by her belief in God. According to Fowler (1981, 1984), the vocation in life and spiritual transcendence refer to three different aspects in the relationship with God: through caring for the environment, through God's governance, justice and relationship-building, and finally through God's liberation from socio-economic and political ideologies and boundaries, leading to fulfilment in feeling blessed by God. An analysis of the life of ESH reveals that care for the environment and others in the environment was of major importance across her lifespan, particularly in caring for her children, caring for her husband and his career, building the orphanage and the school and helping others in more challenging situations (Kenyes, 1931; New Netherland Institute, 2020).

With regard to God's governance, justice, lawfulness and relationship-building, ESH's vocation is mainly represented in supporting her husband's political career, standing in for certain political views and perspectives and reflecting them back to her husband, supporting him in writing his political attempts (Chernow, 2004).

Finally, she also found part of her vocation in life in God's liberation from socio-economic and political ideologies and boundaries to a certain degree. In one respect, she overcame socio-economic boundaries by marrying Hamilton who was an orphan coming from a lower-class socio-economic background. On the other hand, she aimed to overcome these boundaries by helping children from lower-class socio-economic backgrounds with education and by giving them a home in the orphanage.

It may be summarised that her relationship to God was essentially influenced by God's creation and caring for others within her family and beyond. This was particularly true until her middle adulthood. Later, ESH mainly focused on diminishing the boundaries of people from different classes by providing a home and education for them. However, the focus of her actions was always based on the foundation of human values and care for others.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study aims to contribute to psychobiographical literature on exploring the coping mechanisms of women from diverse backgrounds. Coping, in this study, was understood as being supported by SOC and FD throughout the lifetime. The subject of the study was ESH, the wife of Alexander Hamilton, one of the founding fathers of the US, who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The study shows that ESH had a strong SOC which helped her to cope with a number of difficult situations and losses throughout her lifetime. Coming from a wealthy, educated and well-established Christian family background, she

developed keen comprehensibility and meaningfulness during her childhood and teenage years. During her marriage to Hamilton, she showed great strengths in managing her marriage and children, her husband's politics, his extramarital affairs, and the losses she had to cope with. She drew on all of the resources she had (family, friends, and a firm faith in God) to deal with and overcome her challenges. After the loss of her husband she managed to cope with the financial strain and all of her children on her own, mainly through her own sense of meaningfulness and a strong belief in God. It may be assumed that her sense of purpose and meaningfulness was in particular influenced by her belief in God and her desire to contribute positively through the life of others, such as her late husband's career and reputation and her support of children from lower socio-economic classes.

ESH's faith developed throughout her life in terms of Stages 0–5, as according to Fowler's FDT. Although ESH had a love for humanity and non-violence, she did not overcome any religious or national boundaries. She stayed firmly within her Christian belief system, and because the US was in the process of being created, she did not aim to overcome any brand-new national boundaries.

Finally, one may conclude that her relationship with God, as described by Fowler (1981, 1984), was mainly based on caring for others and doing good, although she also supported her husband's politics and lawfulness as well as liberation from sociocultural ideologies.

For future research and practice, it is recommended that future psychobiographies should take the exploration of the lives of women into consideration, thereby exploring women's lives during different times and within various cultural contexts. It is particularly important to explore women's coping mechanisms throughout their lifetime. These coping mechanisms can be explored through theories such as salutogenesis and SOC, as well as FDT.

It is also important to highlight that FDT needs to be explored specifically in terms of context. This study shows that, for example, Stage 6 of the FDT might not be reached owing to the contextual situation of the individual whose life is explored. Therefore, future psychobiographical research should aim to further develop theories, such as in this case, SOC and FDT.

On a practical note, psychobiographies on the coping mechanisms of women can be referred to in counselling and therapy as positive examples of extraordinary women coping with difficulties and challenges throughout their lifetimes, in different sociocultural and contextual situations. This psychobiography of ESH can also be used to provide an example of how an individual can deal with tragic losses and return with resilience to contribute positively to the lives of different individuals and to society in general.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The civic engagement community participation thriving model: A multi-faceted thriving model to promote socially excluded young adult women

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Social policies to promote socially excluded young adult women generally concentrate on education, employment, and residence but tend to neglect thriving. The current article puts forward a Civic Engagement Community Participation Thriving Model (CECP-TM) that views thriving as a social policy goal in and of itself. It posits that civic engagement, beyond its contribution to social justice, serves as a vehicle for thriving through self-exploration and identity formation. Both are considered key components of successful maturation and thriving. Nonetheless, civic engagement and self-exploration tend not to be nurtured in socially excluded young adult women, a unique group experiencing intersecting discrimination. The model shows how active civic engagement in the context of a community of peers contributes to developing a sense of belonging and connectedness and promotes new self-reflection, identity formation, and agency capabilities. When situated within the context of intersectionality, these encourage the development of critical consciousness and new understandings of "who I am and how I fit into the social world in which we live." These can provide a sense of meaning, contribute to identity formation, and promote the thriving of the self and the community. Several examples illustrate the model.

KEYWORDS

civic engagement, thriving, women, young adults, identity, community

Introduction

The social inequity associated with globalization underscores the need to confront social exclusion (Hazari and Mohan, 2015; Muñoz Arce and Pantazis, 2019). Social exclusion is defined as a state or a process in which individuals or groups are denied full participation in social, economic, and political life (Benbow et al., 2015; Hazari and Mohan, 2015) and has vast negative implications for individuals' quality of life (Enderle, 2018). Despite making up more than half of the population, women experience greater social exclusion and inequality (Strier, 2010; Jensen and Arnett, 2012; Lightman and Good

Gingrich, 2018). This gendered exclusion is expressed in women's absence from the public sphere, limited involvement in civic/political life (Palència et al., 2017), and reduced participation in the labor market (Farre et al., 2020). These are reflected in lower income levels (Novo-Corti et al., 2014) and greater poverty (Fredman, 2016) compared to men. No less significant are women's subjective experiences of exclusion, as manifested in decreased levels of belonging, self-esteem, and control (Choudhury and Kumar, 2021), as well as higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Mata-Greve and Torres, 2020), which can endanger young adults' wellbeing (Levy et al., 2020).

Extended young adulthood is one of the characteristics of today's global, industrialized society (Webster et al., 2006; Wood et al., 2017) and now covers the period from 18 to 30 or even slightly beyond (Arnett et al., 2014; Scales et al., 2016). This stage is characterized by the postponement of adult obligations (i.e., getting a job, acquiring an education, and starting a family; Aronson, 2008; Harris et al., 2010), which enables prolonged self-exploration and a search for direction in life (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018). However, since socially excluded young adults, mainly from lower socio-economic strata, face unique stressors in the transition to adulthood such as discrimination and higher poverty rates (Harris et al., 2010; Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018), they have fewer opportunities for self-exploration and undergo a much more rapid transition to adulthood (Harris et al., 2010; Bialik and Fry, 2019).

By shifting rapidly to participation in adult life and its associated obligations, they have fewer opportunities for self-exploration and self-definition (Webster et al., 2006; Webb et al., 2017). Hence, the process of identity formation is suspended or occurs in parallel to fulfilling adult roles and tasks (Oesterle et al., 2010; Hardy et al., 2013). This need to immediately embark on adult life is acerbated in terms of gender (Oesterle et al., 2010) since it imposes another dimension of exclusion on already complex life circumstances, which may deny women the opportunities to develop their capabilities, and the freedom to plan their lives (Greene and Patton, 2020). This situation adversely affects health, wellbeing, and thriving that extend into adulthood and can influence the next generation (Munford and Sanders, 2007; Hickey and du Toit, 2013).

Social workers, healthcare professionals, researchers, and policymakers worldwide are engaged in finding ways to promote young women's successful passage to adulthood (Sonu et al., 2019). Nevertheless, in today's Western, mostly neoliberal, economic context (Nikunen, 2016; Barnett and Bagshaw, 2020), public expenditures for social security services are scarce (Barnett and Bagshaw, 2020), and there is not enough social investment (Kuitto, 2016). Typical interventions targeting young adults (men and women) concentrate mainly on improving labor and working conditions (Webster et al., 2006; Nikunen, 2016), promoting housing solutions (Arthurson and Jacobs, 2004; Webster et al., 2006), enhancing education and training levels (Jordan, 2018), subsidies (Jordan, 2018), and supporting health and mental health conditions (Luchenski et al., 2018). Nevertheless, these welcome efforts have a minimal impact on inequality (Arthurson and Jacobs, 2004; Jordan, 2018). Researchers have suggested that concentrating on practical support and providing tangible basic needs (Chant, 2016) rather than directly addressing wellbeing as a social policy goal (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2019) lessens the effectiveness of these interventions.

