


‘Spiritual Risk’: A Parental Perception of Risk for Children in the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Community

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Abstract

This article addresses child protection in close-knit religious communities. Specifically, it presents the findings of a qualitative research project that examined Ultra-Orthodox Jewish parents’ perceptions and ascribed meanings of child risk and protection based on fifty in-depth interviews with parents from Israel and the USA. Here, we hone in on one key theme that emerged from our analysis of the interviews, which the interviewees themselves referred to as ‘spiritual risk’. ‘Spiritual risk’ is a complex construct comprising the following three interrelated dimensions: (i) a decline in observance of the Torah and the commandments, (ii) violation of socio-cultural norms and rules and (iii) a decline in spiritual beliefs, including the sense of connection with G-d. In the eyes of parents, it is decline in these three dimensions that constitutes the ‘spiritual risk’ to the child. ‘Spiritual risk’ can be a consequence of parental maltreatment and can result in children and adolescents moving away from the Ultra-Orthodox religious world and leaving their community. The results of this study advocate context-informed and religious-sensitive prevention and intervention programmes. They also highlight the need to include context and religious competency in the training of professionals working with diverse communities.

Keywords: Child protection, cultural competence, culture, risk for children, religion, spirituality, Ultra-Orthodox Jews

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Introduction

The field of knowledge concerned with child risk, maltreatment and protection is rooted primarily in universal developmental theories, which were formulated based on empirical research and clinical experience conducted largely in Western countries (Korbin, 1981; Henrich *et al.*, 2010). These theories are based on Western values, worldviews and norms. They are also the source from which definitions of risk, abuse and neglect are derived (Korbin and Spilsbury, 1999).

Minority groups residing in Western societies may espouse perspectives on child maltreatment, risk and protection that differ from those of the hegemonic majority society in which they live (Korbin, 1981). The resulting gap in perception and behaviour that emerges in welfare agencies and child-protection services, between social workers who underwent Western professional socialisation and parents from minority groups, is often a source of misunderstanding and tension. In such cases, parents tend neither to accept nor comprehend proposed solutions and they typically fail to implement them (Korbin and Spilsbury, 1999; Schmid and Benbenishty, 2011).

This article addresses this gap by focusing on one aspect of potential mismatch between social workers and parents: religion and spirituality. It does so by exploring perceptions and constructions of child risk and protection in Jewish Ultra-Orthodox minority religious groups in Israel and the USA. It begins with a brief review of the literature dealing with child risk and protection in religious communities in general and aspects of child risk, protection and maltreatment in the Ultra-Orthodox community in particular. It then presents the methodology of the study and focuses on one key finding: a notion referred to by participants as ‘spiritual risk’. It concludes with a discussion of the study findings and their implications for child protection in close-knit religious communities.

Religion and spirituality in the discourse of child risk and protection

Academic interest in spirituality and religion has grown dramatically over the past few decades (Carlisle, 2016; Hodge, 2017). The fact that more than 80 per cent of the world’s population currently identify with a religious group (Bunge, 2014) indicates that religion is a fundamental aspect of an increasing number of service users’ lives and experiences, regardless of whether they engage actively with religious institutions (Gilligan, 2009; Holloway and Moss, 2010). Consequently, social work, along with other helping professions, has incorporated these constructs into professional discourse (Koenig, 2013). Religion and faith, and their

associated cultural dimensions, are important social factors that influence beliefs and practices pertaining to child rearing, well-being, risk and protection, shaping the way that child-protection concerns are defined, identified and addressed (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2015; Nadan and Ganz, 2018). Studies suggest that most social workers receive minimal instruction in these aspects of religion and spirituality during their education (Canda and Furman, 2010; Furness and Gilligan, 2014; Oxhandler *et al.*, 2015).

According to Hodge (2017), contemporary religion tends to be contemporarily conceptualised as a socially shared set of beliefs and practices that can be, but are not necessarily, related to spirituality (Derezotes, 2006). As an individually oriented construct, spirituality is hypothesised to stand on its own, separate from religion, which is viewed in more communal, structured and institutional terms. As such, spirituality is often defined in a manner that subtly frames it positively (Wolfer, 2012), while religion is often portrayed in more negative, institution-oriented terms (Henery, 2003; Wong and Vinsky, 2009).

