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The Experience of the Stigma of Divorce for Christian Women in Violent Marriages

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Sonya L. Cowart

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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by

Sonya L. Cowart

MA, Liberty University, 2015

BS, Liberty University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

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February 2024

Abstract

Intimate partner violence has become a serious threat to marriage and communities as a

whole and is often cited as the justification for divorce in secular and religious groups.

There is very limited existing research on how Christian women move through intimate

partner violence and divorce. In this phenomenological study, the stigma that Christian

women experienced in divorcing from abusive husbands was explored. The theoretical

foundation of feminism was used as the lens through which to view situations when

women were treated as inferior and were oppressed, victimized, dominated, and silenced.

Six Christian women participated in this study, all fully divorced from husbands who

abused in multiple forms. Data were collected in semistructured individual interviews

that were transcribed for thematic analysis. Six themes emerged from the analysis: family

and church connections were very important, all forms of abuse were experienced in their

marriages, religious leaders gave unsafe and contradictory advice, there was a strong

stigma for divorcing from abusive marriages, help came mostly from outside the church,

and Christian women in abusive marriages need better advice and substantial help. The

findings of this study highlight the intense suffering of the participants as they searched

for safety and support yet found little to none. The study's implications for positive social

change include the need to raise awareness that women are suffering unnecessarily from

religious stigma, the need to raise awareness of the distinct lack of preparedness within

Christian leadership to intervene on behalf of women victimized by intimate partner

violence, and the need to raise awareness that the families of these women are being

harmed from inadequate support systems.

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to the women who have suffered unfathomable anguish in abusive marriages at the hands of those men who promised to love, uplift, and protect their wives, yet who did not honor that promise. It is dedicated to those women who were further victimized by God's people who were put in place to be the embodiment of His love to the helpless and hurting, yet who did not honor that position. May you all thrive knowing that His face is shining upon you and that He will bless and keep you as His own.

Acknowledgments

 I want to say thank you to Walden University for preparing me thoroughly for this time and to my dissertation committee members for their guidance, Dr. Jessica Millimen, Dr. Jana Price-Sharps, and Dr. Jessica Hart.

I want to thank the women who have sought my help over the years as they healed and grew around their experiences. Thank you for trusting me with your pain.

Thank you to Leslie Vernick and the work that she has done to show the Church at large that there is a Godly and Biblical way to intervene in abusive situations within marriages.

A heartfelt thank you to my family who has allowed me space and time to focus on this project and supported me completely.

To my love and lifelong companion, Jerry, I give my warmest thanks for guarding my heart so carefully and loving me to the uttermost.

And my deepest thanks, from my very soul, is for God my Father, Jesus my Savior, and Holy Spirit my Sustainer. Thank you for providing us with all we need to live abundantly in this world. May we do better in honoring You.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Marriage has been and remains prevalent and common in most societies worldwide while intimate partner violence (IPV) has become a serious threat to those marriages (Breiding et al., 2015; Duncan & Duncan, 1978; McDougall & Pearsall, 2017; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). IPV is widely described as a destructive phenomenon crossing every culture, yet IPV specifically against women has been termed a significant global problem (Breiding et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018). There has been an inadequate understanding of IPV as well as poor support for those victims of IPV, not only in secular communities but also in religious groups including Christian organizations (Focus on the Family, 2016; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a; Iqbal, 2021; Konieczny, 2016; Konstam et al., 2016; Laufer-Ukeles, 2020; Mogahed, 2021; White & Berghuis, 2016). More importantly, there has been little research into how Christian women navigate the stigma that often accompanies divorce from such situations.

In this study, I examined the experience of the stigma surrounding divorce for Christian women who chose to divorce from marriages wherein they were victimized by their abusive husbands. In this first chapter, I lay the foundation for the research and describe the background of the issue, the problem being addressed, the purpose of the study, the theoretical foundation of the project, and the nature of how the study was conducted. I also provide definitions of terms important to the research, assumptions related to the study, the scope and delimitations, the study limitations, and the significance of this study.

Background

Great suffering is experienced by victims in IPV situations even though many victims steadfastly insist on remaining in those marriages, oftentimes due to their Christian values, beliefs, and attitudes (Moon & Shim, 2010; Vernick 2013). Strict Biblical legalism founded upon a narrow definition of abuse has resulted in refusal to enact healthy boundaries in marriage and a hesitancy to move away from emotionally destructive or violent marriages unless repeated adultery has occurred (Moon & Shim, 2010; Zust et al., 2017). Disagreement of what constitutes IPV has brought the need to specify a definition of IPV to include any behavior causing harm physically, psychologically, emotionally, or sexually (Breiding et al., 2015). Furthermore, in circumstances involving spiritual beliefs and divorce, there has been hesitancy to address IPV in such realms as religious/pastoral care (Ellison et al., 2012; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a; Moon & Shim, 2010; Zust et al., 2017) and professional mental health services (Magyar-Russell & Griffith, 2016). Research has demonstrated that many Christian women continue to be victimized without legal, social, and spiritual support (Vernick, 2013; Zust et al., 2017).

Problem Statement

Marriage remains a universal foundational social institution, yet IPV has become a significant health and legal issue within the United States and around the globe (Breiding et al., 2015; Duncan & Duncan, 1978; McDougall & Pearsall, 2017; WHO, 2021). Previous research has explored many factors surrounding IPV including the lack of support many women receive from social communities and religious leaders, the belief

that marriage is a holy and unbreakable sacrament, machismo attitudes, convictions about women's submission in patriarchal cultures, self-identity, and inadequate assistance (Adjei, 2017; Ellison et al., 2012; Savaya & Cohen, 1998). Researchers have reviewed Jewish, Muslim, and nonreligious IPV situations as well as the advice given by Christian leaders when it comes to abuse (Gonzalez, 1999; McCoy, 2016; Zust et al., 2017). This current study added to the body of knowledge by gaining insight into and an understanding of the actual experience of the religious stigma surrounding divorce among specifically Christian women who had been in violent marriages. Additionally, it explored the experiences and meanings of religious stigma for those women during their abusive marriages, how their perceptions of divorce interplayed with their decision to remain in the violent situations, and how they were eventually able to remove themselves to safety.

Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences surrounding religious stigma of divorce for Christian women having endured IPV in their marriages. This study was focused on understanding the thoughts and emotions experienced by women identifying as Christian and gathering descriptions of their perceptions of divorce within the circumstances of their violent marriages. Further, it explored the kinds of abuse they endured, how their belief system impacted their decisions to stay or leave, their conceptualizations of the legal ramifications of IPV, and what the spiritual/religious advice they were given meant to them.

Research Question

RQ: What is the lived experience of religious stigma surrounding divorce for Christian women in abusive marriages?

In this study, I explored the experiences, as well as the meaning attached to the experiences, of religious stigma surrounding divorce when Christian women were in abusive marriages. The vivid descriptions provided by participants' remembered stories were used to uncover the very essence of their particular situations. There was no analysis of these descriptions for causation or explanation of the events (see Adams & Van Manen, 2008). I conducted this study solely as an attempt to develop an understanding of the stigma. A semi structured interview format was used throughout the study (see Bearman, 2019).

Theoretical Foundation

I used feminist theory as the theoretical framework for this exploration. Within feminist theory, gender inequalities are addressed when women are thought to be victimized, dominated, suppressed, silenced, or powerless (Conlin, 2017; Weitz, 1982). Some social organizations expect women to be in passive roles while appearing dependent, weak, and even less intelligent than men (Weitz, 1982). Moreover, studies have indicated that raising awareness of the plight of women in such instances has enabled female victims to feel empowered, increased their self-awareness and self-esteem, and decreased victim mentality (Johnson et al., 2005; Weitz, 1982). Needs for social and political change can be discovered and positive movement can be enacted by uncovering instances wherein women are distressed as individuals or within certain

cultures. Women in the context of Christian beliefs and abusive marriages may be empowered to move away from dangerous situations and move toward safety if the experiences they have had with the stigma of divorce are better understood. The feminist theory framework fully aligned with the purpose of this study and the research question so that insight was gained into the experience of the stigma of divorce for Christian women in abusive marriages. The terms associated with feminist theory that were important to this research were *oppressed*, *silenced*, *powerless*, *self-worth*, and *meaning*.

Nature of the Study

The phenomenological approach used for this research stresses depth in personal interviews to capture as much of the lived experience as possible from those within the defined phenomenon (Lewis & Staehler, 2010). Phenomenology involves the careful and conscientious capturing of, as well as intense and powerful descriptions of, the lived experiences of a specific people in a defined phenomenon (Lewis & Staehler, 2010). I chose this approach as the most appropriate for gaining insight and understanding into the target group of Christian women who have previously experienced abusive marriages along with the defined phenomenon of the stigma they perceived surrounding divorce. I designed the structure of the participant interviews to focus on the actual lived experiences they had, the sensory descriptions of what the experiences felt like in every way, and the associated meanings encompassing the events.

The phenomenological design was a fitting approach for this study because it was founded upon humanist and philosophical disciplines and was designed to uncover new insight (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010). In this study, I observed Christian women's

experiences of the stigma of divorce in abusive marriages, their reluctance to leave, and how they were able to overcome the stigma and thereby divorce. A phenomenological approach was the most appropriate to develop a new understanding of what Christian women have experienced in their abusive marriages and their perceptions or interpretations surrounding the stigma of divorce in those marriages. This design allowed me to fully meet my objective of obtaining comprehensive descriptions from each participant "that portrays the essence of the experience" for these women (see Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

Definitions

Intimate partner: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defined an intimate partner as

> a person with whom one has a close personal relationship that may be
> characterized by the partners' emotional connectedness, regular contact, ongoing
> physical contact and sexual behavior, identity as a couple, and familiarity and
> knowledge about each other's lives. The relationship need not involve all of these
> dimensions. (Breiding et al., 2015, p. 11)

Further, an intimate partner may include a current or former spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend, dating partner, or sexual partner (Breiding et al., 2015). For the purpose of this study, an intimate partner referred to the marital relationship the female participants had while married to their former husbands who committed IPV against their wives.

IPV: There has been much disagreement as to how IPV is defined and what it includes. Breiding et al. (2015), in working with the CDC, defined IPV as any form of

"physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former intimate partner (i.e., spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, dating partner, or ongoing sexual partner)" (p. 11).

Assumptions

A major assumption that I made regarding this research was that the participants would describe and demonstrate a stigma surrounding the idea of divorce from their violent marriages. There has long been a negative attitude toward divorce, with some people describing it as an inexcusable sin and marking those who choose divorce with disapproval (Gerstel, 1987; McCrae, 1978). For those within the Christian belief system, IPV has been documented as the number one cause of divorce (Hobbs, 2020; Levitt & Ware, 2006). Many Christians believe that divorce is only an option when adultery is involved, and some add that abandonment also qualifies as a valid reason to divorce (Hobbs, 2020; Leong, 2018; Olshewsky, 1979). When I considered these factors together, I came to assume that Christian women in abusive marriages would more than likely experience stigma should they choose to divorce.