Intersectionality as a key framework

To address women's wellbeing differently, the current manuscript presents a multidimensional Civic Engagement Community Participation Thriving Model (CECP-TM) focusing on civic engagement and community participation to promote the thriving of socially excluded young adult women. The model draws on major critical post/feminist theories (Butler, 2013), which implement the notion of "intersectionality" as a key framework for designing interventions for socially excluded populations (Mojab and Carpenter, 2019). Intersectionality refers to the complex process and interactions between multiple identity dimensions of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality and their manifestations in experiences of marginalization, social disadvantage, and poorer health outcomes (Zambrana and Dill, 2009; Carbin and Edenheim, 2013; Cho et al., 2015). The concept of intersectionality aligns with theories of critical realism in rejecting the quest for a universal pattern of inequalities; instead, this framework seeks to unpack inequalities in social processes and uncover the subjective meaning of living in an intersectional position (Aronson, 2008; Bauer, 2014).

Originally, Black feminist scholars advanced intersectionality theory to account for multiple forms of subordination in the legal and political domains. Nevertheless, recently, intersectionality has gained increasing prominence in health studies that have examined how the health and wellbeing of various groups are impacted by structural oppression or marginalization (Cho et al., 2015). According to the intersectionality approach, multiple forms of oppression experienced by a single person have a cumulative effect that directly influences the individual's internal sense of self and wellbeing. Therefore, to enhance wellbeing, the interlocking nature of multiple forms of oppression must be disentangled, so that the ways power dynamics at the macro-level of social systems and institutions interact with interpersonal relationships and subjective experience can be identified (Krumer-Nevo and Komem, 2015).

Thriving as a core concept

Although intersectionality theory emphasizes the voices of people experiencing interlocking disadvantages, it does not restrict its focus to the experiences of suffering and oppression. Rather, it calls for identifying resilience and resources available in an intersectional social location (Earnshaw et al., 2013). Nevertheless, since a main developmental goals for disadvantaged

young adult women is broadening future possibilities, returning to baseline while avoiding adverse outcomes (Ryff and Singer, 2003) does not capture their full potential.

Dominant theories in social welfare, humanities, and positive psychology have all advanced the concept of thriving to characterize better individuals' wellbeing (Geldhof et al., 2013; Su et al., 2014). Thriving is defined as flourishing (growing or developing vigorously), prospering (accruing wealth or possessions), and progressing toward or realizing a goal despite the circumstances (Su et al., 2014; Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2019). Thriving views human development as a process and describes the aspiration for a very high living level and fulfillment of human potential (Sheldon, 2018).

Different researchers have divided the concept of thriving into various domains (Brown et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2020). The three prime dimensions are feelings of happiness, enjoyment, comfort, contentment, and the absence of distress (i.e., hedonic wellbeing), a sense of purpose and meaning in life, self-actualization, progress towards meaningful life goals, self-efficacy, agency, and control (i.e., eudaimonic wellbeing; Huta and Waterman, 2014; Sheldon, 2018), and engaging in deep, close, healthy relationships (i.e., social wellbeing; Feeney and Collins, 2015).

The model

Built on the key concepts of intersectionality and thriving, the current article describes a multi-faceted developmental trajectory model, designed to promote the thriving of socially excluded young adult women, by participating in critical civic engagement program in a setting of a community of peers. The model is based on the premise that civic engagement in a community setting can directly augment these women's thriving by promoting a sense of meaning and purpose in life (eudaimonic thriving). In addition, participating in a community was hypothesized to directly encourage marginalized women's social thriving by providing them with the opportunity to establish deep and meaningful relationships and social networks (social thriving), as well as fostering their hedonic thriving by instilling positive emotions and life satisfaction. This model thus innovates by charting the indirect development towards thriving through the mediation of self-exploration (identity exploration and self-reflection in terms of intersectionality), which can lead to the fulfillment of all three thriving domains and promote these women's identity formation. Specifically, social thriving contributes to identity formation, whereas eudaimonic thriving and identity formation mutually reinforce one another (see Figure 1).

Although the assumption that civic engagement promotes wellbeing and identity formation has often been explored (see, for example, Goldner and Golan, 2019; Markovich et al., 2019), few studies have examined the mechanisms through which civic engagement enhances wellbeing. Only a small number have provided a complete framework to describe the ways civic engagement promotes wellbeing and advances the eudemonic, hedonic, and social components of thriving when characterizing the contribution of civic engagement. In most cases, the literature has discussed the contribution of service-learning programs to undergraduate students (a relatively privileged sample). Even when less-represented female students have been the focus (see, for example, Goldner and Golan, 2019), these studies have been conducted in the context of campus-community partnerships. For instance, Markovich et al. (2019) examined campus-community partnerships operating in Israel while exploring the potential of these partnerships to facilitate transformative change in conflict zones. Although their book takes a feminist perspective and deals with how institutional hegemonic academic dynamics shape students' identity, the authors mainly concentrate on how campus-community partnerships expose these dynamics to promote social change and advance human rights in conflict areas. Thus, identity exploration as a primary liberating vehicle to promote thriving is not the central theme.

Civic engagement as a driver of thriving

Civic engagement refers to how individual and collective actions aimed at addressing issues of public concern are undertaken to improve conditions for others and/or help shape a community's future. Engagement of this type can lead to a sense of connection, interrelatedness, and commitment to the community at large (Adler and Goggin, 2005; Vindhya, 2012; Fenn et al., 2021). Civic engagement includes any step intended to enhance the quality of life (Cnaan and Park, 2019). It can take many forms, from individual volunteering to organizational involvement, and from addressing a specific social issue and promoting social change to voting (Flanagan and Levine, 2010; Ballard et al., 2019). These acts can be regular or episodic and constitute one of the fundamentals of a democratic society that emphasizes active citizenship (Adler and Goggin, 2005; Ejlskov et al., 2014). Data indicate that women's civic engagement is often situated in the private sphere, within their homes and neighborhoods, where they can express their voice in a secure atmosphere, before turning to larger civilian spheres (Godquin and Quisumbing, 2008; Jensen and Arnett, 2012; Jupp, 2017).

Overall, research findings are consistent with the notion that civic engagement can be highly beneficial, having a positive cumulative effect on individuals' physical and mental health, life satisfaction, and thriving (Son and Wilson, 2015; Yeung et al., 2017). For example, a cross-sectional empirical study on students reported a strong relationship between civic engagement and wellbeing, mediated by service self-efficacy and meaning in life (Fenn et al., 2021). A review and meta-analysis demonstrated that volunteering positively affected depression, life satisfaction, and wellbeing (Jenkinson et al., 2013). Further empirical support for these findings emerges from a cross-sectional survey showing that in comparison to nonvolunteering, formal volunteering once a week was associated with twice the likelihood of thriving (Santini et al., 2019). Similarly, studies have repeatedly shown that civic

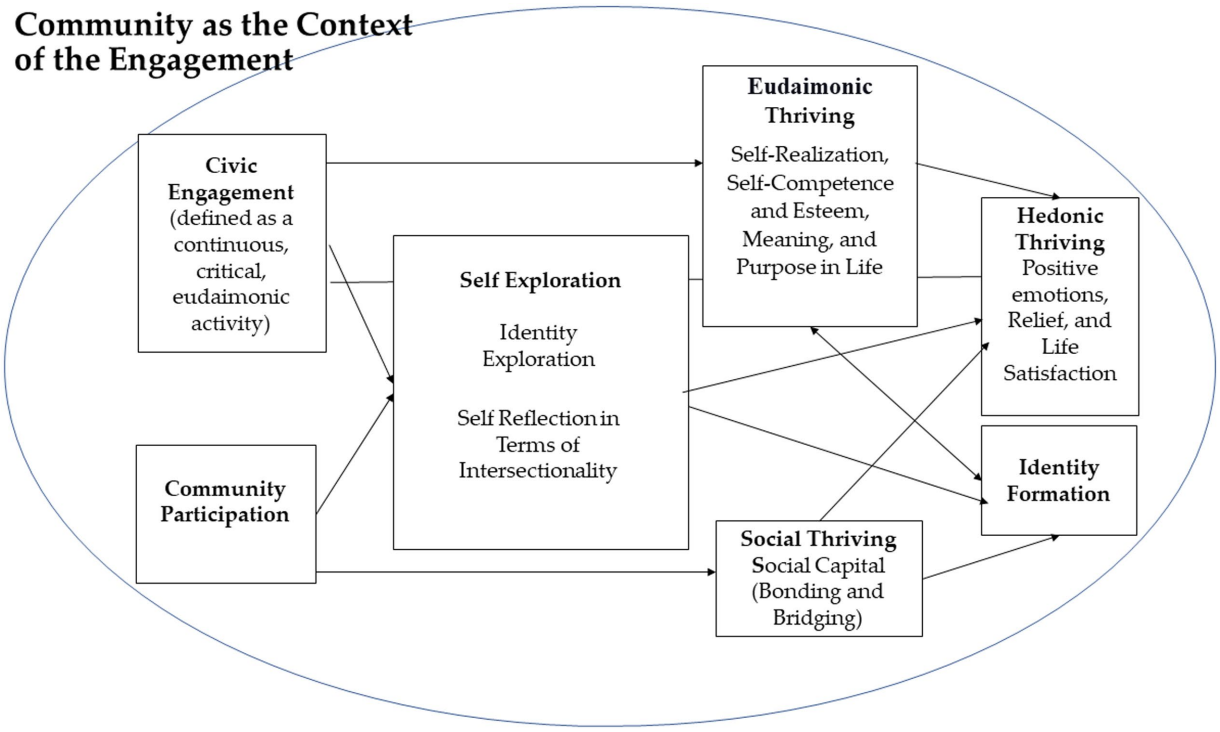

FIGURE 1
The civic engagement community participation thriving model (CECP-TM).

engagement is a significant driver of young adults' thriving (Jenkinson et al., 2013; Webb et al., 2017; Santini et al., 2019), generating self-efficacy and agency, and meaning in life.