In the realm of risk and protection, religion is often perceived as associated with child abuse and neglect. For example, religion has been identified as one potential risk factor for corporal punishment. Several studies have confirmed a relationship between membership in a conservative religious organisation and approval of, as well as more frequent use of, corporal punishment (e.g. Wolf and Kepple, 2016). Some authors have made reference to denial and concealment regarding the fact that child abuse takes place in faith communities, including places of worship such as mosques and *madrasas* (mosque schools) (Siddiqui, 2006) and Churches (Keenan, 2013). Nevertheless, belonging to a faith community may also play a fundamental role in protecting children, based on a strong consensus across religious traditions about the inherent dignity of every child (Hanmer, 2010). Many faith communities have established internal child-protection procedures and systems for co-operation with relevant statutory services (Gilligan, 2009). Many religious leaders and communities have supported child-protection and welfare laws and are collaborating with state and secular organisations to help address issues such as violence against children, child sexual abuse and child marriage (Bunge, 2014). In cases where children have been subjected to maltreatment, religiosity may serve as a positive factor in coping, survival and resilience, as religion can provide reassurance to the victims, who gain strength from a belief in God's unconditional love for them (Doyle, 2001).

Child risk and protection in Ultra-Orthodox communities

Ultra-Orthodoxy is an umbrella term applied to the most religiously conservative branches of Judaism in North America and is equivalent to

Haredi Judaism in Israel. According to estimates, Israel is home to approximately 700,000 Ultra-Orthodox Jews (Friedman *et al.*, 2011) and the USA has an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish population of 318,000 (Lugo *et al.*, 2013) (9 per cent and 6 per cent of each country's Jewish population, respectively). Although divided into many subgroups and streams that differ from one another in many ways, Ultra-Orthodox Jews also share numerous attributes that find expression in their common struggle to preserve their identities (Friedman, 1991). Most notably, they are characterised by their faith in G-d, their commitment to Jewish law (*halakha*) and their obligation to preserve and observe an all-encompassing life system of immutable values, norms, laws and institutions. They do this by maintaining a unique form of community life and specific rituals, practices and traditions (Weiss *et al.*, 2013). Ultra-Orthodox Jews tend to enforce insularity and safeguard their collective values from external influence by living in self-segregated communities where they can maintain their distinct way of life. They also maintain independent education systems and share a disdain for secular education. In addition, they isolate themselves from the secular media and try to provide for their own needs from within the community using internal social networks and organisations (Samet, 1988; Friedman, 1991; Coleman-Brueckheimer *et al.*, 2009).

The distinctive religious and cultural values, worldviews and norms that prevail in Ultra-Orthodox communities impact perspectives regarding child risk and protection (Shor, 1998; Dorff, 2014). Being a close-knit community characterised by social solidarity, close social supervision and a strong support network presents various risk factors (such as the failure to report maltreatment) as well as protective factors (such as multiple care-giving adults and the provision of spiritual support) (Spilsbury and Korbin, 2013; Bunge, 2014; Nadan and Ganz, 2018).

Driven by a strong aversion to stigma, individuals in Ultra-Orthodox communities are unlikely to discuss their serious problems with people outside their immediate family, which may prevent them from seeking assistance when needed (Margolese, 1998; Stolovy *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, the desire to prevent the modern secular world from imposing on their values and challenging the internal structure of their community results in only partial co-operation with and underutilisation of public health and social services (Popovsky, 2010; Freund and Band-Winterstein, 2013). This is partially due to the community's perception of the threat posed by the welfare and juridical authorities (Lightman and Shor, 2002; Schmid and Benbenishty, 2011), which leads to low rates of reported maltreatment among the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish population in Israel (Attar-Schwartz *et al.*, 2011).