A second assumption was that there would be women in local churches who would be appropriate for inclusion in this research. This was to assume that there were local divorced Christian women who were victimized by their former husbands and chose to leave the marriage. It was also to assume that such women lived through and past the stigma, healed from their experience, and remained in church. This assumption was not fully founded on good logic since at least 20% of divorced Christians stop going to church in an effort to avoid negative feedback, and many others reported distancing

themselves from their faith while only attending services periodically (Focus on the Family, 2016; Konstam et al., 2016; White & Berghuis, 2016).

Scope and Delimitations

In this study, I sought to develop an understanding of and insight into the experience of the stigma of divorce for Christian women who were victimized by their former husbands. The focus was on the participants' thoughts, emotions, reactions, and behaviors they experienced regarding divorce along with their perceptions of divorce according to their religious beliefs. The mark of negativity and shame they endured was expected to be described in thick rich detail to provide better awareness and understanding of their experiences. I also desired to uncover how participants' faith systems interacted with their decision to divorce and the reaction of their cohort.

Because deep descriptions were being sought to gain insight into others' experiences, phenomenology was the most suitable design for this study. I considered other designs for this project: narrative, case studies, grounded theory, and ethnography. None of these designs were appropriate for a variety of reasons such as time constraints, the purpose of the project, and safety for me as the researcher and for the participants alike. For example, ethnography immerses the researcher into the situation being observed as it is occurring (Fetterman, 2010). This was not a suitable plan when observing stigma during a divorce from a violent marriage.

All participants of this study were required to be adult, female, divorced, Christian, and have experienced IPV in their previous marriage. They could no longer be

in any abusive situation and could not be part of a protected or vulnerable group. Individuals were excluded if they did not meet these criteria.

Data were gathered in personal interviews accomplished through face-to-face, video, or phone meetings (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participants chose how the interview was conducted based on their location and technological ability. Each interview was audio recorded and limited to no more than 2 hours. After full transcription, I coded the data thematically (see Saldaña, 2016; Sutton & Austin, 2015).

The information gathered in this study is only applicable to this project and only to be understood in the context of the women involved as participants (see Shenton, 2004); therefore, transferability is quite limited. At the same time, a detailed description of each step of recruitment and interviewing has been provided so that the process can be transferred to similar future projects (see Shenton, 2004; Tracy, 2010; Vagle, 2018).

Limitations

A serious limitation in nearly any research is the presentation of risk to participants, yet that risk must be minimized (Lantos et al., 2015). The U.S. Code of Federal Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (2018) defined minimal risk as being an anticipated harm or discomfort encountered in the research that will not be greater than the harm or discomfort encountered in ordinary daily life or in routine physical and psychological exams. I interacted with research participants in this study in such a way as to protect their dignity along with their physical, psychological, and financial status (see Lantos et al., 2015). Other protective measures I employed included informed consent; protection of identity; confidentiality of information; disclosure of the

purpose for research; voluntary participation; disclosure of risk possibilities; and availability of help, if necessary, for processing past trauma (see American Psychological Association [APA], 2017).

Another limitation was ensuring that participants were no longer in abusive situations or fragile states of mind. People experiencing current violence or who are in an emotionally or psychologically impaired state are vulnerable and were not accepted for this research (see Office of Research and Doctoral Services, 2021a). Any vulnerable applicants were referred to appropriate interventions.

Significance

Positive social change is fundamentally accomplished through individuals, spreads to families and communities, and moves out toward cultural and global conditions in ever widening circles. This research, delving into the experiences of Christian women and the religious stigma of divorce in abusive marriages, has just such potential. As individual women provided thick rich descriptions of their experiences, knowledge was gained toward understanding the perceptions, values, beliefs, and attitudes that kept these women in violent and devastating circumstances. This knowledge need not only provide insight; it can also be dedicated toward improving situations such as these women described, empowering Christian cultures to assist in moving women away from danger and toward safety, and challenging practices that harm the innocent or further victimize those who are already victims. The end result may very well be safer families, safer communities, and a safer world.

Summary

While marriage remains a foundational social institution, violence within marriage is a serious global problem with far-reaching ramifications (Breiding et al., 2015; Dillon et al., 2013; WHO, 2021). Women suffering under IPV within the United States often reported receiving poor support from community programs as well as religious organizations (Davis & Johnson, 2021; Zust et al., 2021). There have been a variety of previous research projects documenting IPV from a multitude of angles (which will be meticulously described in Chapter 2), yet what remained to be explored was the actual experience of the stigma of divorce for Christian women who chose to divorce from violent marriages. I conducted this phenomenological study from a feminist theoretical perspective that highlights when women are thought to be victimized, dominated, suppressed, silenced, or powerless (see Conlin, 2017; Weitz, 1982). This study will raise awareness of the plight of women in such instances and may well enable female victims to feel empowered toward decreasing victimization, thereby producing positive social change (see Johnson et al., 2005; Weitz, 1982).

In the next chapter, I present an exhaustive review of the relevant literature relating to marriage, divorce, and IPV. The relationship between the largest religious organizations and marriage, divorce, and IPV are examined with Christianity as a focus. Additionally, I also provide descriptions of behaviors that are considered IPV, information on the prevalence of IPV, and the documented effects of IPV. Chapter 2 closes with a synthesis of the literature on IPV, divorce, and religious beliefs along with a

discussion of how previous studies laid the foundation for this study on the stigma of

divorce for Christian women in marriages characterized by IPV.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

IPV has become a significant worldwide health and legal issue (Breiding et al., 2015; WHO, 2021). Marriage remains a primary social and religious institution meant to provide stability and intimate connectedness, yet IPV has threatened the well-being of many of these relationships (Billari & Liefbroer, 2016; Gesselman et al., 2019; Hobbs, 2020; Levitt & Ware, 2006). Even in such devastating circumstances as IPV, there have been sanctions against divorce, especially in religious communities, which have become barriers to women seeking safety (Jayasundara et al., 2017; Nason-Clark, 2004; Zust et al., 2017). Furthermore, the stigma that often accompanies divorce is overwhelming to many people and has been described as "an insidious presence" (Gerstel, 1987; Konstam et al., 2016, p. 189).

Despite an immense amount of research on divorce and IPV, there exists no examination of the actual experience of the religious stigma surrounding divorce among specifically Christian women who were in violent marriages. The purpose of this study was to explore that stigma. I concentrated on gaining an understanding of and insight into the thoughts and emotions surrounding the stigma experienced by Christian women and their descriptions of their perceptions of divorce within the circumstances of their violent marriages.

In Chapter 2, I provide a thorough review of the literature relevant to marriage, divorce, and IPV, along with how the five largest religious groups interact with marriage, divorce, and IPV. There is a focus on Christianity and women as victims who are seeking or have sought divorce. I describe feminist theory as the theoretical framework for this

study and explain it accordingly. There is also a comprehensive examination of IPV with its prevalence and effects both inside and outside of religious affiliations. Lastly, I synthesize these facets to demonstrate the need for further research on the topic.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted an extensive search of relevant literature within several libraries, databases, and search engines, which provided numerous resources for both peer-reviewed and nonpeer-reviewed information germane to the subject of this study. In preparation for this research, relevant literature was gathered in the form of journal articles, magazine articles, dissertations, books, statistical data, internet sites, and web documents.

Microsoft Edge and Google Scholar were utilized to find statistical data as well as cultural current and historical information using the following search terms: *history of marriage, trends in marriage, beliefs on marriage, religion and marriage, history of divorce, trends in divorce, religion and divorce, statistics for marriage and divorce, IPV rates, violence against women, spouse abuse, domestic abuse, definition of IPV, cost of IPV, religion and IPV.*

I searched the following academic databases for pertinent academic and peer reviewed literature: Academic Search Complete, APA PsycInfo, Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Business Source Complete, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, Communication & Mass Media Complete, Directory of Open Access Journals, Education Source, ERIC, Gale Academic OneFile Select, International Security & Counter Terrorism Reference Center, Journals@OVID, ProjectMUSE, ProQuest Dissertations &

Theses Global, ScienceDirect, Science Citation Index, Social Sciences Citation Index,

Social Works Abstracts, SocINDEX with Full Text, Supplemental Index, and Thoreau

Multi-Database Search.

I used a variety of search terms in each database. Literature relevant to the subject

matter of this research project were found using the following terms:

(abuse), and partner, spouse, domestic, battered, women, men, children,

prevalence, effects, in the church

(cultural, social) and attitudes on marriage and/or divorce

(divorce, divorced, divorcing, divorce distress) and women, effects of, children,

reasons for, (Jewish, Judaism) (Muslim, Islam), (Christian, Christianity),

(Buddhist, Buddhism), (Hindu, Hinduism), (Catholic, Catholicism),

(Protestant, Protestantism)

(marriage, married, marry),and history of, attitude(s) toward, trends, belief(s),

norms, perception(s), (Jewish, Judaism), (Muslim, Islam), (Christian,

Christianity), (Buddhist, Buddhism), (Hindu, Hinduism), (Catholic,

Catholicism), (Protestant, Protestantism)

(pastor, pastoral, cleric, clergy) and teachings on marriage and/or divorce,

attitudes on marriage and/or divorce, teaching on (abuse, DV, IPV,

spouse abuse)

(religion, religious) and beliefs on marriage and divorce

(stigma), and definition of, divorce, effects of

(violence), and definition of, effects, domestic, DV, intimate partner, IPV,

prevalence, in the church

(Women, feminist, feminism)

Theoretical Foundation

Feminist theory was the foundation for this research. Feminist theory was created

to uncover and correct instances wherein women are considered or treated as if they are

inferior and unequal to men (Conlin, 2017). The theory is applicable when women are

excluded, oppressed, victimized, dominated, suppressed, silenced, or powerless merely

because they are women; it also applies when women are expected to be passive and

weak in the presence of men (Conlin, 2017; Weitz, 1982).

The need to raise consciousness of the injustice and bias toward women is

historical. Tertullian, a 1st-century teacher of Christianity, instructed that womanhood

was a curse from God (Srivastava et al., 2017). The Islamic Quran teaches in Chapter 34

that women are to be ruled by men and completely obedient to them; when women are

not obedient, the man of the house is to strike and/or forsake them (Srivastava et al.,

2017). Honored Greek philosopher, Aristotle, argued that women were to be treated as

similar to slaves due to their naturally inferior intellectual abilities; limited emotional

control; deformity in development, such as lower number of teeth than men; and inability

to produce semen outside of the body (Srivastava et al., 2017; Stauffer, 2008).