Nonetheless, socially excluded young adults engage less than young people from higher socio-economic classes (Fenn et al., 2021), partly because such activities are too burdening for those who are already burdened (Fenn, 2022). However, Fenn (2022) comprehensive literature review suggests that an informed, tailored-to-need civic engagement activity can facilitate participation and bolster thriving (Fenn, 2022). Studies have shown that civic engagement can compensate for a lack of resources and development opportunities through exploration and helping others, which enables disadvantaged young adults to experience personal change, specifically in terms of resilience, identity, and social capital (Webb et al., 2017).

Civic engagement as a generator of meaning in life, satisfaction in life and positive emotions

Studies on highly diverse samples implementing various forms of data collection suggest that significant sources of meaning in life can be derived from personal relationships, achievement, success, and altruism (Webb et al., 2017; Xi et al., 2022). Specifically, engagement at the macro-level (connecting with other members of one's community) while addressing values, needs, goals and caring for others enables individuals to be involved in a eudaimonic activity that targets issues beyond the ego and mundane concerns. Hence, connecting to something more significant than the self (i.e., the eudaimonic component in wellbeing) is critical to advancing individuals' wellbeing (Sheldon and Lyubomirsky, 2006; Nelson et al., 2016; Sheldon, 2018). By grappling with challenges and unexpected situations in new surroundings, individuals are called upon to show initiative and creativity and acquire new communication and leadership skills. These promote their sense of self-competence and lead to the realization of personal potential (Francis East and Roll, 2015; Fenn et al., 2021). This suggests that civic engagement facilitates a sense of meaning and purpose in life, which provides individuals with a crucial way to allocate their resources toward meaningful achievements that give a sense of satisfaction and happiness (i.e., hedonic wellbeing).

The idea that engaging in eudaimonic actions (highly meaningful, intentional, and beneficial behaviors) such as civic engagement can facilitate positive emotions is also based on Aristotelian philosophy as manifested in Sheldon (2018) Eudaimonic Activity Model. We suggest that for women who are not regularly exposed to such experiences in particular, civic engagement can be highly beneficial, by fueling them with positive emotions and a sense of enjoyment. This can have a cumulative effect which relieves their draining, alienating, and muted reality (Fenn et al., 2021) and can promote thriving both directly and indirectly (Ballard et al., 2019; Christophe et al., 2021).

Community participation as a generator of social and hedonic thriving

Community participation is a broad and complex term describing interactions and collaborations among individuals with similar identities, goals, and interests. Through an ongoing process of participation, the identity of the participants and the community itself is continuously created (Strier, 2010; Christens and Speer, 2011), supporting the development of "social capital" (Brooks and Nafukho, 2006). Social capital is a term with many definitions relating to the amount and strengths of social connections stemming from family support, peer networks, and community stability (Pettit et al., 2011; Webb et al., 2017). It is customary to divide social capital into bridging and bonding, representing different levels of connectedness and the quality and/or quantity of social relations, both of which are increased through community participation (Christens and Speer, 2011; Landstedt et al., 2016).

Bridging social capital refers to establishing relationships between different groups of people, within and outside the community, characterized by weaker ties and often referred to as operational or general community participation (such as voting). These relationships can enable socially excluded young adults to extend their social networks, engage with meaningful organizations in their environments, and widen their mobilization opportunities, which constitute an important way to promote their future options and status (Moghadam, 2003). Bonding social capital refers to strong relationships between individuals within a homogeneous group (Pettit et al., 2011; Landstedt et al., 2016).

The development of close and meaningful relationships (i.e., bonding) promoted by participating in a community aligns with women's inclination to group in what is classically termed "sisterhood" communities to promote women's rights and involvement in the socio-political arena (Tesoriero, 2006; Francis East and Roll, 2015; Jupp, 2017; Andersen and Banerjee, 2019). These communities, characterized by trust, support, coalitions, collaborations, and effective communication (Taylor et al., 2000; Gittell et al., 2012; Webb et al., 2017), allow women to participate in decision-making about their future and improve their lives. In addition, these communities play a protective psychological role by reducing stress (Cicognani et al., 2009), lessening depression (Landstedt et al., 2016), improving social wellbeing (Cicognani et al., 2015), and at times people's lifetimes (Holt-Lunstad and Smith, 2012).

Increasing community participation is an essential component of integration in a democratic society (Etzioni, 2011) which helps fight poverty and social exclusion. Thus, for socially excluded young adults, participating in a community that combines positive and meaningful relationships holds numerous benefits. These include strengthening their significance to others while augmenting a sense of worth, belonging, and connectedness. It also compensates for the lack of social resources crucial to young adulthood (Webb et al., 2017), serves to establish networks, and can help overcome experiences of adversity (Hartling, 2008; Soska et al., 2010; Arslan, 2019; Azpiazu Izaguirre et al., 2021). It thus enables the development of resiliency, positive emotions, and better health (Feeney and Collins, 2015; Dunkel Schetter, 2017). This is especially true for women, who use social networks (bonding and bridging) as a powerful resource for promoting social resistance and social rights (Francis East and Roll, 2015). In our model, participating in the community serves as the platform for civic engagement and a vehicle to catalyze women's social and hedonic thriving.

Identity exploration and intersectionality self-reflection as a generator for thriving and identity formation

Civic engagement and participation in the community can also shape the process of self-exploration and identity formation, the cornerstones of our model. Identity formation is often divided into exploration and commitment (Klimstra et al., 2010; McLean et al., 2016). Exploration is defined as actively engaging in targeted activities and searching for alternatives while trying to answer the question of 'who am I?'. Commitment refers to making decisions about these alternatives while defining 'myself' (McLean et al., 2016). Identity formation is a core developmental process that begins in adolescence and continues into young adulthood, in which different dimensions of identity evolve towards greater maturity, forming a more stable identity in different content domains (ideological, interpersonal, etc.). It is characterized by individuals' increased reflection on their certainty about their commitments (Klimstra et al., 2010; McLean et al., 2016).

Findings have indicated that individuals who have made identity commitments (i.e., decided that certain things are important to who they are), ideally through a process of exploration, have fewer mental health problems (e.g., anxiety and depression and suicidal self-injury; Crocetti et al., 2009), engage in fewer health-risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol use and sexual risk-taking; Bishop et al., 2005; Schwartz et al., 2013), have fewer mental health concerns and report higher levels of psychological wellbeing (e.g., self-esteem; Basak and Ghosh, 2008; Dunkel et al., 2011) and meaning in life (Hardy et al., 2013).

Our model suggests that civic engagement as a eudaimonic act, within a community setting can catalyze identity formation through a reflection on the intersection of the components of identity and identity exploration simultaneously. Specifically, it suggests that civic engagement can be experienced as a self-formative and maturational experience that can shape women's identity and self-knowledge and serves as a springboard for shaping life goals and plans. Through civic engagement, women are called upon to explore new abilities and skills and fields of opportunities, explore career choices, examine new roles, and build a network of connections. In this respect, civic engagement may serve as a vehicle for acquiring social thriving reflected in social capital, which is especially important for individuals from

socially excluded minority groups with fewer opportunities to be actively involved in identity exploration (Putnam et al., 2003; Strier, 2010).

Furthermore, interacting with people who differ in terms of age, social strata, and ethnicity from people that individuals encounter regularly, generates questions regarding sense of self, and may encourage women to explore their strengths and weaknesses. Hence, through their civic engagement, women can actively search for a more vigorous, sophisticated, and defined sense of subjectivity as to who they are and how they fit into their social world. Establishing a more robust subjectivity may also be enhanced through interaction with other women in the community, which can serve as a hall of mirrors, reflecting women's abilities, assets, and difficulties (Goldner and Golan, 2019).

As a part of the change process, reflection on one's civic engagement forms the common thread of the model because it emphasizes the importance of cognizing one's eudaimonic activities, both personally (Christophe et al., 2021) and collectively (Wegner et al., 2019). Once women reflect on their upbringing, intersectional identities, assumptions, values, and restrictive conditions in which their civic engagement is enacted, critical social consciousness begins to form. This awareness helps them further analyze the world in which they live, and promote their self-determination, despite the systemic oppression they become more aware of (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2007; Goldner and Golan, 2019; Ajaps and Obiagu, 2020).

By applying an intersectional lens, disadvantaged women often recast their trauma as a motivation for taking on an active role and choosing the field of civic engagement (Jupp, 2017). Critical feminist thinking and intersectional theory both emphasize the need for socially excluded women to uncover how the components of their identity are differentially influenced and affected by social status, class, and ethnicity within a specific historical context (Bell et al., 2019; Biana, 2020). In this vein, research indicates that when civic engagement is viewed as a revolutionary act of the self in response to sociopolitical inequality, it can integrate into one's identity in the form of resistance, thus forming an adaptive coping strategy that can promote eudaimonic thriving (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2007; Hope and Spencer, 2017).