During the past decade, trends of change have been discernible in Ultra-Orthodox communities around the world with regard to the willingness to address issues such as at-risk children and child maltreatment (Eidensohn and Shulem, 2010; Salamon, 2011). This relative openness

has enabled professionals to intervene and be more involved in the community. It has also sparked calls for more relevant knowledge regarding at-risk children and risk perceptions in order to facilitate the development and modification of services and intervention programmes that are specially adapted to the unique context and culture of the community. This study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding perceptions of risk and protection in Ultra-Orthodox communities by exploring the following research question: What are the local perceptions, perspectives and ascribed meanings of child risk and protection among parents in Jewish Ultra-Orthodox communities?

Methods

This study employs a context-informed approach (Roer-Strier and Sands, 2015) utilising a qualitative methodology, which aims to achieve a holistic understanding of phenomena by examining perceptions, worldviews and meanings that are influenced by environmental context and the subjective interpretations of participants (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Such an inquiry, often referred to as an *emic* approach, draws on the views of ‘insiders’ in the inductive study of the worldviews, beliefs and behaviours of members of a specific cultural group (Creswell, 2012). The study was conducted in two locations—Israel and the US state of Ohio—to allow an understanding of the role of social context, in addition to religion and culture, in the construction of risk and protection.

The sample

Face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifty Ultra-Orthodox parents, 60 per cent ($n = 30$) from Israel and 40 per cent ($n = 20$) from the city of Cleveland, Ohio. Both fathers (56 per cent) and mothers (44 per cent) were included in the sample, which was purposive and based on participant referrals (snowballing) to gain access to close-knit and insular communities. There were two criteria for inclusion in the study: (i) self-definition as belonging to an Ultra-Orthodox/Haredi community and (ii) being a parent of at least one child under the age of eighteen. Only one parent in each family was interviewed. The age of the parents interviewed ranged from twenty-one to fifty-six (mean = 37). All interviewees were married and the number of children of each ranged from one to eleven (mean = 5.42). Twenty-nine per cent of the fathers in the sample were *Avreichim*, as were 66 per cent of the husbands of the mothers interviewed. An *Avreich* devotes all his time to studying the Torah, receives a modest stipend for his study and does not

work. The community values and venerates the *Avreich*, supports him and educates its members to aspire to this position.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted between January 2014 and February 2015 by the study's co-researchers, who included two Ultra-Orthodox men and an Orthodox woman who interviewed the mothers in Israel. Interviewers were trained and supervised by the study's Primary Investigator (the first author) prior to and throughout their fieldwork. Interviews were conducted in Hebrew (in Israel) and English (in Cleveland) in locations chosen by the participants, primarily in their homes, and lasted between one and two hours. In addition, a demographic questionnaire was administered to collect socio-demographic data.

The interview guide was composed based on previous studies on risk and protection in other communities (e.g. [Marey-Sarwan and Roer-Strier, 2017](#)). The interview questions covered the following subject areas: (i) perceived good care, risk and protection of children (What, in your personal opinion, constitutes good childcare? What poses risk for children?); (ii) perceptions regarding the definition and aetiology of child maltreatment (What, in your personal opinion, constitutes 'child neglect'/'child abuse'?); (iii) perceptions regarding the effect of child maltreatment (What do you think is likely to happen to children who are abused/neglected?); (iv) ideas regarding effective intervention and the prevention of maltreatment; (v) religious aspects of child abuse and neglect (What do you know about how the Torah and the Halakha approach issues of abuse and neglect?). The questions were open-ended, allowing participants to spontaneously raise other topics.

Data analysis and validation

With the participants' permission, all interviews were audio-taped and fully transcribed verbatim. The study was conducted based on the thematic analysis method ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#); [Patton, 2015](#)). In the first stage, the researchers acquired familiarity with the data (immersion) by reading the interviews several times. In the second stage, we began open coding, which facilitated the identification of basic units of meaning ([Corbin and Strauss, 2015](#)). Then, links and hierarchies among and within the codes (subcategories) were established using axial coding ([Denzin, 2009](#); [Corbin and Strauss, 2015](#)). Data analysis was conducted using *Dedoose*—a cross-platform web application for analysing qualitative data.