A strong effort to raise awareness of the plight of women was championed in the

1800s by activists such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. These women

labored throughout their lives for the rights of women to be autonomous, independent,

and accepted as equal to men in humanness and civil freedoms (The National Susan B.

Anthony Museum and House, 2020). They accomplished much through their tireless

efforts and were able to see women recognized as citizens though the right to vote was

not granted for years after their death. The 19th Amendment giving women the right to

vote was passed in 1920 (The National Susan B. Anthony Museum and House, 2020).

More recently, research has shown that women are still often expected to be

passive, dependent, and less competent than men (Conlin, 2017; Weitz, 1982). Cultural

and religious precepts vary, yet many of those practices keep women in subjection and

seeming bondage (Adjei, 2017; Callahan, 2021; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001b; Hobbs,

2020). Such oppression commonly causes an internalization of negativity resulting in

poor self-esteem, demoralization, and a strong sense of helplessness which thereby

increases the likelihood of developing mental health issues such as depression or anxiety

(Conlin, 2017; Walker, 2017; Weitz, 1982). The traditional professional psychotherapy

world has long been dominated by men which implies another imbalance for women

seeking help since a man is the one with the expertise and ability to help the woman, and

"In this sense, therapy inadvertently encourages dependence and helplessness" of women

(Weitz, 1982, p. 240). Feminist theory has been influential in forming a branch of therapy

highlighting an egalitarian approach centered on assertiveness, empowerment, balanced

relationships, and self-esteem (Conlin, 2017; Johnson et al., 2005).

Despite these gains, there are some women that are being held hostage in violent

marriages due to societal and religious beliefs on divorce (Adjei, 2017; Callahan, 2021;

Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001b; Hobbs, 2020). More specifically, there are some Christian

women, in a belief system said to be characterized by love, who have felt oppressed, dominated, suppressed, silenced, and powerless to move away from violence in their marriages toward safety outside of them (Hobbs, 2020; Leong, 2018; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Vernick, 2013). This phenomenon was an ideal fit for exploration through the lens of feminist theory. Doing so provided increased consciousness of the issues these women faced and understanding into their experiences.

Literature Review

In this section, I review the history and relevance of marriage according to cultural and religious communities. I also include a review of the history of divorce in the same fashion. Additionally, IPV is described, defined, and discussed along with its prevalence and effects. There is a specific focus on IPV within religious communities, especially for Christian women who divorced.

Marriage

Marriage has been and remains a universal foundational social practice. Across cultures, marriage has long been a standard that provides legal, economic, social, and relational benefits (Cherlin, 2004). Marriage, however, has changed over time.

Historical Aspects of Marriage

The practice of marriage has spanned time, nation, and culture. Marriage has incorporated the ideas of monogamy, bigamy, and polygamy as well as set standards of hierarchy of power (McDougall & Pearsall, 2017). In much of history, marriage has been considered a practice of patriarchy in which male prerogative reigned, and female subordination was expected. Marriages have been consummated for love,

companionships, duty, political power, legal convenience, economic gain, and for

environment in which the chance to have children is optimal (Duncan & Duncan, 1978;

McDougall & Pearsall, 2017). Indeed, King Henry VIII of England is well known for

encompassing every one of these ideals in his multiple marriages, divorces, and

widowhood, some of which will be highlighted later in this discourse (A&E Television

Networks, 2020).

Gender roles within marriage have long been ardently defined. Husbands have

traditionally been the major money-makers, while wives have held the responsibilities of

nurturing the family and home (Duncan & Duncan, 1978). These roles have been

confined to strong male and female divisions. For example, even in the 20th century in

the United States, masculine responsibilities for husbands were considered to be repairs

around the house, paying the bills, picking a vehicle to purchase, and securing insurance.

Feminine responsibilities for wives were considered to be grocery shopping, preparing

meals, tidying up the living spaces, and cleaning up the evening dishes (Duncan &

Duncan, 1978).

Current Trends in Marriage

The modern era has seen a significant evolution of the ideals and roles within

marriage. Many couples reported sharing responsibilities that were traditionally separated

by femininity or masculinity (McDougall & Pearsall, 2017). No longer are washing

dishes and cleaning the home singularly regarded as only the wife's duty, but spouses

tend to make joint decisions on purchases and bills rather than leaning on the masculine

tradition (McDougall & Pearsall, 2017). Additionally, marriage in the United States has

been legally redefined to include same sex unions. There are approximately 543,000

same-sex marriages and 61.4 million opposite-sex marriages in the United States (CDC,

2019a, 2019b).

There has been a steady decline in the rate of marriage in the United States from

the high of 72% in 1960 to the current rate of 50% (CDC, 2021). Whereas previous

generations looked for status or benefits in marriage, there has been an ongoing shift in

the significance of marriage in several realms (Cherlin, 2004; Coontz, 2004, 2006). No

longer do people feel compelled to marry for legal and economic safety, sense of duty, or

desire to have children (Coontz, 2004, 2006). Many people believe there is no need to

have the traditional stamp of approval of marriage in order to experience a fulfilling

relationship, and this belief was thought by some researchers to be the demise of the

institution of marriage (Coontz, 2006). Indeed, Cherlin (2004) argued that the acceptance

of cohabitation and birth outside of marriage along with changing trends in gender roles

inside of marriage would bring about a deinstitutionalization of U.S. marriage and a

transition into individualized relationships.

Other researchers have suggested that marriage would continue to hold value and

be a goal to seek and achieve (Smock, 2004). It has become apparent that there are still

the high ideals of romantic love and lifelong marriage even though many adults struggle

to reach such a lofty goal (Hull et al., 2010). The rate of marriage in the United States has

dropped, according to the CDC (2021), yet the symbolic and emotional benefits of

marriage are still being sought after (Billari & Liefbroer, 2016; Cherlin, 2005). Billari

and Liefbroer (2016) supported the case that marriage continues to be viewed as a

positive thing to be achieved and pointed to the decision to marry as an emotional rather than rational one. This outlook suggested that emotional satisfaction in marriage remains a high priority for many people (Billari & Liefbroer, 2016). Gesselman et al. (2019) found that among single adults in the United States, there was strong support for the current relevance of marriage in the ideals of emotional bonding and support as well as contentment. The act of marriage in itself signals willingness and commitment since an exit from the marriage is costly, both financially and emotionally (Lundberg & Pollack, 2015). A leading expert on relationships and marriage reported that couples who remain happily married are healthier and live longer than those who divorce or are in unhappy, disappointing, or destructive marriages (Gottman & Silver, 2015). Those who are happily married tend to have stronger immune systems and report fewer problems with "blood pressure and heart disease, and a host of psychological troubles including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, psychosis, violence, and suicide" (Gottman & Silver, 2015, p. 6).

Attitudes about marriage are often formed in childhood. Adult children of parents who remained married tend to hold a more favorable view of marriage than those adult children of parents who were not married or who divorced (Shimkowski et al., 2018). Additionally, adult children of parents who remained married have a more positive expectation for their own romantic relationships, love, and marriage (Shimkowski et al., 2018). Even so, some adults bring negative attitudes about marriage into their relationships due to the history they had with their own parents' experiences in marriage (Buri et al., 2018). In the current culture, some young adults do not tend to view marriage

as more positive than being single even though marriage is still held up as a high and optimal ideal; for many, marriage seems to be viewed as a rather unreachable pinnacle of emotional satisfaction (Gesselman et al., 2019).

Marriage in Religious Groups

Marriage exists in most cultures and is in the least condoned or in the most mandated in faith-based groups. The major religious groups in today's culture are Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity (Hackett & McClendon, 2017). I reviewed all five groups for their teachings on marriage.

Marriage in Non-Christian Groups. *Islam.* Marriage is a legal and social contract in the Islamic faith (Huda, 2019). Marriage is also considered a religious duty so that families can be established and maintained since sexual activity is not allowed outside of marriage (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001b; Huda, 2019). Muslims who marry each other must always be of the opposite sex (Tasker, 2021). Men are allowed to choose up to four wives at the same time, and the wives can be of the Islamic faith, Christian faith, or Jewish faith. Women are only permitted one husband, and he must be Muslim (Tasker, 2021). Additionally, females are typically considered to be under the guardianship of their fathers until marriage when they transfer to the guardianship of their husbands (Tasker, 2021). Many marriages are of mutual consent although some arranged marriages do occur. Marriage partners are to live together in safety, comfort, and love with the focus of the relationship being obedience to Allah (Huda, 2019). Above all, marriage is looked upon as integral to maturing in the faith (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001b).

Hinduism. Hindu marriage is a very sacred act which is required for pursuing life, wealth, sensual pleasure, and salvation (Jayaram, 2019). Marriage binds two souls for spiritual progression across this life as well as at least seven more lives in reincarnation. Most marriages are arranged according to social class, financial status, education, appearance, and enlightenment. Few marriages are for love, and such marriages are viewed with skepticism as they are outside of social norms. Most Hindu marriage ceremonies are lengthy, elaborate, and expensive. Many rituals are incorporated into the ceremony, the most important being when the bride is given to the gods by her father, and the gods give her to her husband for care and protection. The husband then places a sacred necklace around the bride's neck and accepts her hand (Jayaram, 2019).

Buddhism. Marriage is not considered a religious concern in the Buddhist faith. Instead, marriage is a personal and social practice which came about for human comfort as well as to differentiate human behavior from animal behavior (Maha Thera, 2001). Marriage also maintains order and ensures the young are properly cared for. Buddhist teachings on marriage are liberal and do not provide guidelines on who one may or may not marry. They do, however, give simple directions for living a happy married life, such as remaining monogamous and avoiding large age differences between partners. Monks typically do not officiate at Buddhist weddings since they are not considered religious ceremonies (Maha Thera, 2001).

Judaism. Marriage in Judaism is considered a holy covenant ordained by God (Spiritual Life, 2020). Jewish tradition holds that 40 days before every male is conceived, a heavenly voice announces who that male will marry. This perfect match is his soul

mate, his *bashert*, and Jewish people search diligently for that one person who is the ultimate fit (Jewish Virtual Library, 2021; Rich, 2020). Marriage is primarily to provide unsurpassable companionship and deeply connected love through intimacy on emotional and physical levels. Children are an added blessing (Rich, 2020; Spiritual Life, 2020). Women must consent to the marriage and are provided a monetary token. They are oftentimes gifted with a ring, a written contract, and sexual relation, yet only one of these three needs to be completed to have a binding and unbreakable agreement for marriage (Jewish Virtual Library, 2021). Additionally, Jewish marriage consists of two components: the betrothal and the completion of the marriage. The betrothal may last up to a year and is traditionally the time of preparing the new home, though the couple cannot live together until the actual wedding. In modern times, both stages are typically completed on the same day (Jewish Virtual Library, 2021). Differently than in many religions, sex is the right of the wife rather than the husband. A husband owes his wife food, clothing, and sexual intimacy, but he can never force her to have sex (Jewish Virtual Library, 2021).