More generally, researchers have suggested that interventions which involve civic engagement as a strategy to promote thriving are beneficial, especially when they implement social justice-based or critical civic engagement point of view (Hope and Spencer, 2017; Christophe et al., 2021; Fenn et al., 2021). Thus, women's self-exploration that concentrates on the components of context, ideology, social structures, and power relations and extends beyond the practical aspects of acquiring skills and knowledge is likely to enable the construction of meaningful different identity components to serve as a broad platform for their self-realization and development (Daoud et al., 2012; Bairey Ben Ishay and Gigi, 2019; Goldner and Golan, 2019).

Examples

In Israel, several projects and programs have been designed to enhance young adults' eudaimonic, social, and hedonic thriving through civic engagement that promotes identity exploration in light of intersectionality. These include the Civic Service of Arab young adult women, which according to Yanay-Ventura et al. (2020) offers young Arab women the opportunity to crystalize their personal and citizenship identity. This takes place by exploring aspects of discrimination and marginalization that shape their identity and acquiring new skills and economic independence, thus bypassing the glass ceiling. The authors noted the concept of cultural capital and described how the participants unpacked various aspects of exclusion and discrimination internalized in their identity. These benefits are especially interesting given the ambivalent public attitude and opposition to participation in Arab communities (Yanay-Ventura et al., 2020).

Goldner and Golan (2019) describes the Israel Scholarship Education Foundation program (ISEF). This program operates civic-engagement social-educational projects, in which students from disadvantaged backgrounds regularly meet marginalized communities for two to 4 hours per week in return for a scholarship. The project aligns with the Foundation's vision of reducing social gaps through higher education. The findings pointed to the significance of volunteers' reflections on culture, ethnicity, and power distributions, which validated their cultural heritage and integrated intersectional aspects of their identity.

Below, we focus on the Young Women in the Lead - Social Activism in Young Adult Women's Communities program, under the auspices of the Fund for Demonstration Projects of the Israel National Insurance Institute and the Gandyr Foundation. During this program, various organizations established 20 communities for socially excluded young adult women across Israel. These women's communities are characterized by multiple marginalization, such as belonging to an ethnic minority group, residing in low-income peripheral towns, and lacking family support. In some cases, the women had a history of child abuse, neglect, or personal trauma, all amplified because of their gender.

In most cases, the women were recruited through welfare bureaus. The project aimed to encourage civic engagement as an innovative approach to promoting women's wellbeing. The communities consisted of 5–10 young women who participated in weekly two-hour meetings in which designated coordinators introduced the women to issues such as civic engagement skills, social/political awareness, social justice, and gender. Participants were invited to be involved in building the community and initiate civic engagement that addresses social issues derived from their life stories and circumstances. Women were also invited to consciously reflect on matters of intersectional identity, social justice and gender throughout the program in group discussions guided by the communities' coordinators.

The example below is taken from four in-depth semi-structured interviews with a 23-year-old Arab Israeli woman who participated in one of these communities for 3 years. Research

assistants conducted the interviews in Arabic and later translated them into Hebrew. The interview consisted of questions about the community's progress. These included: "What expectations did you have from participating in the project?" "If someone were to ask you to stop for a moment and look at your life to this day, how would you describe it?" "Can you describe how participating in the project has affected your life?" "Do you have plans for future jobs, education, leisure, family, and relationships?"

Asil (pseudonym) is a 23-year-old Arab Israeli woman living in a large Muslim-dominated city in the north of Israel. She was asked to recollect her motivations for joining a civic engagement community. Her response revealed a life full of hardship and despair, leading her to hope and wish for change.

> I have gone through many periods of hardships in my life, and I am still going through them. Sometimes there are moments of despair when you are sure nothing will work out, and you are exhausted. But these don't last. They are just bits of the time; afterward, you return to the struggle.

Nonetheless, this wish for change has little hope of coming to fruition, as shown by her sense of ambivalence and hesitation. "At first, I hesitated; my mother said, 'you will not lose anything, try.' So, I joined the community here."

She nevertheless made it clear that something was profoundly missing by saying, "After graduation, I had a lot of free time. I felt like I was not really me. I wanted a change in life, in my personality, a break from the routine, to breathe a little, just to go out! To feel independent and see beyond routine."

Later, Asil talked about the importance of being part of a supportive community of women, gaining confidence, and exploring her capabilities. She repeatedly used the terms "voice" and "voicing the self" as constituting significant steps in acquiring knowledge about the self and building her identity. She recalled: "I remember at first I was timid. I could not express myself." Later on, she dared to express herself, especially in less conventional fields in her milieu.

> I'm glad I joined, I found a place to express my voice, to speak freely about topics that are not usually discussed, it was very empowering that the group is for girls, and you can both give and receive, be a voice for those who do not have enough voice to speak and express themselves.

She continued by defining civic engagement as "…the possibility to give to each person, every little thing that can help, support, and promote," thus linking the processes of civic engagement with personal and social change. In fact, she saw these three processes as almost identical:

> It first and foremost starts from the inside. It does not matter for whom or for what. The main thing is that you stand up to support yourself, take care of yourself and thus others as well. I come here on my day off, without many hours of sleep, so yes, I am an activist… I am a little different each time I come here: sometimes I am calm, sometimes nervous, sometimes talking, sometimes quiet, etc. And I know that I am accepted as I am. And acceptance is mutual of course. That in itself is activism. Accepting the other allows for free, authentic, and the truest expression of the self.

In addition, she described her identity development associated with eudemonic thriving (i.e., findings meaning in the social change she is involved in) and the joy (i.e., hedonic thriving) associated with this development:

> I personally have developed a lot… I feel growth… I am very happy… Creating change, talking about rights, about women, bringing things to light and not hiding them as is customary in my culture. It is exciting to understand that my participation is important; that I can contribute another voice, another opinion, another question… Another idea of being part of something

In terms of change and self-exploration, Asil described the persistent gap between her aspirations for identity exploration and her limited possibilities and choices. In her view, this gap began when she graduated from high school and started thinking about "what I would like to do and not just what I need to do," even though "I do not see why there are things that prevent me from thinking and dealing with these thoughts and questions, but when I want to act sometimes I have to convince those around me and negotiate with my immediate environment (family)." These limitations relate to her social positioning, which she perceives through self-reflection in the light of intersectionality. Asil gained an understanding of this gap which is related to her life circumstances and society in general, and this has allowed her to broaden her perspective, make different interpretations, and engage in a range of actions, as she courageously described:

> The community has been by my side through a process of self-awareness and connection to the self. Today I know Asil better (who I am, what I am, what I want ...) more than ever. I am connected to who I am and believe in everything I am. I will give you an example: one day I had to go to the city, and on the way, I saw a man beating a woman, I was stressed, I cried, but nevertheless, I had the courage to call the police and report it. I felt really proud that I have the ability to defend, to express, to speak, not to be silent. I did not use to be like that. I did not have that courage. The community is a big part of all the inner changes I have gone through.

At the end of the final interview, Asil summarized her 3 years of participation. Her statements illustrate how the components of the model are combined and interconnected. She related to the importance of community in instilling feelings of connectedness and serving as a safe place for self-exploration in a secure atmosphere which allows her to contemplate and shape a different way of thinking. She repeatedly used the word "change" to describe

her internal changes and the social changes in which the participants evolved. She described the community as a group of feminist women, changing their reality. She stated:

> This project helped me a lot. I do good and receive good. I feel a sense of satisfaction that I am active, and I am in, I am for others. The group is like a warm home where I can express parts of myself that I cannot express anywhere else... My thoughts have taken on a slightly different shape, sometimes a slightly different turn... Giving, support and change. I am a girl who believes in change: changes in people, changes in the environment, personal change. The project was a place for unloading energies, thoughts, and deliberations. All the girls are willing to help and promote change in any way possible. The sense of belonging was strengthened several times over. Especially in the group and when it comes to women, girls and feminism … Planning a path in life, achieving goals by planning ahead. If I have a setback, I stop, I ask myself the relevant questions, get more information, turn to the questions, and start re-planning.

Another example is Hadil, a 20-year-old Arab Israeli woman living in a medium-sized village in the north of Israel. In response to a question about her interest in wanting to join the community to be involved in civic engagement, she talked about the importance of a supportive women's community. She described wanting to create a secure space for her and others to promote change through civic engagement, referring to the internalization of discrimination and social control by the women themselves.

> She said: I am in favor of women changing, working for peace… first and foremost among the women themselves. We are very oppressive of each other when we criticize and censor each other out of social conventions that we ourselves reinforce. Women are supposed to have each other's backs. This is where activism begins, and this is where change really begins.

In a later interview, she talked about her growing feelings of connectedness and belonging in the community fostered by the women and the community's coordinator. She described how these feelings catalyzed her motivation for active civic engagement, which led to meaning and purpose in life. Hadil also provided a sense of the indirect connection between civic engagement and community participation with identity exploration.