As part of the effort to increase the reliability of the study ([Lincoln and Guba, 1985](#)), we employed peer debriefing and an audit log. In the

course of peer debriefing, the researchers analysed the data both independently and jointly. Joint analysis was conducted in face-to-face group meetings and considered elements of the data that were previously analysed separately. The unique composition of the research group—which included experts in the field of qualitative analysis, child welfare practitioners and people with differing levels of familiarity with the Ultra-Orthodox community—provided multiple perspectives for analysing the raw data and served as a basis for interpreting the findings until consensus could be achieved (investigator triangulation). The audit log consisted of detailed documentation kept by all the researchers throughout the various stages of the study (Denzin, 2009).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study in Cleveland was granted by the Case Western Reserve University Ethics Committee (IRB-2014-769) and the study in Israel was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's School of Social Work. The study was conducted in accordance with the Ethics Committees' guidelines: participants signed an informed consent form and confidentiality was ensured throughout all stages of the study, including the use of pseudonyms and the omission of all identifying details from the final report and from this article.

Findings

Although many themes and categories emerged from the analysis of the interviews, in this article, we focus on one prominent and consistent theme that the interviewees themselves referred to as 'spiritual risk'. As the interview guide was formulated based on the existing Western professional literature on risk, neglect and abuse, the interview questions made no direct reference to this kind of risk, which has yet to be addressed by the literature. The interviewees' attitude towards 'spiritual risk' emerged spontaneously in response to numerous questions designed to probe the question of what, from their perspective, constitutes risk for children. Elements of the construct 'spiritual risk' were evident in all fifty interviews. The emergence and salience of the notion of 'spiritual risk' in the interviews highlighted the centrality of the conceptions and meanings ascribed to risk within the Ultra-Orthodox community.

Dimensions of 'spiritual risk'

Our analysis indicated that what Ultra-Orthodox parents referred to as 'spiritual risk' is a complex construct consisting of three interrelated

dimensions that contribute to risk for children and adolescents in the eyes of their parents.

A decline in the observance of the Torah and the commandments—the strict and total observance of the large number of Jewish religious commandments—some of which are regarded as stemming directly from the Torah and others of which are regarded as having been created by the Jewish sages—is a fundamental value of the Ultra-Orthodox community. The *Shulchan Aruch*, a legal code authored in the sixteenth century by Rabbi Yosef Karo, is regarded as the last rabbinical authority to enumerate these different obligations. Children who do not fulfil these commandments tend to be regarded by their parents as being at risk. One major manifestation of this condition is a decline in their observance of the commandments of prayer, which causes parents concern and emotional distress: ‘When I see a child who is not praying as he should, it breaks my heart . . . it hurts’ (Nisan, father of six, Israel).

Breaking socio-cultural norms and rules—the Ultra-Orthodox community is organised around strict sets of norms and rules that aim to assist community members in fulfilling the commandments and to preserve the unique socio-cultural heritage of the community. These norms, rules and restrictions cover almost every aspect of a person’s life, including gender roles and separation, dress-codes and the banning of the mass (secular) media, the internet and smart phones. Children who deviate from these norms are perceived by parents as being at risk:

I won’t allow my children to watch movies, not even those that are considered to be ‘Ultra-Orthodox’ We have a computer at home, but I don’t show them anything. It’s really no good Today, nothing can be watched. The exposure on the internet, on Facebook, and in movies is truly a risk in my view (Yael, mother of six, Israel).

A decline in spiritual beliefs, including their sense of connection to G-d—Ultra-Orthodox society in particular assigns great significance and importance to the spiritual realm, which is considered to constitute a substantial reality. Indeed, the spiritual realm is viewed as more important than the physical realm (Friedman, 1991; Asad, 1993; Woodhead, 2010). In Ultra-Orthodox communities, a decline in a child’s spiritual beliefs and his or her sense of connection to G-d is regarded as a marker for risk:

When you feel a reality that can pull them down, far below the limit you set for yourself, it scares you a bit. It scares you because that’s not how you want to see your child. The goal is to start a family in which the children follow the path of G-d—again, in the way that you understand it. When you see that your child can sometimes reach places that are significantly lower than the bar you set for yourself, you have a problem with it (Rafael, father of five, Israel).