　　　　Marriage in Christian Groups. Christian tradition stands on marriage as invented and enacted by the Almighty one true God. After creating space, time, heavens, earth, plants, and animals, God specially created man out of dust and then woman out of man (New American Standard Bible, Gen. 1:1-2:22). God brought this man, Adam, and this woman, Eve, together and blessed them in the first marriage. The couple was open and vulnerable with each other without shame or condemnation (Grams, 2020: New American Standard Bible, Gen. 2:22-25).

God places exceedingly high value on relationships (Grams, 2020). He created people to be in relationships with Him and with each other. Further, He designed marriage as the pinnacle, the most personal and intimate of all human relationships (Johnson, 2020; Thomas, 2015). Marriage was designed to meet the deep-seated human desire to be accepted and valued without fear. The marital relationship is based on unconditional love, trust, forgiveness, selflessness, sacrifice, and vulnerability (Crabb, 2013; Johnson, 2020; Martinez, 2017). It is a reflection of the relationship Jesus Christ has with his church, also called His bride, and the perfect love that He gives (Grams, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Thomas, 2015). Because that love which Jesus gives is unending, Christian marriage is supposed to be for life (Crabb, 2013; Fenn & Rossini, 2017; Johnson, 2020).

Divorce

Divorce, the legal dissolution of marriage (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a), has been increasing in occurrence for much of the 20th and 21st centuries (CDC, 2021; Kulik & Heine-Cohen, 2011). Incidences of divorce peaked in the 1990s, then began to fall. However, a rise in number of divorces has been noted in the last few years (CDC, 2021; Office of National Statistics, 2020). There has been an overall upsurge in acceptance, if not approval, of divorce across cultures, and foundational motivation for divorce varies from adultery to unacceptable behaviors to incompatibility (CDC, 2021; Office of National Statistics, 2020).

Divorce in Public Opinion/Nonreligious Groups

Divorce has long been looked upon as an inexcusable sin (McCrae, 1978). Gerstel (1987) suggested that while public disapproval of divorce waned somewhat, there was still a stigma associated with being divorced. Divorced men and women reported feeling ostracized by friends, losing friends that were shared by both marriage partners, receiving blame from friends and family, and an overall sense of being devalued as a human. As a result, many divorced people suffer with a loss of self-worth (Gerstel, 1987).

Adjei (2017) found that cultural and social beliefs contribute to low divorce rates in many countries. For example, social traditions and cultural behaviors in Ghana tend to cause many women to feel trapped in their marriages due to the fear of the stigma that may accompany divorce. Even in marriages described as abusive, there is little to no divorce. Such situations are oftentimes described as a "double fear" encompassing the fear of community sanctions versus the fear of further abuse (Adjei, 2017, p. 888). Tarnishing the reputation of the family by divorcing, and the resulting stigma which can continue indefinitely, carries a stronger fear factor than continuing in the abuse. Therefore, most women in Ghana in unsatisfactory marriages choose to remain in their marriages rather than divorce (Adjei, 2017).

Industrialized countries tend to have higher divorce rates than less developed areas. The current divorce rate in the United States is 44.6% (CDC, 2021) while the rate in England and Wales is lower at 33.3% (Office of National Statistics, 2020; Yurday, 2021). However, the overall rate of divorce in Israel is 12% which is dramatically lower than in other industrialized countries (Kulik & Heine-Cohen, 2011).

Divorce in Religious Groups

Many religions have tenets and precepts regarding divorce. A majority of religious teachings do not support divorce in most instances. A few, however, provide guidance on when and how divorce should be handled, if allowed. Reasons for divorce abound, ranging from financial issues to substance abuse. The major justifications for divorce among all religious couples in the United States are firstly, lack of commitment to the relationship, secondly, infidelity in the relationship, and thirdly hostility and arguing (Scott et al., 2013). Yet in Christian marriages, research has indicated IPV as the number one issue leading to divorce (Hobbs, 2020; Levitt & Ware, 2006).

Islam. Islam is the second largest religious group in the world, according to the Pew Research Center (Hackett & McClendon, 2017). The Muslim community has generally looked down upon divorce. It is allowed yet considered detestable and something to be avoided (Mogahed, 2021). In the Arab as well as American Muslim culture, those who have chosen to divorce often only do so in extreme situations and with heavy disapproval of others (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001b; Iqbal, 2021). Currently, the divorce rate among Muslims is about 6% although 58% expressed desire for better community support for those who have divorced (Iqbal, 2021).

Hinduism. Hindus make up the fourth largest faith group in the world (Hackett & McClendon, 2017). In Hinduism, divorce has traditionally been banned (Callahan, 2021). The marital bond is thought to be a life-long promise which undergirds the formation of a stable and healthy community (Surjuse, 2021). However, the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 made the provision that divorce is acceptable in the specific circumstances of

infidelity, cruelty, and abandonment. The divorce rate among Hindus in India is approximately 5% while American Hindus divorce at less than 1% (Pew Research Center, 2021; Surjuse, 2021).

Buddhism. Buddhism is the fifth largest religious group, but its members make up only 6.9% of the world's population (Hackett & McClendon, 2017). Buddhism offers a much more relaxed and liberal stand on divorce than other religions. (Buddhism Info, 2021). Marriage is not part of a religious function but is instead a social and individual choice. Hence, Buddhists are free to choose divorce should they find unhappiness in their marriages (Buddhism Info, 2021; Callahan, 2021). Even so, American Buddhists report divorce at only about 1% (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Judaism. Judaism is reported to be one of the smallest religious groups with the overwhelming majority of members living in Israel (Hackett & McClendon, 2017). The whole of Israeli society places the preservation of the family as paramount for being secure and supported, so it is not condoning of divorce (Kulik & Heine-Cohen, 2011). As an industrialized country, the rate of divorce in Israel is 12% which is dramatically lower than in other developed nations (Kulik & Heine-Cohen, 2011). Of the few women divorced in Israel, 90% identify as traditional Jews practicing Judaism (Kulik & Heine-Cohen, 2011).

Christianity. As the largest religious group in the world, the reported rate of divorce among Christians is conflicted. The Barna Group (2009) released data supporting an American Christian divorce rate of 50% overall. Among professing Christians, the rates were 26% for evangelicals, 32% for those born again, 34% for Protestants, and 28%

for Catholics. Dissenting research suggested divorce was much less prevalent within Christian groups. Feldhahn (2014) described the Barna (2009) statistics as controversial projections with little basis in reality and reported the overall divorce rate as closer to 33% with church-going Christians as 27% less likely to divorce.

   Catholic. Catholicism is generally grouped with Protestantism as Christian in statistics and therefore represents the largest religious group in the world (Hackett & McClendon, 2017). Marriage is a holy sacrament to those of the Catholic faith and is believed to be sanctified and permanent (Fenn & Rossini, 2017). Legal divorce is not recognized by the Catholic church and is, in fact, called a sin (Callahan, 2021; Fenn & Rossini, 2017). However, a church tribunal has the authority to deem a marriage invalid in specific circumstances and thereby provide an annulment (Fenn & Rossini, 2017). To be clear, a legal divorce deems a couple no longer married while a Catholic annulment deems the couple was never married in the first place (BeginningCatholic.com, 2016). The current American Catholic divorce rate is at 19% (Pew Research Center, 2021).

   King Henry VIII of England presented two of the most famous cases of annulment by using it, or attempting to use it, to end two of his six marriages (A&E Television Networks, 2020). His first wife, Catherine of Aragon, was out of favor with the king due to not producing a male heir for the throne. Henry sought an annulment from her on the grounds that their marriage was not valid since Catherine had been his brother's wife; Henry married her as a widow shortly after his brother died and he ascended the throne. The Catholic church did not allow Henry's petition which resulted in his declaring a break with the church and forming the Church of England. His fourth

wife, Anne of Cleves, was chosen for political purposes. Henry sought to have this marriage annulled only days after the union (A&E Television Networks, 2020).

    Protestant. As previously noted, Protestantism and Catholicism together, as Christianity forms the largest religion in the world (Hackett & McClendon, 2017). The traditional belief of both groups is that the nuclear family is the foundational element to a healthy society. Divorce rips that foundation apart; therefore, it is taught as a thing that God hates and is rarely permissible (Hobbs, 2020). Many Protestant pastors preach divorce as the enemy of God's plan and the pathway to ensure "the collapse of the family and social order" (Hobbs, 2020, p. 195). Evangelicals and conservative protestants have long believed and continue to believe, that divorce is only to be sought in the instance of sexual infidelity and possibly abandonment (Hobbs, 2020; Leong, 2018; Olshewsky, 1979). Further, they tend to discourage or forbid remarriage after divorce (Hobbs, 2020; Leong, 2018). Years of research have highlighted the tendency toward lower numbers of divorces among conservative Protestants than among other Christian groups as well as nonreligious peoples (Perry, 2018).

Stigma of Divorce in Religious Communities

    Stigma is defined as a blemish of shame and negativity, such as that which may be characteristic of a defect or disease, as well as a distinguishing mark of social disgrace (Goffman, 1963; Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). Stigma is founded in sociocultural processes wherein certain people are grouped as different or abnormal and treated thusly (Jones & Corrigan, 2014). It is a complex issue that has been explained in two components: public stigma and self-stigma. Public stigmatization is related to stereotyping and prejudice and

is often influenced by popular culture, news media, and social media formats (Jones &

Corrigan, 2014; Vogel et al., 2013). Lack of social acceptance, denial of supportive

resources, and discrimination often result from public stigmatization (Konstam et al.,

2016). Self-stigma occurs when individuals in marginalized groups not only endorse the

stereotypical negative beliefs but also internalize them (Jones & Corrigan, 2014;

Konstam et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2013). Self-stigma manifests in shame, loss of hope,

poor self-esteem, and withdrawal from others (Jones & Corrigan, 2014; Konstam et al.,

2016; Vogel et al., 2013).

Such feelings of shame and disgrace are not evident in all people who divorce.