> I feel and see that many things have changed since joining the community. Let's start with the fact that there is support, the girls support me, and my aspirations and I support them. It is very encouraging. Beyond that, I am more active, I go out into the community to act, I started volunteering at school, I participate in community projects. I have power, I feel I have meaning, and I have a purpose… I'm important, and the fact that I can give makes me feel even more powerful. This is what encouraged me to want to get more education, expand my horizons and continue to be active for others and for myself. It makes a sense of vitality and hope.

Hadil elaborates how being a part of a group of women who share experiences, ideas, and actions regarding women's inequality, led her to reflect on her own life in the light of intersectionality, and experience self-change. She described taking a more critical point of view on the condition of women in her community, being more empathic, caring more for others. She describes many good feelings, which are related to being a part of something and being active towards something novel, within her reach.

> The activity enabled me to see a truer picture of women in society and the oppression of women. The group activity made me look at people more empathetically, while thinking of more options. Before I joined the community, I was not interested in what was happening in the village or the conflicts we were facing. Today, I feel more caring and interested in participating in the change. Today I feel it is my duty to understand, know, and take an active role in repairing and improving. Before joining the community, I saw myself as an ordinary girl living for ordinary needs and normal roles. Today, I see myself as more vital. I do not just exist to exist. I exist for action to be part of and for a goal.

Summary and implications

Our theoretical model suggests a trajectory of subjective thriving through participating in community civic engagement *via* the mechanism of self-exploration and intersectionality. Although this kind of civic engagement differs from conventional civic engagement in young adults that evolves spontaneously, policymakers, third-sector organizations, institutions involved in service learning, and other welfare and health practitioners working with underprivileged populations can draw on this model to promote thriving among socially excluded women and other populations. This could involve developing white papers and plans for program interventions that decision-makers can use to allocate budgets and resources to establish civic engagement communities for socially excluded populations.

For civic engagement to be perceived as meaningful, attention should be paid to educating young women on how their personal lives can be translated into community goals and concerns. One way to do this is for social workers and field practitioners to guide and support the women in transforming their broad social goals into a series of small but meaningful acts of civic engagement to avoid despair and maintain motivation. Time and effort should be devoted to teaching women civic engagement skills and providing them with a solid background. Efforts should be made during community meetings to develop political awareness and critical thinking that can enable women to reflect on their identity in terms of the premises of social justice. Engaging in critical civic engagement that fights institutionally structured power dynamics which curtail women's

rights may encourage young women to express their silenced voices and re-consider their intersectional experiences. They can then actively address social concerns from the agent's perspective rather than that of the victim while considering the issues of "equality" and "patriarchy," which can restore their sense of agency and foster a liberating anti-oppressive standpoint of engagement.

Social workers and healthcare professionals should be aware that when prolonged civic engagement addresses personal and social needs and is analyzed in terms of gender and identity, it can become an internalized element in women's identity that can promote resiliency and thriving. Social work curricula would benefit from incorporating thriving-informed interventions that go beyond subsidies, better housing, scaffolding education, and professional training, and should offer courses centered on paradigms targeting wellbeing and positive development trajectories. This transformation would help disadvantaged populations more fully develop their potential in their communities despite structural inequality and intersectional discrimination.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

IS and LG have developed and formulated the model, wrote the manuscript, and directly contributed to the work and its approval for publication. YC revised the draft of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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One uncertainty added on top of another: Challenges and resources of mothers of preterm infants during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Aims and objectives: To qualitatively explore COVID-19-related experiences of mothers of preterm infants in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), the main challenges they face, and the resources available for them.

Background: The birth of a preterm infant is a stressful event under otherwise normal circumstances. The outbreak of COVID-19, the uncertainty about the virus and how it spreads, and the restrictions imposed, may have exacerbated the stress of caring for a preterm infant.

Design: Retrospective interviews.

Methods: In-depth interviews with 12 mothers of preterm infants who were hospitalized in the NICU at the time of study. The interview addressed challenges and resources related to coping with the pandemic. The interviews were transcribed and content analyzed, based on Lieblich et al's model for narrative analysis. This research was conducted in accordance with the COREQ checklist.

Results: The overarching experience shared by all mothers was accumulative stress caused by a combination of factors related to the infant's health and COVID-19-related stressors. A central theme was the dissonance between the mothers' expectations from the birth and infant, and the reality they encountered. Other themes included fear of infecting the infant, loneliness, and stress caused by the restrictions that disrupted daily routines. Resources included a sense of shared fate regarding the pandemic, improvements in the infant's condition, religious faith, emotional support from the partner, and support from professional staff.

Conclusion: Caring for a preterm infant during a pandemic is a challenging experience on many levels. The loss of significant support resources puts mothers of these infants at a higher risk for psychological distress.

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Relevance to clinical practice: Awareness of mothers' accumulative stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic may assist the staff in developing procedures that can alleviate parental stress, for example by enabling mothers to connect to each other, giving clear information to compensate for physical and social distancing and providing professional mental health support.

KEYWORDS

stress, coping, challenges, resources, COVID-19, mothers, preterm (birth), neonatal intensive care unit

Introduction

All parents dream of a healthy infant. During pregnancy, parents have expectations and hopes for a healthy, perfectly formed infant. When a preterm infant is born, parents experience acute stress due to the unexpected event and the change in their parenting role (Al Maghaireh et al., 2016), and anxiety about the precariousness of their infant's situation (Hagen et al., 2019). They are fearful for the infant's wellbeing (Bry and Wigert, 2019), pained by seeing their infant suffer, struggle to forge a connection with their infant and possibly even with his or her appearance (Agrawal and Gaur, 2016; Spinelli et al., 2016), while at the same time mourning the premature end of the pregnancy (Obeidat et al., 2009; Valizadeh et al., 2013).

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019, the prevalence of psychiatric disorders and loneliness among women was higher (Li and Wang, 2020). In the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), parents of preterm infants have had to cope with additional stressors related to the pandemic, whose end is not in sight (Kluge, 2020), and with a tangible and life-threatening virus that requires social distancing (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Dubey et al. (2020), mentioned fear and anxiety concerning a new and little-understood disease, fear about one's own health and that of one's loved ones, worry about isolation should one become ill, and loss of supportive resources. Nurturing experiences such as breastfeeding, kangaroo care, and talking with the newborn infant, which routinely mitigate stress, may occur less frequently under these circumstances (Erdei and Liu, 2020). In addition, the parents had less opportunities to learn about and develop their self-confidence to care for their infants. The preparation for the discharge was carried out in the setting of basic care, when the discharge was imminent (Osorio Galeano and Salazar Maya, 2021).

Hobfoll (1989) presented the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as a framework for understanding how people use resources differently to cope with stress. According to this theory, people aim to preserve, protect, and construct resources that help them cope. The stress of giving birth to a premature infant can be described as a sudden and unexpected loss of highly valuable resources. The loss of resources can cause psychological distress in the mothers of these infants, which can affect the infants' medical outcomes (Shani-Sherman et al., 2019). Research on the psycho-social factors that affect parents with NICU infants is associated with severe parental distress during hospitalization and with a worse outcome for the infant's future cognitive and emotional development (Grunberg et al., 2019). There is a wealth of research literature about the stressors involved in parenting a preterm infant. Thus, it is important to understand NICU parents' psycho-social needs, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, not only to alleviate their distress during their hospital stay, but also to improve the long-term outcome for their infants (Hall et al., 2017; Bry and Wigert, 2019). In a recently published study, we (Bin-Nun et al., 2021) found that COVID-19 intensified the difficulties experienced by mothers of preterm infants and harmed their familial and social relationships. Most mothers reported feeling stressed, lonely, and helpless. In the absence of efficient coping strategies, anxiety levels and depression may rise. Moreover, maternal distress may be intensified if families must be separated and quarantined (Brooks et al., 2020; Osorio Galeano and Salazar Maya, 2021).

An infant's medical condition may require neonatal isolation that is not related to COVID-19. During this time, the medical staff and the parents take extra precautions (e.g., wearing gloves and gowns at all times). COVID-19 created a new reality in which either the neonate or the parents may be exposed to the virus, necessitating further maternal isolation from the infant, whose condition may be life-threatening. This was one of the most extreme stressors encountered in the NICU as a result of the pandemic.

In light of the literature reviewed above, on heightened maternal stress due to COVID-19, the purpose of the current study is to investigate the challenges experienced by mothers who stayed in the NICU with their infant during the first weeks of the pandemic. We were interested in learning about the main challenges they encountered, how they perceived the medical staff's performance, and the resources they used to cope with the circumstances created by COVID-19.

Materials and methods

The study approach

Due to our aim to focus on mothers' lived experience and to learn on the challenges created by the pandemic, we adopted a qualitative/narrative approach. Because we wished to gain understanding of a phenomena that was new at the time, and due to the relatively low number of potential participants, we chose a qualitative approach. The narrative approach was deemed appropriate as its focus is on viewing narration as a meaning making process (Lieblich et al., 1998). This approach claims that people construct their life stories based on their lived experiences through a dynamic process, and that these stories shape and are shaped by their identities, as well as by cultural and social circumstances (Clandinin, 2006).