The interconnectedness of the three dimensions

In the eyes of the parents interviewed, the three distinct dimensions of what they refer to as ‘spiritual risk’ are interrelated, as exemplified in the following quotation:

Not following Torah and mitzvahs [commandments] according to the Orthodox community would be very at-risk ... something that would be at-risk in youth is all of a sudden not showing up for their regular ‘davening’ [prayer] times ... that could be a risky situation, because ... without davening they’ll be less closely connected to G-d—*hashem*—and therefore more likely to not be thinking about something watching over them in their lives, even when nobody’s looking. They might be more likely to go into negative behaviour. That’s from the point of view of fear ... also from the point of view of love, if they don’t see their father, their creator—I’m not talking about their parental father but their G-dly father—without him being there, they also may not feel that comfort growing up. And without that comfort, their personality might slowly deteriorate ... [into] negative attributes and negative traits (Aaron, father of five, Cleveland).

In this way, the notion that is referred to by Ultra-Orthodox parents as ‘spiritual risk’ can actually be understood as a complex construct consisting of three interrelated dimensions: (i) a decline in the observance of the Torah and the commandments (in this case, not praying), (ii) the violation of socio-cultural norms and rules (either not showing up for prayers or showing up late) and (iii) spiritual decline, including a decline in the sense of connection with G-d (being less protected and therefore perhaps even developmentally impaired).

Elements contributing to ‘spiritual risk’: the home and the family*Parental maltreatment*

From the perspective of the parents interviewed, maltreatment that occurs within the home may expose a child to ‘spiritual risk’, as in the case of child abuse:

There was a case here of ... shocking physical and emotional abuse, something truly frightening. And, well, the kids broke down the walls and did their own thing. They simply ran off and became whatever they became, in all respects All [of the adult children] found a refuge for themselves ... [The older children] dropped out in all different directions and declined spiritually, in all respects. I’m not placing blame, but they rejected and rebelled against everything they could (Dassi, mother of ten, Israel).

The major effect of domestic child abuse and neglect as depicted by the interviewees was its potential to lead to spiritual risk.

Strict parental education and pressure for religiosity

In the eyes of the parents, strict and rigid parental education towards religiosity may actually have the opposite effect to that intended: a failure to fulfil the commandments, spiritual decline, a move away from religion and, in the long term, leaving the community:

When a child is forced to pray or to study ... he will simply come to hate it. And if it occurs systematically over a period of years as he grows up ... he'll simply rebel against everything and never pray. Not even at the age of 40 (Levi, father of five, Israel).

Elements contributing to 'spiritual risk': exposure to the world outside the family and community

Exposure to the media

The parents interviewed for the study perceived exposure to the general secular media, which reflects an ethical world that differs from that of the Ultra-Orthodox community, as an element contributing to the risk of spiritual decline: ‘

As far as I'm concerned, the internet is *ye'hareg v'al ya'avor*. All the visual content ... the computer ... the television ... As far as I'm concerned, they are unacceptable and can result in spiritual decline ... I don't want to expose him to it (Chavi, mother of six, Israel).

‘*ye'hareg v'al ya'avor*’ is a Jewish religious category of things that people must be willing to die before doing. Here, this expression should not be interpreted literally, but rather as a way of expressing the interviewee's negative attitude towards the internet.

The 'street'

The ‘street’ is perceived as a space representing the risk posed by what lies beyond the protected home environment and a world of values and behavioural norms that are different and distinct from that of the Ultra-Orthodox community. It is a space that represents a particularly formidable risk to the spirituality of children and adolescents:

And there's the open space—the guys in the neighbourhood, particularly the street. A home is supposed to be a protected, sheltered environment. [The child] shouldn't start declining or be drawn into what's happening on the street. The street poses a greater danger to the spiritual realm—the danger of being exposed to an environment with bad influences that can cause a child to start declining and lower his spiritual level. The environment does damage ... It introduces the child to concepts with which he is not familiar (Rafael, father of five, Israel).