Divorce, in itself, has become more acceptable to society in the modern era than in a

historical perspective, and it is not often treated as an unpardonable sin bringing public

sanctions as it was in the past (Goode, 1956; Konstam at al., 2016). There are numerous

studies covering the positive outcome of some who divorce despite the negative

circumstances in their marital relationships (Augustin, 2016). Bourassa et al. (2015)

suggested that even for women who decided to divorce from very low-quality marriages,

there is a significant trend for them to later gain high satisfaction of life. However,

research has also indicated that for many people, the stigma of divorce is overwhelming

and often crippling, especially to women in religious communities (Adjei, 2017; Gerstel,

1987; Konstam et al., 2016; Olshewsky, 1979; White & Berghuis, 2016).

Stigma of Divorce Among Non-Christian Denominations. Members of faith-

based groups oftentimes describe stigma associated with divorce. American Muslims

once considered divorce a subject completely off limits, yet now they are more open to

the idea when couples are struggling with seemingly unresolvable issues; a full 54% of those surveyed responded as supportive of divorce in such situations (Iqbal, 2021; Mogahed, 2021). Even so, only 6% of that demographic are actually divorced, and it is reported that American "Muslim society and culture remain biased against divorced individuals, especially women who have children" (Iqbal, 2021, p. 25). Ironically, divorced women with children may be the very ones needing the most support, encouragement, and assistance. Contrasting research on America Muslim divorce has suggested that there remains a stronghold in the belief that divorce is abominable in all instances (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a). This belief has left many couples with no recourse. Some interviewees of previous studies reported that they would be better off dead than in their marriages yet were unable to leave due to the firm boundaries of their faith (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a).

In Arab Muslim communities, the majority of marriages do not end in divorce, and actual numbers of occurrences of divorce are difficult to attain with some agencies overestimating and others underestimating (Bromfield et al., 2016). One reason for this difficulty in tracking is that a man can say the word *talaq* (I divorce you) three times to his wife, and they are immediately divorced (Bromfield et al., 2016). Women do not have this right because it is a traditional patriarchal society wherein women are strongly defined by their roles as wife and mother. Women in Arab Muslim communities reported that they do not encourage or endorse divorce due to the intense stigma divorced women experience. These women described poor to no support, financial struggles, social shunning, and psychological trauma (Bromfield et al., 2016).

In Judaism, the stigma is remarkably similar. Divorce is permitted to be initiated by either party, the husband or wife, yet the majority of divorces are led by men (Laufer-Ukeles, 2020). Current Israeli law states that divorce is only accomplished by mutual consent of both parties, yet in actuality it is not so balanced. More often than not, husbands do not consent to the divorce, therefore they are not required to provide financial or material support to the wife. In such situations, husbands are allowed to move forward with a new wife and family while previous wives are considered chained to the marriage. If they go on to a new relationship and have children, the relationship is not recognized, and the children are called illegitimate. Psychological damage to these women is pervasive as seen in poor self-esteem and bitterness (Laufer-Ukeles, 2020).

Stigma of Divorce Among Christian Denominations. Many Christian church members who are afflicted in their marriages and contemplating divorce suffer in silence due to the fear of repercussions from other church members and leadership (Focus on the Family, 2016). Less than half of Christians who divorced mentioned their marital problems to a pastor, while about one third told utterly no one in the church (Focus on the Family, 2016). A full 20% of surveyed Christians who are divorced stopped going to church altogether in avoidance of the backlash while many others simply distanced themselves from their faith without cutting ties altogether (Focus on the Family, 2016; Konstam et al., 2016; White & Berghuis, 2016).

Many Christians contemplating divorce or having already divorced describe little to no support from their fellow believers. Only 25% of divorced Christians reported that their churches offered marital or family disruption counseling (Konieczny, 2016). The

remaining 75% experienced nearly no support during or after their divorces which delineated the strong prohibition against divorce within Christian congregations (Focus on the Family, 2016; Konieczny, 2016). Pastors of those churches not offering family disruption counseling or support services did recognize that there are divorced Christians who are hurting, yet those pastors offered a sort of blame-shifting and referred to the American culture as largely nonsupportive of marriage and endorsing of divorce. They perceived the divorce issues among their congregants as results of outside influences not to be addressed within the church (Konieczny, 2016).

Perry (2018) suggested that while some divorcees separated themselves from their faith, others interpreted their divorces in ways to lay blame on the exspouse. Of divorced Christians who stated their religion/faith is important to everyday life, the stigma of divorce was strong enough for many to consistently lay blame for the divorce on the other spouse, regardless of the foundational issues leading to the divorce. They described an unspoken pressure to present themselves as the innocent party in the hope that they may somehow decrease the discouragement and shame of the perceived negative social mark upon them (Perry, 2018).

Research has also indicated that stigma may be experienced by children of religious parents who divorced. Many such children begin to doubt their belief systems and grow up to question their foundational ideas on faith, relationships, and marriage, and in turn, they often develop a more acceptable view of divorce (Shimkowski et al., 2018). Additionally, adult children of divorced parents reported a decrease in religious affiliation

and attendance to religious events as well as a loss of closeness with their parents (Shimkowski et al.,2018).

IPV

IPV has become a significant health and legal issue not only around the world but also within the United States (Breiding et al., 2015). There has been much disagreement as to exactly what behaviors can be termed abusive and thereby be called IPV. Breiding et al. (2015) defined IPV as *any* behavior by one person which causes harm to another person physically, psychologically, or sexually.

While some behaviors are obviously abusive, others may seem rather harmless in and of themselves, and they are often not initially understood as aggressive or abusive in nature (Breiding et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018). Such behaviors, like name calling and following someone, are typically covert attempts to manipulate and exert power/control over the victim. As shown in Table 1, a variety of behaviors qualify as IPV. These behaviors are categorized according to the type of abuse and the harm they may cause. Even so, this list is not exhaustive (Breiding et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018).

Despite such clear boundaries about what is and is not IPV, there remains a trend to focus mostly on physical and sexual violence as IPV while minimizing or discounting psychological abuse (Pickover et al., 2017; Vernick, 2013; Walker, 2017; Yoshihama et al., 2009). There has been a hesitancy to accept verbal and psychological abuse as real and damaging to the victim (Nash et al., 2013; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005; Walker, 2017). Research by Yoshihama et al. (2009) indicated that not only are the effects of

emotional and verbal abuse just as damaging as other forms of abuse, but emotional and

verbal abuse may often be the predecessor to physical and sexual abuse.

Table 1

Behaviors Defined as IPV

Physical	Psychological	Sexual
Scratching	Indifference/ignoring	Unwanted sexual contact
Pushing	Name calling	Unwanted exposure to sexual content/behaviors
Throwing	Yelling/screaming	
Grabbing	Degrading/humiliating speech toward victim	Unwanted filming/photographing of sexual nature
Biting		
Shaking	Stalking	sexual nature
Punching	Watching/following	Verbal sexual harassment
Hitting	Unwanted repeated contact by phone, message, or in person	Sexual contact without freely given consent
Slapping		
Burning	Sneaking into the victim's property	Attempted or completed forced penetration
Restraining	Leaving odd/threatening items for the victim to find	
Hair pulling		Inability to consent
	Threatening to harm the victim	Inability to refuse
	Threatening to damage property, possessions, loved ones, or pets	
	Damaging/harming the victim's property, possessions, loved ones, or pets	
	Unwanted repeated gifts	
	Spying with listening device, camara, or positioning system	
	Coercive control by limiting access to finances, transportation, or communication	
	Isolation of the victim	
	Mind games to cause the victim to doubt personal sanity	

Prevalence

The WHO monitors the prevalence of IPV. Current statistics show that 30%-38%

of women are or have been victims of IPV; the average is 35%, more than one third of all

women (WHO, 2021). Smith et al. (2018) reported a lower rate at approximately 25% or 1:4 women having been victimized in IPV. The instances of IPV against men is much lower at 1:10 men being victimized (Smith et al., 2018). Further, an intimate partner may be a spouse, a dating partner, a romantic or sexual partner, a cohabitation partner, or a previous partner (Smith et al., 2018). An intimate partner may even be someone relatively unknown to the victim whom he or she just met and decided to go out with or have a one night hook up experience with (Smith et al., 2018).

IPV is widely described as a destructive phenomenon crossing every culture, yet IPV against specifically women is termed as a significant global problem (Breiding et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018). For instance, the Israeli society places heavy stress on the preservation of family which is described as a foundational reason to shy away from divorce. However, research has shown the overwhelming majority of Israeli women who divorce do so because of "extreme marital misery brought on by a high degree of physical violence, sexual torment, and emotional abuse" (Savayah & Cohen, 1998, p. 157). In fact, in a sample of 1,401 married Arab and Israeli Jewish women, an alarming 40% reported IPV (Daoud et al., 2020). The WHO (2021) provided the following rates of IPV against women according to region: Africa, 36.6%; North and South America, 29.8%; Eastern Mediterranean, 37.0%; Europe, 25.4%; Southeast Asia, 37.7%, Western Pacific, 24.6%.

In a single day in the United States in 2015, more than 70,000 services were documented as provided to victims of IPV (Walker, 2017). These services included support and assistance for the adult as well as any children involved, transportation,

emergency housing, and legal advocacy. Another 12,000 requests for victims of IPV services were not able to be filled. Further, about 26,000 calls were made to various IPV hotline agencies. These extraordinary statistics do not include those instances wherein victims of IPV were unable to reach out for help or those agencies that provided IPV relief services which were not reported in the survey (Walker, 2017).

Effects of IPV

All abuse can be traumatizing and destructive. Especially harmful, though, is the pain that is inflicted and experienced within IPV, in a relationship that is supposed to be characterized by comfort, openness, trust, friendship, and love (Gottman & Silver, 2015; Vernick, 2013). The effects of IPV are many and far-reaching.

Economic Effects of IPV. Intimate partner violence is extremely costly in a multitude of ways. The economic burden of IPV is quite high. This burden includes medical services for injuries incurred, mental health services for psychological pain, lost productivity within the workplace, lost wages, loss/damage of personal property, legal fees, and court costs for arresting and prosecuting perpetrators of IPV (Peterson et al., 2018). Within the United States, the lifetime cost per female IPV victim was found to be $103,767, but it was less than one quarter of that amount at $23,414 per male IPV victim. The overall population economic burden of IPV intervention and reparation was reported to be nearly $3.6 trillion (Peterson et al., 2018). These statistics do not and cannot include those numerous victims who did not report IPV or seek help. They also do not include those things which are not quantifiable, such as anguish and suffering experienced by victims or victims' family and friends (Peterson et al., 2018).

Other research has suggested that childhood exposure to IPV between adults in the home also carries a high financial cost. It is estimated that nearly 16 million children in the United States were exposed at least one time to IPV, and more than 50% of those children witnessed serious IPV including one caregiver in the family assaulting another caregiver with a deadly weapon (Holmes at al., 2018). Such exposure places children at increased risk of multiple issues including mental health care needs, decreased academic achievement, increased aggressive behaviors, substance use problems, and legal infractions. The estimated costs per child exposed to IPV is currently over $50,000 (Holmes et al., 2018).