Setting and sample

The participants in this study were 12 mothers of preterm infants, who delivered and were hospitalized in a large, Level III NICU during March–April 2020. The NICU admits approximately 1,000 sick neonates per year, and serves a general population of nearly 18,000 deliveries per year. There are a limited number of one mother/infant dyad in full rooming in, while most mothers are housed in 2–3 patients' rooms. Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, many hospital policies were modified or adjusted. Babies were allowed to breastfeed at the breast and were not separated from a mother with COVID-19. Mothers were instructed to wear mask at all time during the hospital admission except for brief periods of eating or washing, and were instructed to wash their hands prior to any kind of baby handling. Distancing of at least 2 m between babies was implemented at all times. No more than one visitor at a time was allowed, and only belonging to the same nuclear family (spouse or child). Grandparents were not allowed to come into the NICU. If one parent was sick and the other in isolation, then the preterm infant remained alone without the presence of a family member. Based on Robinson's (2014) considerations on the sample universe and homogeneity, the strategy chosen for data collection was purposive sampling technique (PS, Etikan et al., 2016). The rationale for the PS technique was to explore the experience from diverse perspectives, that we saw as relevant to the researched experience, and referred to the level and type of isolation of the baby in the NICU. Therefore, we sampled mothers who represented three different groups: mothers whose infants were isolated for medical reasons other than COVID-19, mothers who were separated from their infants because of suspected exposure to COVID-19, and mothers who were not separated from their infants at all. The mothers' average age was 27 (SD = 6). All were married, 11 were Jewish, one was Muslim, and the majority of them (n = 9) were religious (orthodox or ultra-orthodox). The mothers had given birth to 0–9 children before the study (M = 1; SD = 3). Seven mothers were primipara. The length of hospitalization in the NICU was 7–176 days (M = 60; SD = 45).

Table 1 shows the demographics of the mothers and their infants.

Interviews and procedure

Mothers of preterm infants in the NICU were invited to participate in the study, in order to learn about their experiences in the NICU. Upon agreeing, they signed an informed consent, and were invited to a quiet room in the NICU. Participants were asked about their experiences since their infant were born and admitted to the NICU. Specifically, they were asked to describe their thoughts, feelings, and what they perceived as the challenges created by their infant's condition and how COVID-19 impacted their experience. We asked about their strategies for coping with the situation, and what they found most effective. A two-stage narrative interview was conducted with all participants. The two-stage narrative interview was open-ended, and based on the narrative approach. Each interview lasted 30–45 min. All the interviews were held face-to-face, conducted in Hebrew, recorded and transcribed. Participation was voluntary and participants did not receive compensation for participation.

Analysis

The interviews were content-analyzed by two of the authors separately, based on the model for narrative analysis proposed by Lieblich et al. (1998). Each searched for stressors and resources that emerged in the narratives. Following the initial analysis, the authors met to discuss the emerging themes, and reached an agreement on the main themes identified. For the purpose of writing the manuscript, verbatim sections were translated from Hebrew to English for citations, translation was conducted by a bilingual English editor, fluent in both Hebrew and English.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the local IRB. Mothers of infants admitted to the NICU signed an informed consent form after receiving an explanation about the study. Participants were assured of their ability to leave the study at any time, or refuse to respond to any question in the interview. We paid careful attention to the sensitive topic of the interview and to the stressful conditions of mothers at the time of interview. First, mothers who agreed to participate were free to choose the time of interview as the interviewer was available in the NICU. Second, the interviewer is a trained psychologist with much experience in working with mothers of preterm babies, and in case of distress could assist in turning participants to get support. The interviewer was not the direct therapist of participants. Importantly, as two of the authors (S.P and A.B.N)

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TABLE 1 Details of the mothers and their infants' condition.

Group	Participant	Maternal age	Sex of newborn	Delivery number	Pregnancy week	Single/twin	Birth weight	Hospitalization (days)
No isolation (NI)	9	25	M	3	27.4	S	1.095	89
	10	33	M	1	34.3	S	2.455	21
	11	30	M	1	29.0	S	1.200	43
	12	25	M	1	32.0	S	2.110	48
Medical isolation (MI)	1	41	F	10	27.0	S	1.150	71
	2	21	F	1	35.4	T	2.018	18
	3	22	F	1	30.4	T	1.440	40
	4	24	M	1	25.0	S	840	176
COVID-19 isolation (CI)	5	22	F	1	35.6	T	2.740	7
	6	21	F	2	28	S	3.065	92
	7	29	M	2	27.6	S	945	73
	8	30	F	2	34.1	S	1.950	46

are part of the NICU staff and therefore had met the participants at the NICU before beginning the study, the third author served as an external reader of the interviews, as she had no acquaintance with the participants.

Results

The overarching theme that emerged from the interviews was the continuous need to adapt to an ever-changing reality when faced with multiple uncertainties related both to the infant's condition and the COVID-19 situation. There was no difference in experience and distress described by mothers between those whose infants were at more risk than others, or whose infants required medical or COVID-19-related isolation. Most narratives described typical challenges that began from the moment of delivery. The mothers described a sense of everything being new and unexpected, even when the preterm infant was not their first child (as was the case for about half the participants). Three themes emerged from the interviews—the gap between expectations and reality; new and unforeseen challenges created by COVID-19-related restrictions; and resources that helped mothers cope with the COVID-19 situation.

Expectations vs. reality and the need to constantly adapt

All mothers described a significant dissonance between their expectations and the reality forced upon them. They expected a normal delivery, but complications resulted in preterm delivery and infants who were admitted to the NICU. Mothers described how they had imagined their pregnancy and their infant, and how they had to adapt instantly to a very different reality. They felt that their role as mothers became secondary to the role of the medical staff, who took over responsibility for managing the infant's care. In some cases, there were cautionary signs during pregnancy that enabled the mothers to anticipate certain complications. In other cases, the newborn infant's need for special care and treatment came as a total surprise. In the latter case, the lack of opportunity to mentally prepare for the challenges posed by having an at-risk infant created even more stress for the mothers, and required their swift adaptation to a dangerous and intense reality, while still recovering from delivery. Elza, who experienced bleeding during the early months of her pregnancy, was told that she would likely give birth a little early, but the delivery at 27 weeks came as a complete surprise:

> It was a shock. I told my husband to go and be with our older child, so he left, and then, within a few minutes, I gave birth. It was fast and surprising, everything happened so fast, the baby was taken to the NICU. . . Wait a minute, I need to process that I gave birth. But immediately the doctor from the NICU starts talking to me while I'm still in the delivery room. It took us a few days until we managed to take the element of shock out of our situation.

The narratives make it clear that the mothers had specific, often unconscious, notions about what should have happened during labor, when bringing home a healthy infant, during their maternity leave, etc., and all these expectations were abruptly shattered, not only because of the infant's condition, but as we illustrate below, because of the COVID-19 pandemic as well. For example, mothers imagined celebrating the delivery with others during the first days after the infant's birth. Mariam, a first-time mother said:

> "Before [I gave birth], I imagined that I'd give birth, have many visitors, and a room full of flowers. Then, suddenly, no one was allowed to come. It sucks."

Another mother, Martha, said:

> "We were imagining all our friends coming to our home, and we planned a baby party, but now, all we can do is send pictures because they can't even come and see him. . . the most difficult thing is to cope with the expectations and dreams that didn't come true, coping with 'how it should have been'. . .coping with the reality that everything is totally different, and managing to survive it and stay positive."

Efforts to quickly adapt to the new reality were hampered by constant uncertainty, caused by the infant's unstable and dynamic condition, as well as by the rapidly changing regulations related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was conducted during the first months of the pandemic, when the restrictions were unclear and changed from 1 day to the next. For example, partners, who were initially allowed to stay in the NICU with the mothers or to replace them, were suddenly not allowed in the NICU in order to minimize the risk of contagion. In another case, one of the infants in the NICU was suspected of having contracted COVID-19 and all parents of the infants who shared the same room were sent home and not allowed to see their infants for a few days. One of the mothers said that any time the ground started feeling firm beneath her feet and she started to adapt, everything was shaken up again and she had to readjust to new COVID-19 restrictions. Another mother described her experience as "one uncertainty on top of another."

Challenges related to COVID-19

All the participants described in detail the many challenges and difficulties they encountered because of COVID-19. We distinguished between practical and emotional challenges for purposes of clarity, although the participants described them together and as interrelated.

Practical challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic created practical challenges that added to the burden of coping with a premature infant. All the mothers described how the COVID-19 restrictions had made life more complicated and required more planning, adjustment, and constant improvisation. One mother, Elana, described how she could not visit her baby whenever she wanted to, because public transportation suddenly stopped without any prior notice due to the high rates of contagion in public places. Another mother, Olivia, said that they had been due to be released from the hospital to continue the preterm infants infant's treatment in the community, but because community medical services were closed due to the lockdown, the doctors decided to keep them in the NICU for another few weeks so that the preterm infants preterm infants could get the treatment he needed. Another practical challenge was the need for parents to take extra precautions and wear special gowns in the NICU, which was not easy and was experienced as interfering with the parent's ability to bond with the baby. Nicole said:

> All these ungainly layers, this gown and that gown, and the masks. It is annoying, and you have to keep social distance and wear a mask, and I feel that my baby doesn't see me smiling at him because I'm always behind a mask.