The street is viewed as dangerous because of the potential for encounters with people who are not from the Ultra-Orthodox community and who may expose children to a different ethical world and impair their spirituality.

The consequences of 'spiritual risk': increasing distance and leaving the community

According to parents, 'spiritual risk' can result in a child's moving away from the Ultra-Orthodox religious world and leaving his or her community:

When they say a child is at risk in the Ultra-Orthodox world, it usually means the risk of leaving—you know, leaving the fold, so to speak; deviating from the path, becoming non-religious (Moshe, father of one, Cleveland).

I would say that I've only heard 'child at risk' with regard to the orthodox community. It generally refers to a child who is at risk of going away from his orthodox roots ... and often that comes with many other things that we would not approve of, like drugs and hanging out with the wrong crowd (Yakov, father of five, Cleveland).

The impact of 'spiritual risk' can manifest itself in a decline in the spiritual and religious level of the child to the point of abandoning religion altogether or leaving his or her community.

Discussion

In this article, we focused on parents' perceptions of risk to children in their community and on one concept that emerged from our analysis of fifty interviews with Ultra-Orthodox parents in Israel and the USA. 'Spiritual risk', in the eyes of Ultra-Orthodox parents, is a complex construct comprising the following three interrelated dimensions: (i) a decline in observance of the Torah and the commandments, (ii) violation of socio-cultural norms and rules and (iii) a decline in spiritual beliefs, including the sense of connection with G-d. In the eyes of parents, it is *decline* in these three dimensions that constitutes the 'spiritual risk' to the child. Such decline may also have severe implications for the individual (e.g. drug use), as well as their social status and, sometimes, that of their parents and members of their extended family (e.g. by adversely impacting siblings' marriage opportunities). 'Spiritual risk' can result in children and adolescents moving away from the Ultra-Orthodox religious world and leaving their community and their spiritual connection with G-d.

Spirituality and religiosity have attracted a growing interest in social work practice and education in recent decades (Furness and Gilligan,

2010, 2014; Stirling *et al.*, 2010; Bullis, 2013; Hodge, 2013, 2017; Oxhandler and Pargament, 2014; Oxhandler *et al.*, 2015; Carlisle, 2016; Crisp, 2016; Kvarfordt *et al.*, 2017). ‘Religion’ refers to affiliation with an organisation that is guided by shared beliefs and practices that have members who adhere to a particular understanding of the divine and participate in sacred rituals. ‘Spirituality’, on the other hand, relates to a person’s sense of connection to or search for the sacred (Vieten and Scammell, 2015). Social work is characterised by a marked trend of framing religion as negative and spirituality as positive (Henery, 2003; Wong and Vinsky, 2009; Hodge, 2017).

Our findings regarding interrelated dimensions of ‘spiritual risk’ challenge this dichotomy by reflecting the overlapping nature of spirituality and religion. Moreover, our study suggests a need for the addition to the discussion of religion and spirituality of a third element that is essential for understanding the individual and family life experiences of members of religious communities: the sense of belonging to the community and identification with its socio-cultural norms and rules. Based on our findings, we argue that these three elements and their potential outcome (i.e. a member leaving the community) should be considered when working with religious families in general and in the context of risk assessment for children in particular.

Adopting a meta position vis-à-vis the research findings encourages us to reflect on the tension surrounding the conflicting cultural and value systems of minority groups and social workers that becomes evident and intensifies when dealing with issues of children at risk. This tension does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in a complex arena embedded in power differentials related to professional role (clients versus practitioner) and social location (minority versus a representative of the hegemonic majority group). The religious and spiritual dimensions tend not to be considered by standardised risk-assessment instruments and therefore may be ignored by social workers and child-protection officers. In a follow-up study with social workers who work with the Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel (Nadan *et al.*, 2018), we discovered that none of the secular social workers recognised ‘spiritual risk’ as a risk for children. The secular social workers noted that children who are brought up within Ultra-Orthodox religious communities may be exposed to other risks embedded in religious, spiritual and community normative practices, beliefs and customs, such as the biblical view supporting corporal punishment, lack of direct parental supervision in large families in which older siblings are responsible for childcare, refraining from talking about sexuality in general and gaze aversion from sexual abuse by adults from within the community in particular, structured and institutional gender inequality, etc. The secular social workers also discussed social work ethics and laws such as the Israeli law that prohibits parental violence and corporal punishment (Nadan *et al.*, 2018). As Ultra-Orthodox parents may

perceive spirituality, religiosity and the sense of belonging to the community as a major concern for their children, the resulting gap in perception may be a source of misunderstanding and tension that can lead to a lack of co-operation and even hostility (Schmid and Benbenishty, 2011), which is ultimately not in the best interest of the child.