Psychological Effects of IPV. Dillon et al. (2013) conducted a thorough data review for information specifically relating to the effects of IPV on women. Their research indicated a significant relationship between female victims of IPV and a deterioration in mental health status. Women who were victims of IPV were found to be at a much-increased risk of developing numerous psychological complications. These effects were reported, from the most to the least prevalent, as the following: depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, suicidality, self-harm behaviors, psychological distress, and sleep disruption (Dillon et al., 2013). Additionally, it was found that women experiencing more than one type of abuse or experiencing sustained abuse developed more severe symptoms of mental affliction (Dillon et al., 2013).

Pickover et al. (2017) found a strong correlation between non-physical forms of abuse and generalized anxiety disorder. These abuses include emotional, psychological, verbal, and dominance tactics. When one partner utilized patterns of demandingness,

chastisement, and nagging for power and control over the other partner, those victims

tended to avoid, withdraw, and isolate in attempts to decrease risk of harm (Malis &

Roloff, 2006; Pickover et al., 2017). This demand/withdrawal cycle of abuse, wherein

women are the victims of male perpetrators, was found to be statistically significant with

the development of generalized anxiety disorder (Pickover et al., 2017).

Much less information is available documenting the effects of IPV on men. An

emerging body of literature has documented significant psychological distress in men

who were victims of IPV (Machado et al., 2017). Many suffered emotional turmoil

surrounding cultural ideas on masculinity and gender stereotypes. They also felt helpless

because the overwhelming majority of services offered for IPV victims were for women

only (Machado et al., 2017). Some men reported extreme confusion after contacting legal

and social services when they were victimized by their spouses. Many of these men were

completely ignored. Others were made fun of and were even told they were worthless.

More confusing to such victims was when they were told things like "[just] push her

against the wall, give her two punches and the problem will be solved" (Machado et al.,

2017, p. 519).

Children have also suffered psychologically from witnessing IPV among adults in

the home (Harris, 2017; Piotrowski et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2019). Researchers have

shown that these children often developed a multitude of mental health issues including

posttraumatic stress symptoms, poor attention skills, emotional dysregulation, conduct

problems, peer relationship issues, and lack of prosocial interactions including verbal and

physical aggression toward others, most often siblings (Piotrowski et al., 2021; Silva et

al., 2019). Many children developed clinical issues with anxiety and depression that resulted in self-harm behaviors (Harris, 2017).

Physical Effects of IPV. A myriad of physical problems can result from IPV. Chronic pain is one of the most statistically significant issues female victims of IPV reported (Chandan et al., 2019; Dillon et al., 2013). This pain was sometimes discussed as debilitating and disabling, inhibiting everyday functioning. The pains described included spinal, head, neck, abdominal, and joint. Victimized women were also found to have much higher incidences of cardiovascular issues, hypertension, stroke, malnutrition, gastrointestinal problems, sexually transmitted infections, genital problems, urinary tract maladies, and numerous psychosomatic issues as opposed to women who were not victimized by IPV (Dillon et al., 2013). As with the psychological effects, physical effects increased in severity when there was more than one type of abuse and when the abuse occurred repeatedly over time (Dillon et al., 2013).

Relationship Effects of IPV. IPV sometimes damages the ability to initiate or maintain relationships. Data collected by Cherlin et al. (2004) suggested that women who were victimized in IPV were significantly less likely to remain in any marriage or cohabitation partnership. Some such women moved from one superficial relationship to another. Others chronically repeated violent relationships (Cherlin et al., 2004; Walker, 2017) It is important to note that most victims are teenagers or young adults at their first experience of IPV which sets up a pattern for repeated abuse in future relationships (Smith et al., 2018). LaMotte et al. (2017) found a significant reduction in ability to trust and experience closeness or depth of intimacy after being victimized with yelling, blame-

shifting, and name-calling from partners. Many women surveyed determined they will no longer have intimate relationships whatsoever but instead focus on personal priorities such as careers or rearing children (Cherlin et al., 2004).

Battered Woman Syndrome

Walker (2017) has for many years been the leading expert in the field of IPV, with a special focus on women as victims. Her research began in the 1970s as she documented data from more than 400 women in what was then termed *domestic violence,* and she subsequently named the condition these women were commonly experiencing *Battered Woman Syndrome* (BWS) (Walker, 2017). This research has been foundational in changing policy toward helping such victims and informing legal authorities about the ramifications of being victimized in IPV and suffering from BWS (Walker, 2017).

There are very specific symptoms involved in BWS, and they are placed in two groups (Walker, 2017). The first group involves clinical diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder:

- Intrusive reexperiencing of traumatic events in IPV

- Hyperarousal with high anxiety

- Emotional numbness with avoidance

- Difficulty with cognition (Walker, 2017)

The second group describes issues specific to the women with BWS:

- Disrupted interpersonal relationships

- Physical health problems

- Concerns over body image

- Sexual and intimacy inabilities (Walker, 2017)

Central in BWS is the theory of *learned helplessness* as first proposed by

Seligman's research (Seligman, 1975, as cited in Walker, 2017). This term does not

imply, as first thought by many critics, that women in these situations are completely

helpless and unable to react to the violence. Instead, learned helplessness describes the

way in which a person, after repeated abuse, has come to understand that she has "lost the

ability to predict that what you do will make a particular outcome occur" (Walker, 2017,

p. 75.). Said otherwise, victims of chronic abuse do not know the outcome of what their

responsive actions may bring which results in distortions of perception about motivation

toward safety or escape. Learned helplessness is quite difficult for many laypeople to

understand, yet it gives profound insight into the web victims of IPV are caught in, a web

which often prevents them from leaving the relationships (Walker, 2017). Learned

helplessness also counters previous attempts to explain the situation by asserting that

women stay in abusive situations because they have personality disorders, they like pain

and love chaos, or they are simply masochistic (Shainess, 1979). Strongly intertwined in

BWS is the cycle theory of violence (Walker, 2017). Nearly all women who were victims

of IPV experienced this cycle. The cycle has three distinct phases (Walker, 2017).

Phase 1. In the first phase, there is a small amount of tension between the

partners, and it increases over time (Walker, 2017). The perpetrator shows displeasure

and disapproval in several ways, typically including name calling, irritated attitude, and

hostile actions. The victim often goes out of her way to placate and please him which is

sometimes successful and reinforces a belief that he may be changing or that he can be controlled (Walker, 2017).

Phase 2. Tension continues to build, and the victim feels an ever-increasing sense of doom (Walker, 2017). She realizes that she is no longer able to have any control in calming the perpetrator, so she typically retreats or withdraws as much as possible. He, in turn, becomes more aggressive and oppressive toward her. In some instances, she intentionally sets off the upcoming explosion in an attempt to have it occur in a place or at a time wherein she can minimize the damage (Walker, 2017).

A discharge of tension occurs in some way during Phase 2 (Walker, 2017). It may come as an acute verbal assault, physical barrage, or sexual battery. It is intense and leaves the victim injured emotionally and often physically. Phase 2 is when neighbors often notice, and police are called. The aftermath of the attack brings an immediate and extreme drop in tension thereby reinforcing the notion that violence works to reduce tension, yet it guarantees that violence will reoccur (Walker, 2017).

Phase 3. This phase is marked by penitence, remorse, and kindness from the perpetrator (Walker, 2017). He often apologizes, giving gifts and promising that he will change. Some men are not quite so contrite, yet there is an absence of tension and a semblance of peace which gives the victim hope that he may really mean it this time (Walker, 2017).

There are times when Phase 3 does not bring an absence of tension or loving contrition (Walker, 2017). In the first instance of the cycle, 69% of women reported the perpetrator showing remorse and kindness as typical to this stage. However, when the

violence reoccurred and each cycle was repeated multiple times, only 42% of victims reported loving or remorseful behaviors from the perpetrator. These data suggested that after several iterations, tension building and explosions become more common while penitence and kindness decreases. This research also indicated that in relationships marked by a lack of remorse or kindness behaviors in phase three, there is a marked increase in risk of more severe abuse or lethality (Walker, 2017).

More than 40 years of research have gone into gaining deeper understanding of the phenomenon of BWS (Walker, 2017). This careful documentation has helped numerous victims break the cycle and move forward in a safer environment. It has also aided in providing insight into the odd and seemingly indefensible behaviors victims of IPV sometimes display. For instance, there are multiple court cases of women who murdered or seriously harmed their husbands in moments of so-called relative safety. Yet when the principles of BWS have been presented in court, some of these women were found not guilty due to new understanding of the syndrome (Walker, 2017).

IPV in Religious Couples

As discussed previously, marriage is a vitally important part of every culture and is considered sacred in nearly all religions (Billari & Liefbroer, 2016; Grams, 2020; Huda, 2019; Jayaram, 2019; Johnson, 2020; Spiritual Life, 2020). The marital union has been and is still sought after as well as highly valued. Even with such importance and special meaning placed on marriage, repeated IPV is prevalent in religious couples (Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

Added to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse that occurs, there has been a movement toward recognizing spiritual abuse (Davis & Johnson, 2021; Nason-Clark et al., 2018). This abuse involves the use of religious beliefs as a means to control and dominate others. Spiritual abuse attacks the beliefs of victims, impairing them at the very nature of their identity (Davis & Johnson, 2021). Tactics involved may include belittling values and faith-based moralism, preventing involvement in religious practices or traditions, or pressuring the victim to behave in a manner that she believes to be sinful. The perpetrator often uses the ideals of the religion to justify IPV in physical, psychological, or sexual forms and thereby subjugate and dominate the victim. Spiritual abuse in conjunction with IPV has been documented in multiple religions including the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian faiths (Davis & Johnson, 2021; Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

IPV in Judaism and Arab Muslims. Women in Israel have strong religious foundations and are reported overall to be either of the traditional Jewish faith or Muslim (Daoud et al., 2020). Even so, at least 40% of the married women in Israel described IPV within their marriages while divorce rates remain below 12% (Daoud et al., 2020; Kulik & Heine-Cohen, 2011). There is extremely limited data on IPV in Israel, and these are typically only from those instances of IPV wherein police were involved or homicide occurred. Therefore, the actual occurrences of IPV are projected as even higher (Daoud et al., 2020). A recent report showed 72 women murdered in family violence, 33% of which were Arabic Muslims, and over 19,000 women made formal complaints of IPV, 70% of which were Jewish (Mizrahi, 2015). Recent research showed that of those women reporting IPV, 30% of Jewish women and 67% of Arabic women described emotional

and verbal abuse being the most prevalent and physical and sexual abuse often co-occurring (Daoud et al., 2020).