A few mothers pointed out that the medical staff was more stressed and overloaded, especially when some staff members had to quarantine or take care of their own family members. They said that this affected the staff's availability and patience toward the parents. Several mothers said that they had planned on their own mothers helping them with their other children at home, while they stayed with their infant in the NICU, but the circumstances and the lockdown prevented them from receiving this help, and they did not know how to divide their time between home and the hospital. The stress of caring for the family at home and the infant in the NICU was mentioned by all participants who had other children. While most parents of infants who require special attention are torn between home and the hospital, the pandemic added difficulties with commuting, finding babysitters (which was prohibited during the lockdown), getting help from extended family, and running simple errands for the baby. When asked what was most difficult for her, Mira said:

> That my parents can't come to visit, and that we can't be together. It's very difficult for them too, not to see their grandchild, and when my husband was in quarantine I was here all alone, all the time. It was very difficult.

Emotional challenges

The tone common to all the narratives reflected emotional drain and exhaustion. The word "difficult" was the word most frequently used in all narratives. Mothers expressed concerns about their infant's condition and development, and fears that they, their partners, or any of the healthcare providers would be a source of infection for their infants with COVID-19 and endanger them. This created a heavy sense of responsibility and anxiety. Charlene says:

> I was terrified that I'd have to be in quarantine because of contact with a sick person, and I knew this meant my baby would be alone. I saw that all the others didn't follow the instructions as carefully as I did, so I started to touch the doors with gloves, I didn't touch anything. We stopped sitting in the family room near the NICU because I saw that

> other people touched the surfaces. There was a difference between me and my husband. I was hysterical, he was not, so I had to ask him to put gloves on. It was so tough, I really hit rock bottom. nothing could reassure me.

As expected, the infant's condition had the greatest effect on the mothers' moods and emotions. Premature infants are often unstable, and it takes time before their medical condition stabilizes. At the time of the interviews, about half the mothers still reported fluctuations in their infant's health, and the others described the infant's condition as more stable and progressing well. Nevertheless, all the mothers were still concerned about their infant's medical condition, and described feeling emotional distress. These feelings were exacerbated by the pandemic for several reasons, including the inability to share their concerns face-to-face with other family members such as the father and the grandparents. This increased the mothers' sense of bearing the burden of responsibility alone. This especially applied to partners, who could not stay in the NICU with their wives due to COVID-19 restrictions, or because they had to care for the other children at home. Many times, the partners were updated only after the changes happened or decisions were made regarding the infant. In addition, most mothers described a sense of loneliness resulting from the COVID-19 restrictions, due to the inability to have visitors, receive emotional and physical support from their own mothers or partners, or talk with other mothers in the NICU to support each other. Charlene, who gave birth right before the pandemic, was able to compare the time when her parents could come and be with them, with the time when they were asked to stay away:

> When we were told that my parents couldn't come anymore, I think that was the most difficult moment for me, because then, we were left alone. At the beginning we were very enveloped; my parents came to the NICU every day. It gave us time to breathe; for each of us to get some space. . . And then, suddenly, my parents weren't allowed in anymore.

Coping resources

As described above, the simultaneous, multiple stressors were overwhelming and ongoing. The mothers in our study had to find ways to cope with the circumstances, especially as it became clear that it was going to take a long time before their situation would change, both because of their infant's condition and because of the spread of the pandemic. We asked the mothers what helped them cope with the stress and the uncertainty. They all reported that it took time and effort to find the right resources, mainly because the resources they used in previous stressful situations were no longer available. Two examples of resources that are often used to relieve stress were social support and having personal time to rest, be distracted from the situation, or "recharge their batteries." These two resources were seriously compromised, as we described above, and therefore, mothers had to find other ways of strengthening themselves. Five resources that many of the mothers described were: improvement in the infant's condition; religious faith; the ability to emotionally lean on their partners; feeling connected to the world and to other mothers with regard to the virus; and the support of the professional team at the hospital. The infant's condition was described as the main contributor to facilitating or inhibiting their ability to cope with their situation. Improvements, even when small or temporary, were uplifting for the mothers and gave them hope and strength. Charlene says: "The only thing that could encourage me was my infant's progress. Every time there was progress, I felt that there was a light at the end of the tunnel, and it encouraged us."

Most of the mothers were religious, and therefore their religious beliefs served as a protective factor. Rose said:

> I believe in God and it helps. I know that everything that happens should have happened, so if it happened to us, I'm telling myself it should have happened. I won't say it's not difficult. There's tension and anxiety. But there's something to hold on to. There is someone to turn to, I can pray to Him. That keeps me going during these times.

Despite the absence of the natural support system (e.g., friends, grandparents, sisters) during the pandemic, mothers still found ways to benefit from the support of their significant others. The majority of participants referred to their partners as their main source of support and as a central resource that enabled them to cope. Martha says: "This is something you can cope with only together." She refers to the relationship with her partner as both affecting and being positively affected by their experience in the neonatal unit: "There is no doubt it strengthens our relationship."

Significant and mutual relationships with other mothers in the unit were also mentioned as a meaningful resource, as was a sense of being connected to the world with regard to the pandemic. Many mothers described the notion of "being in a bubble," in which outsiders cannot understand the drama and intensity of the life-threatening experience. The ability to share their experiences with others and get tips and encouragement from mothers who had already gained experience in the NICU was a major resource. In addition, the pandemic gave them a sense of sharing a common fate with the rest of the world. Donna says:

> What helps me here is the company of other mothers and knowing that everyone is dealing with this pandemic together. Several mothers became real friends for me, and

> I feel much more comfortable talking to them about what happens with us than talking to my other friends, from the time before all this happened. Here, with everything that happens to my baby, those who didn't go through the same thing will never understand. Only the mothers here can understand, so I can share with them, and I can let myself be weak with them, and they can be weak with me, and let go of everything that bothers them. And this is something that really helps me very much.

Finally, the professional staff was described in many of the narratives as contributing significantly to the mothers' wellbeing and ability to cope. Relevant aspects of the staff's behavior were the doctors' patience and their availability to explain and attend to the parent's need to know what was going on with their infant; the nurses' ability to encourage the parents and instill hope in them; and the warm atmosphere in the unit. Elana said:

> The medical staff and the nurses are amazing. There are wonderful nurses, you feel their embrace. You are in a very complex situation, and they try to encourage, to explain, always give hope. It feels good. We felt all along that he (the infant) was in good hands. Even when I had to go home and leave him behind—that was the hardest thing for me. . . I was relaxed because he was in good hands.

Another mother, Leona, described her difficult experience when she, as a new mother, did not take even short breaks for herself, because she was too stressed about needing to be with the infant all the time. She recalls how one of the nurses told her she had to go out and take a break, and assured her that it was the right thing to do. She says: "I couldn't stop crying that day, I felt like I couldn't take a break, it's forbidden, and she (the nurse) said: 'go freshen up, don't worry."

However, when one or more of the resources described above were missing or compromised, mothers described more distress and helplessness. Such was the case with Charlene, who referred to her inability to get the support she needed. She said: "I was in a difficult mental state, my husband tried to help me as much as he could, but at some point, he just couldn't do it anymore. It was difficult." Another mother said that when a nurse was impatient, it could ruin her day, and make her anxious and hesitant to ask questions.

The resources we described served to offset the many challenges and anxieties that are part of the complicated and multi-challenging experience of caring for a preterm infant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this study did not aim to quantify the mothers' distress, the mothers' narratives showed that those who were fortunate enough to have more resources available to them, were able to cope better and reported a more positive wellbeing.

Discussion

Parenting preterm infants, and mothering in particular, has been found to be a major source of psychological distress (Heerman et al., 2005; Swanson et al., 2012; Rogers et al., 2013). Factors associated with maternal stress in the context of NICU hospitalization include the baby's appearance; difficulty creating a bond with the infant (Bry and Wigert, 2019); developing maternal self-efficacy (Swanson et al., 2012); and being perceived as an outsider in the medical environment (Fenwick et al., 2001; Al Maghaireh et al., 2016). The outbreak of COVID-19 was assumed to significantly increase the emotional burden carried by parents of preterm infants (Osorio Galeano and Salazar Maya, 2021). Therefore, in the current study we aimed to explore the unique challenges faced by mothers of preterm infants, who were hospitalized in the NICU during the COVID-19 pandemic for an extended period of time, and the resources available for these mothers.