The concept of 'spiritual risk' challenges and calls upon professionals to explore the realms of religiosity, spirituality and community life when assessing risk and when working with children and families within close-knit religious communities. Because 'spiritual risk' has not yet been addressed by the professional literature, we can only speculate whether it holds similar importance for parents in other religious groups. Our findings contribute to the debate challenging 'universals' in the definition of 'risk' for children and highlight the importance of social context, religion, religiosity, spirituality and culture in the construction of risk.

Lum (2011) proposes 'inductive learning' as an essential element of cultural competence among practitioners working with diverse groups. Inductive learning is based on the idea that social workers should move beyond cultural descriptions and stereotypes towards listening to the meanings that clients assign to their lives and their experiences within their unique life contexts. It is a position that encourages social workers to adopt an ethnographic stance in which they learn from their clients and, with them, discover their perspective on their lives, including their problems and their strengths (Leigh, 1998). The move from knowing *about* clients to learning *from* clients reflects a fundamental and ethical shift in understanding cultural competence (Hollinsworth, 2013; Nadan, 2017).

In accordance with this principle, this study provides support for the importance of incorporating the perceptions of parents into the discourse of risk, and for the value of qualitative methods in revealing previously unrecognised concepts. While standardised instruments are of great value, a more open-ended conversation based on a grounded-theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) yields concepts and ideas that, though unknown to the researcher, may be of extreme importance to the participants.

Study limitations

First, as in any qualitative study, this study may suffer from sample bias because only those who were willing to take part in the study were interviewed. This potential limitation is especially relevant when researching religious communities with strong boundaries. Second, the study relied mostly on a snowballing sampling technique, which may have resulted in a more homogeneous sample in terms of participants' position in the community. Third, the study focused only on the experiences of parents and could have been enriched by exploring the views of children in the community. Future research should consider the perceptions of Ultra-

Orthodox families that are in contact with welfare agencies and child-protection services, as doing so will highlight the most marginalised segments of Ultra-Orthodox communities and provide a perspective that is even more relevant for service provision.

Practice implications

The findings of this study advocate context-informed and religiously and spiritually sensitive prevention and intervention programmes and highlight the need to include context and religious competency in the training of professionals working with diverse communities. This is consistent with the International Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW) Global Standards (2012) and Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (2015), both of which specify religion and spiritual beliefs as factors of diversity requiring cultural competence on the level of professionals and the overall system. However, whereas clinical social workers from across the USA were found to have positive attitudes towards integrating clients' religious and spiritual beliefs into practice, fewer reported engaging in behaviours related to such interventions. Prior training was found to be a predictor for overall orientation towards integrating clients' religion and spirituality into practice (Oxhandler *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, Canadian social work educators showed a favourable view towards religion and spirituality in social work practice, and general support for including such content in social work education. However, only one-third reported that such content is actually included in their curriculum (Kvarfordt *et al.*, 2017). These findings stress the importance of developing training modules for incorporating religion and spirituality into social work practice in general and child-protection work in particular. More specifically, our findings highlight the importance, on the part of social workers, for the development of empathy for parents' concerns regarding the religiosity and spirituality of their children, as well as for parenting practices aimed at preventing or dealing with 'spiritual risk'. Making room for discussing issues related to 'spiritual risk' in child-protection work can open new venues for strengthening co-operation with Ultra-Orthodox families and relevant community figures. Moreover, every-intervention programmes offered to Ultra-Orthodox families should be examined to ensure that the proposed intervention itself will not expose children to 'spiritual risk', as perceived by their community.

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