With divorce rates below 12% and despite nearly half of the married women experiencing IPV, it is unclear what the impetus is for remaining in such marriages. Data suggested religiosity and restrictions of faith as a major factor associated with remaining in violent marriages regardless of abusive conditions (Daoud et al., 2020). One exploratory study of Muslim women in Israel noted that participants reported prolonged and quite severe physical as well as sexual IPV (Cohen & Savaya, 1997). Some women were finally able to divorce and escape the violence despite being viewed by their families and society as permanently deficient because of their divorces. They were often called pieces of broken glass, referring to an old yet common cultural adage that "glass once broken can never again be made whole (Cohen & Savaya, 1997, p. 236).

Arab Muslims make up 97.2% of the population of Jordan (World Atlas, 2018). Women in Jordan experience high instances of IPV; the current rate of overall IPV in that region is estimated at 37% (WHO, 2021) while previous reports showed up to 52% of married Muslim women described IPV from their husbands (Krug et al., 2002). To date, there is no Jordanian national system for monitoring IPV or violence against women, so there is uncertainty as to the actual prevalence (Safadi et al., 2013). The findings of Safadi et al. (2013) suggested that basic Islamic instructions and misinterpretations of Muslim teachings have been used to endorse and justify male behaviors of violent control and power within the family.

Jordan is a very modern and advanced Middle Eastern country, yet a majority of Muslim married women there suffer severe physical and verbal abuse (Salameh et al., 2018). Laws surrounding marriage and divorce are religious and determined by Sharia courts which leave battered women believing they have little to no recourse other than to remain and endure because divorce is an abomination. Indeed, women who were finally able to escape the violence and divorce described being taught in their faith that women were created to suffer and endure pain as an acceptable form of living so they could earn rewards from Allah (Safadi et al., 2013). The Jordanian home has been determined as the most dangerous place for women to be (Salameh et al., 2018). At least 76% of adult women murdered in Jordan died in their own homes, mostly at the hands of their intimate partners. Autopsies of many of these women showed old wounds which indicated an ongoing problem of violence in the home (Salameh et al., 2018).

IPV in American Muslims. While the American Muslim faith was organized upon Islamic ideals, all Muslim groups are not identical. Instead, they are representative of the lived culture of the community (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a). Even so, it has been found that American Muslims, as do Arabic Muslims, hold firmly to the pervasive belief that divorce is lawful but most abominable in the sight of Allah (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a). American Muslim have also been documented as having remained in violent marriages because of religious values which bring strong disapproval on separation and divorce (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a; Macfarlane, 2015). One study documented that one in three American Muslim women indicated "shocking" IPV (Macfarlane, 2015, p. 180). Many of these women felt pressure from their religious counterparts to do their duty as

wives, to be patient and accepting of their husbands' behaviors, and they were counseled

to stop being selfish in desiring to escape the abuse (Macfarlane, 2015). Allah hates

divorce and finds it detestable, therefore American Muslim women reported fear of

displeasing him by fleeing the abuse. Many remained in destructive marriages until they

realized they were at the point of welcoming death just to be free of the pain (Hassouneh-

Phillips, 2001a). Because marriage is believed to be the only path to spiritual wholeness,

American Muslim women in violent marriages reported feeling confusion and

devastation when their marriages failed, and they were left bereft of spiritual harmony

(Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001b).

IPV in Christianity. Christian marriage was designed to be a place of

unconditional love, acceptance, and safety (Crabb, 2013; Johnson, 2020; Martinez, 2017).

Christianity is a faith which teaches the importance of healthy, loving, and just

relationships with God and with each other (Jayasundara et al., 2017). However,

Christian marriages still experience IPV at about the same rate as the general population

(Nason-Clark, 2004; Vernick, 2013). Religious beliefs have been correlated with

providing protective elements toward healthy coping and decreased anxiety (Anye et al.,

2013; Davis & Johnson, 2021; Nason-Clark, 2004). Some Christian women who are

victims of IPV use their faith and a community of believers for strength, empowerment,

and support through the difficulties of leaving their abuser and moving toward safety

(Davis & Johnson, 2021; Nason-Clark, 2004).

Other Christian women, however, have not been able to make the choice to move

toward safety or get away from abuse. Researchers have found that the majority of

conservative Christians tend to gravitate toward a patriarchal approach to husband headship of the family and wifely submission and subordination at all times (Nash et al., 2013; Popescu et al., 2009). Research has also indicated that even for those victims of IPV who describe strong Christian faith, they reported significant decreases in perceived levels of personal safety and increases in levels of anxiety and fear (Davis & Johnson, 2021; Nason-Clark, 2004; Rudneva, 2017). In fact, Christian women in abusive marriages have been described as more vulnerable to continued violence and less likely to flee than non-religious women due to their beliefs that they should pray harder and forgive their spouses (Ademiluka, 2019; Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

Female victims of IPV who have remained in violent marriages do so for a variety of reasons, most of which are based on the tenets of their Christian faith: first, God created marriage to be for life; second, adultery is the only excuse for divorce therefore IPV does not qualify; third, they were given advice from pastors, church members, family, and friends who strongly counseled them to stay; and fourth, Christian stereotypes and gender role beliefs prevented them from leaving (Ademiluka, 2019; Popescu et al., 2009). Still, others pointed out these concepts as misinterpretations of Bible scriptures which tend to justify abusive behaviors and violate God's directions to live in love and peace (Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Popescu et al., 2009; Vernick, 2013).

Christian Clergy Perspective on IPV. With IPV occurring at about the same rates within the Christian church as outside of it, there is a need to understand the perspective of the clergy as well as the importance of the clerical role in IPV (Leong, 2018; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005; William & Jenkins, 2019; Zust et al., 2017, 2021). A

full 60% of the U.S. population reported that their faith is especially important to everyday life, and research has indicated that religious organizations provide strong opportunity for providing support to victims of IPV (Levitt & Ware, 2006). More often than not, the first person a victim of IPV tends to seek out for help is a religious leader (Drumm, 2018; McCoy, 2016; Zust et al., 2021).

Separation, divorce, and IPV are complex issues which tend to generate conflicting views. Most pastors and faith leaders consider themselves as protectors of their congregants as well as protectors of the sanctity of marriage (Levitt & Ware, 2006). Christian clergy who were interviewed tended to believe that abuse is not a foundational reason for divorce but that divorce is only accepted or approved by God and the church when adultery is involved. A few added that desertion by a spouse also qualified (Levitt & Ware, 2006; Olshewsky, 2001; Zust et al., 2021). Other Church leaders stated that only in cases of severe physical abuse would divorce be an option, despite lack of adultery (Levitt & Ware, 2006). None of the pastors were able to define how severe physical abuse needed to be in order to warrant divorce (Levitt & Ware, 2006).

Many Christian clergy seem to be unaware or avoidant of acknowledging IPV situations within their congregations. Respondents in one study estimated the instances of IPV within their members as 10% or less despite actual statistics of 25% to 35% (Nason-Clark, 2004; Smith et al., 2018; Williams & Jenkins, 2019; WHO, 2021). A full 42% reported that they did not know of any IPV within their congregants and therefore could not make an estimation (Williams & Jenkins, 2019). For these reasons, one researcher

noted in the early 1990s that "domestic violence is probably the number one pastoral mental health emergency" (Weaver, 1993, p. 402).

Newer studies have not noted any statistically significant reason for changes from that opinion (McCoy, 2016; Nason-Clark, 2004, Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Williams & Jenkins, 2019). A 10-year study on IPV within the Christian church suggested that pastors and church leaders have a sincere desire to help victims, perpetrators, and families (Zust et al., 2021). Despite this longing and the belief that there should be no violence in the marital relationship, there remained a distinct hesitation to acknowledge IPV, preach about it from the pulpit, or teach about it in small group meetings. Congregants were found to strongly hunger for a break in the silence surrounding IPV, yet clergy continued being inhibited in discussing the issue or addressing the problem (Drumm, 2018; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005; Zust et al., 2021). At the same time, church leaders were found to have little to no training about IPV, whether in their original seminary studies or in post degree continued education. Between 77% and 80% of clergy reported feeling fully unprepared and inadequate to intervene in IPV circumstances (Drumm, 2018; Zust et al., 2021). A disconcerting conclusion of the longevity study by Zust et al. (2021) was that church leaders showed a sincere desire to help, yet they did very little to prepare for providing that help and had insufficient understanding of the elements surrounding IPV. Mental health professionals and some church leaders have recommended for decades that the Christian church has fallen far short of adequately addressing the various issues involved in IPV, and there have been several training programs developed for church leaders (Drumm et al., 2018; Pack, 2020; Vernick, 2013,

2022; Weaver, 1993).Yet overall, there has been scant use of these trainings and poor

growth of a supportive environment for victims of IPV within Christian communities

(Zust et al., 2021).

Religious beliefs and concepts typically increase healthy prosocial behaviors

(Ahmed & Salas, 2011; Nash et al., 2013). However, there are instances wherein certain

facets may discourage healthy behaviors. For example, the Christian concepts of

benevolence and forgiveness may lead some believers toward increased unethical

behaviors (DeBono et al., 2017; Leong, 2018). Research has shown that when kindness

and forgiveness are offered by God and others, a result may be that people come to

believe they can continue to behave in hurtful ways, and their behaviors will

automatically be forgiven (DeBono et al., 2017). There is a clear application of this

concept when Christian women who are victims of IPV are encouraged by their spiritual

leaders to forgive and forget in order to maintain and preserve the family; the outcome is

often that the perpetrator is empowered to continue the violence (Leong, 2018; McCoy,

2016; Nash et al., 2013; Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

There have been other instances of abuse wherein not only perpetrators but also

church leadership used Holy Scriptures in ways which manipulated and harmed victims.

The Christian ideas of submission and obedience are two of the most distorted

theological principals and have often been used against victims, further perpetrating

chaos and pain (McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010; McCoy, 2016). Many women have

been taught by clergy that they should be fully submissive to their husbands, even in

violence, and that it is their duty to obey their husbands no matter what his demands are

(Nash et al., 2013). One pastor was quoted as stating that Christian "women are to be submissive to their husbands even if they are beaten to a bloody pulp. In doing so, they may win their husbands to Christ" (Zust et al., 2017, p. 683). This stance on obedience shifted the blame for the violence from the perpetrator to the victim by implying that a wife's lack of submission caused the violence (Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005). Such misuse of Biblical concepts more often than not has tied women to chronic violence as they attempted to live out their faith (Zust et al., 2021). Interestingly, seven out of 13 leaders of Black Christian churches believe that IPV and the misuse of Scripture for manipulation and power is a spiritual abuse driven by demonic forces (Davis & Johnson, 2021).