Our findings show that in addition to the well-documented challenges that usually characterize NICU hospitalization, the pandemic significantly increased the burden and the stress experienced, both by exacerbating existing challenges inherent to the hospitalization, and by adding new challenges and depriving mothers of resources that would have been available to them under normal circumstances, such as their family's social support. It has been documented that the pandemic had a negative psychological impact in general, even in populations which were not coping with emergencies (e.g., Li and Wang, 2020; Tull et al., 2020). Specifically relevant is Li & Wang's large scale UK study, in which loneliness was reported in more than one-third of the participants. We suggest that stress and loneliness were exacerbated compared to the regular population, due to the additional burden of their baby's situations, but also because the satisfaction of their needs was compromised due to the circumstances created by the lockdown and social distancing policies. Hobfoll's theory of Conservation of Resources (COR theory) (2002) states that when faced with stressful situations, people seek to obtain, retain, and protect their personal and social resources. The loss or gain of a resource is the primary mechanism that drives stress reactions (Hobfoll, 1989). Based on the COR theory, the demands related to parenting an infant in the NICU were exacerbated by changes and restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which threatened personal and social resources and increased parental stress. Indeed, our findings point to the experience of extreme stress in the mothers. It seems that managing stress was especially difficult because of the threat of the pandemic, which was at an extremely high level during the first months before vaccinations were available, adding to their sense of helplessness regarding the infant's life-threatening condition. Gaps between available stressors and resources were described regarding three aspects: lack of (sufficient) social support, both from professional team, from peer mothers, and from partners and the families. Mothers

took extra cautionary steps that went above and beyond the hospital policies regarding social distancing. They stayed away from the other parents, and did not let other family members replace them in the NICU, even when this was possible. This strategy, which may have been necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in the loss of social support by fellow mothers or by family members. Social support is considered one of the most significant resources for mitigating stress (Hobfoll, 2002). The social distancing imposed upon the mothers by the official restrictions and at their own initiative deprived them of natural support resources, resulting in a sense of loneliness, anxiety, and emotional burden. A recent study found that COVID-19 added new fears for parents of preterm infants, who perceived the virus to be a new threat for their vulnerable infants, and these parents had less family and professional support than under regular circumstances (Galeano and Maya, 2021). Additionally, mothers felt that they could endanger their infants by spreading the virus to them, as little was known at the time about mechanisms of contagion. On top of their distress, they were also under great stress and did not have the option of sharing experiences with peer mothers and other family members due to social distancing. The mothers had less opportunities to learn and develop confidence to care for their infant, the parenting's care of the infant is determinant for his health and wellbeing, especially when the discharge was imminent (Osorio Galeano and Salazar Maya, 2021).

Finally, the ability to adapt to the situation was inhibited by the many unpredictable factors involved. One of the crucial factors for successfully coping with stressful situations is the ability to plan ahead to effectively manage available resources. Stressful, ongoing, and dynamic situations are hard to cope with (Ramezani et al., 2014). The mothers in our study had to cope with the daily policy changes and restrictions that were issued by the authorities and the hospital. This uncertainty, where restrictions escalated every day, made adaptation even more difficult, as it required constant adjustments at a time when mothers were already emotionally and physically vulnerable due to their infant's unstable condition.

The long hospitalization in the NICU combined with the intense stress associated with the unpredictability, uncertainty, and uncontrollability of the situation and the loss of important social resources, may make mothers of preterm infants more prone to psychological distress, depression, and post-traumatic stress (Gangi et al., 2013). Recently, Erdei and Liu (2020) suggested that the combination of NICU-related parental stress and COVID-19-related challenges and constraints can have a stress contagion effect. In other words, parental stress may affect how parents engage and connect with their preterm infant, which can have a long-term effect on the infant's development and on the family's adjustment in general.

The participants in this study described several resources that they found helpful for coping with these stressors, including emotional support from their partners and from other mothers, a sense of shared fate regarding the pandemic, and support from professional staff. Another important factor was improvement in the infant's condition, Finally, religious faith was a significant resource in our sample, which included mostly religious women. Religious faith was found in previous studies as well to be a protective factor (Yazarloo et al., 2020). The parents' spiritual lens is relevant in an unfamiliar and unexpected hospital admission for their newborn, which is intensified during a pandemic (Brelsford et al., 2016).

Practical implications

As the COVID-19 virus remains a major threat, it is important to develop strategies and services that can help parents, and especially mothers, manage stress during the critical period of NICU hospitalization.

Our findings suggest that there are ways in which the professional staff can assist mothers in alleviating their stress. First, it is important to maintain social support as much as possible by enabling mothers to connect to each other, even when social distancing restrictions are imposed. Second, staff support is a significant resource, and therefore should be considered an integral part of treatment. Despite the challenging reality, encouraging mothers' early bonding with their infants, breastfeeding support, use of skin-to-skin care can lower mothers' stress level (Melnyk et al., 2006). Furthermore, connecting new mothers with mothers with experience with NICU hospitalization, and referring mothers for supportive services in the community before discharge is important. Awareness of parents' accumulative stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic may help the staff develop procedures for alleviating the shared trauma and stress caused by COVID-19 (Baum, 2014), for example, by enabling mothers to connect to each other, or providing professional mental health support. Third, a mental health professional should be available for parents, as well as staff members, who need additional support (Hall et al., 2017). Finally, since transparency offsets many of the challenges related to the instability and unpredictability inherent to the situation, it is highly recommended that the guidelines be made clear, and that parents be updated on all changes and restrictions related to the pandemic (Galeano and Maya, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic created unique stressors, which may recur in the future, and therefore understanding the best ways to enhance and conserve resources for mitigating stress is crucial.

The study has several limitations. The sample is small and quite homogeneous, as most of the participants were religious. While this represents the population served by the hospital, it is hard to generalize our findings for non-religious populations, especially as religious belief was found to be a major resource. Since most of the mothers in our NICU led a religious lifestyle that is characterized by deep faith and a close-knit community (Dollahite and Marks, 2009), the study findings about available resources are especially relevant for homogenous communities with significant religious resources. Although the religious

narrative eased their coping with the double stressors, yet during COVID-19 assistance from the community may be hindered.

It is important to interview mothers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds to expose other resources that are used. Furthermore, only mothers were interviewed in this study, as mothers and their partners have been shown to experience NICU hospitalization differently (Fegran et al., 2008). Interviews with fathers may yield different themes that could provide new insights on parental experiences in the NICU during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study was conducted during the initial outbreak of the pandemic, and the parents meticulously adhered to rules regarding social distancing and preventing the spread of the pandemic. It is possible that over time, people would become habituated to living with COVID-19 and the anxiety level would be lower.

Despite this limitation and due to the persistence of the pandemic, it is important to note that the characteristics of the NICU examined in the current study are similar to those of other NICUs elsewhere, and therefore the stressors could be relevant for mothers or parents who are caring for a preterm infant in the NICU even under different circumstances or other environmental contexts, given that the pandemic is ongoing or worsening, or in other circumstances that create ongoing social and/or physical distancing. Therefore, we believe that the challenges we described in this qualitative in-depth exploration are shared by many mothers of preterm infants who have to cope with the COVID-19 virus and its impacts.

Conclusion

Caring for a preterm infant during a pandemic is a challenging experience on many levels. The loss of significant support resources puts mothers of these infants at a higher risk for psychological distress.

Relevance to clinical practice

Awareness of parents' accumulative stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic may assist the staff in developing procedures that can alleviate parental stress, for example by enabling mothers to connect to each other and providing professional mental health support.

What does this paper contribute to the wider global clinical community?

- This study raises awareness about the significant challenges of caring for a preterm infant during a pandemic, which may make mothers of preterm infants more prone to psychological distress.
- It is important to be aware of the coping resources that many of the mothers described, namely improvement in the infant's condition; religious faith; the ability to emotionally lean on their partners, other mothers and the professional team at the hospital, and feeling connected to the world, to help improve the mothers' wellbeing.
- The staff can contribute to developing procedures that can alleviate parental stress, for example enabling mothers to connect to each other and providing professional mental health support.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Shaare Tzedek IRB Committee. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

PHS was responsible for data collection, data analysis, and writing. ABN was responsible for data analysis and writing. RTM was responsible for data analysis, writing, and quality assurance. All authors contributed equally planning the research and to the manuscript preparation.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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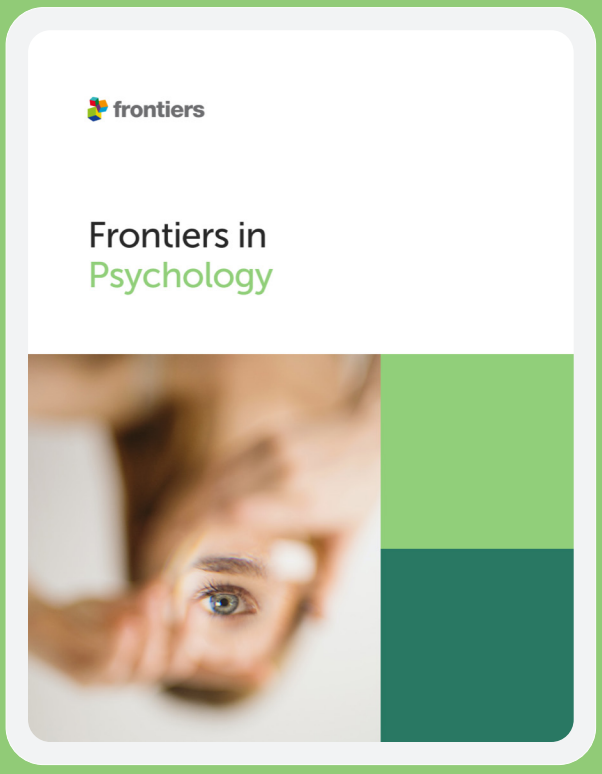

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