Synthesis of the Literature on IPV, Divorce, and Religious Beliefs

There is an abundance of information available concerning the many facets of IPV. Intimate partner violence has been noted in every culture and within all people groups (Breiding et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018). It is easily discernable that there is and has been a global crisis concerning IPV, its antecedents, its prevalence, and strategies for addressing the issue and reducing the occurrences (Breiding et al., 2015; WHO, 2021). Even in religious environments, there has been a distinct lack of understanding and healthy interventions to support victims, engender healing, and reduce instances wherein IPV takes place (Cohen & Savaya, 1997; Daoud et al., 2020; Macfarlane, 2015; Nash et al., 2013; Popescu et al., 2009). More so, within Christianity there has been a misuse of the Bible to place responsibility for the abuse on the victim, causing numerous women to believe they must remain in violent and harmful environments (Ademiluka, 2019; Nason-

Clark et al., 2018; Shannon-Lewy, 2017; Vernick, 2013; Zust et al., 2021). Women

choosing to remove themselves from such situations tended to experience negative

responses from clergy and church members resulting in a stigma of divorce despite their

harmful marriages (Adjei, 2017; Focus on the Family, 2016; Gerstel, 1987; Konieczny,

2016; Konstam et al., 2016; Perry, 2018; Vernick, 2013).

Conclusion

In the midst of this abundance of research on IPV and even IPV within

Christianity, what remained to be explored was the actual experience of the stigma of

divorce for Christian women who chose to divorce from husbands who abused them.

Results from the existing body of literature have given little to no insight into or

understanding of the mark of negativity these women endured or the perception of shame

they lived through. Further, there has been insufficient examination of what ordeals they

endured as they worked through the stigma of divorcing and moved on to a new life.

In Chapter 3, I discuss detailed descriptions of the methods and procedures for

this research project. First, I review the design of the project and rationale for it. This

review is followed by the role of the researcher, participant recruitment and interviewing,

and then the gathering and processing of data. I close Chapter 3 with ethical

considerations for crafting excellent research.

Chapter 3: Research Method

I conducted this study to gain insight into and an understanding of the stigma

Christian women experienced in divorcing from marriages characterized by IPV. A well-

planned and detailed methodology of conducting research is paramount to aligning the

plan and design with gathering and analyzing data (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Tracy,

2010; Vagle, 2018). Each step must be accomplished with careful consideration of the

researcher, the subject matter, the uniqueness of every participant, and the ethics of

crafting excellence in every step. In this chapter, I discuss the design and rationale for the

chosen design; my role as researcher throughout the project; how participants were

recruited and interviewed; and how data were gathered, protected, and analyzed. The

ethical procedures considered in each step are also fully described.

Research Design and Rationale

This research question was the guide for this study: What is the lived experience

of religious stigma surrounding divorce for Christian women in abusive marriages? In

this research, I examined the phenomenon of Christian women's experience of the mark

of negativity, shame, and social disgrace they endured as a result of their religious values

in relation to divorcing from abusive marriages. A qualitative approach was used to gain

insight and understanding of the stigma described by the participants in responsive and

in-depth interviewing which involved me listening carefully and probing according to

what was presented in the conversation (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I chose a qualitative

tradition as opposed to a quantitative one because I did not desire to discover statistical

commonalities of the stigma of divorce or the significance of the effects of the stigma as

would be sought in a quantitative effort. Instead, my aim was to obtain rich firsthand descriptions of the stigma and then work toward deepening the understanding of the multiple facets of that stigma within these women's stories.

I employed a phenomenological design in this study. The phenomenological design stresses depth in personal interviews to capture vivid descriptions of the topic of interest (Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018). This design is the best fit for gathering extensive information from various participants in order to gain knowledge and insight into that which the researcher has never experienced (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Only then, after gathering that extensive information, could I as the researcher, analyze the data to "create portraits" of the complicated and seemingly counterintuitive ordeals and behaviors these women survived (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3).

I also considered other qualitative designs, but I did not choose any of them as they were not the most appropriate fit for this research. For example, a narrative design is used to gather stories from participants, and the researcher then uses them chronologically in a collaborative fashion as the stories are retold in written form to the reader (Butina, 2015). Narrative design, developed from humanities, is the study of human society and culture (Butina, 2015). Another design is case studies which are used to gather information over time from interviews, documents, and other sources to examine, explore, describe, and explain a specific issue (Yin, 2014). There is also grounded theory which has roots in sociology and is conducted through an inductive method of analysis to develop a theory about the topic of interest (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Ethnography is also a qualitative design that was formed in anthropology and

sociology; it is employed to describe shared behaviors within a specific people group as observed in their natural setting (Fetterman, 2010). Each of these designs, while important and applicable in certain circumstances, did not fit the scope or purpose of this study which was to delve into the lived experience of religious stigma surrounding divorce for Christian women in abusive marriages.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is multifaceted, and the researcher is considered vital as the primary instrument for the development, progression, and analysis of the research (Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018). The researcher's position, social location, past experiences, belief systems, moral foundation, assumptions, biases, and perspectives combine to shape every aspect of the project from start to finish, including what meaning is made from the data collected. The researcher, as an observer of the phenomenon, must strive for objectivity and neutrality while working with and through these issues (Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018).

I am a licensed professional therapist as well as a Christian woman. As such, I have become aware of the disturbing frequency of IPV not only within the community at large but also within those of the Christian faith. My help in these situations has been sought both as a professional and as a lay person in the church. These experiences have brought me to the place of inquiry into the dynamics of IPV against women and their experiences of working through staying in the marriage or leaving, both in accordance with their belief system.

Even so, I did not appeal to any former patients, current patients, or church acquaintances to be part of this study. To do so would have been a conflict of interest in creating dual relationships or engendering a power differential that may have been harmful to participants. Both situations may result in ethical issues or complaints (see APA, 2017). All participants of this research project were recruited and selected as described in the Methodology section later in this chapter.

Due to my history of interacting with women who were victims of IPV as well as being a woman of faith, I made every endeavor to be aware of my own thoughts and beliefs about those things that were reported by the participants during interviews, and I made sure to manage my own emotional reactions and behavioral responses. I was careful in analyzing myself and my position in relation to the project.

Bracketing is a standard strategy for managing these concerns (Chan et al., 2013). It is a means of stepping outside of prior knowledge and beliefs so that accurate understanding can be had of others' experiences. Researcher reflexivity is paramount to engaging in quality research (Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018). My systematic self-assessment of my identity, position, awareness, and objectivity was managed through journaling every step of the way. In my journal, I recorded my thoughts, emotions, questions, struggles, and experiences. I then reflected upon my entries in a focused, fluid, and dynamic manner toward gaining insight into how my own perspective and worldview intersected with the work I was engaged in (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018).

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

For inclusion in this research project, all participants were required to be adult, female, and divorced from a past marriage wherein they experienced IPV as defined according to the guidelines of the CDC (Breiding et al., 2015). Additionally, they could no longer be in any sort of abusive situation. The participants had to have firsthand knowledge of IPV and also must have experienced and be able to describe a stigma, a mark of negativity and social disgrace, surrounding the idea of divorce from that abusive marriage (Goffman, 1963). Furthermore, these women needed to self-identify as Christian according to the belief in the traditional Biblical story of Jesus Christ and His appearance on earth as the Son of God who was sacrificed as the way of salvation for mankind. Participants also were required to consent to be audio recorded.

Recruiting

Participants were first recruited through purposeful sampling in which I selected those individuals who fit the parameters of inclusion and could provide rich and detailed information on the phenomenon being explored (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018). The first participants were sought through contact with various church officials in the area where I live. I informed these officials of the research project and asked if they would pass the information along to members of their congregation or, if they would, possibly display a small advertisement in their bulletin or announcement platform. I provided each church with the advertisement which gave those women interested in participation a phone number and email address for contacting me. The churches and

church officials involved in this participant recruitment are not identified in any way in this dissertation.

After one or more participants were located, I also employed the strategy of snowballing in which interviewees were asked if they knew of other women who may meet the criterion and might be interested in participating in the study. I inquired if the interviewee was comfortable providing the advertisement to any referral she may have.

At first, these recruitment methods did not provide a sufficient number of participants, so I also posted the flyer on social media sites. This form of advertisement brought in several prospective participants, yet only one of those chose to participate. In the end, it was snowballing that brought in the needed number of participants to complete this study. Lastly, no gifts or incentives to participate in the research were offered or given to any participant.

Upon initial contact with prospective participants, I used a set of screening questions to determine if they met the participation criteria. These were the questions I utilized:

1. What is your age?

2. Did you ever experience IPV in your marriage?

3. Are you fully divorced for at least 2 years from the abusive marriage?

4. Did you experience a mark of negativity or shame at the idea of divorcing from your abusive marriage?

5. Do you describe yourself as a Christian?

6. How do you define Christian?

7. Do you consent to being audio recorded if we proceed with an interview?

From the answers provided, it was immediately apparent if such prospective participants met the standards necessary for inclusion in the study. For those who did not, I gently advised that they did not meet the necessary requirements. They were asked if they might be aware of any other women who may be interested in participation. For those who did meet inclusion standards, they were made verbally aware of the details included in the informed consent and asked to provide an email address where they could receive and review the informed consent form. Two participants did not have email addresses. I provided them with written copies of the informed consent form, and they wrote "I consent" on the bottom. Each of these consent forms were scanned into my computer, so they could be digitally stored, and the originals were shredded. A copy of the informed consent form was also given to each participant for her own records.

Sample Size

The sample size needed for research differs according to the type of study being conducted. Recommendations vary for phenomenological projects, and they range from five to 35 participants (Guest & Johnson, 2006). It is typically difficult, before the research has started, to determine the necessary number of participants needed to reach saturation, the point at which no new information is being provided by interviewees. I followed the sample size recommendations set forth by those considered experts in the tradition of qualitative research who recommended between five and 10 participants (see Guest & Johnson, 2006; Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018).

The purposeful and snowballing methods of recruitment were not sufficient in the beginning for locating the necessary number of participants for the target sample size. Therefore, the same advertisement mentioned previously was placed on social media sites with the same instructions to call the number provided or email if interested in participating. Snowballing was again employed to gather new participants from referrals made by those women who responded. Again, no gifts or incentives were utilized in this study.

Instrumentation

The only instrument used in this study was a set of open-ended interview questions I designed to engender deeply descriptive conversations (see Appendix A). As interviewees provided information, a responsive form of interviewing was utilized to allow flexibility so that each participant had the opportunity to guide the direction of the discussion (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I confirmed, clarified, and probed through active and reflective listening. I also steered the conversation back to the main topic when it got off track or the participant became distracted. This form of interviewing is semistructured (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

I formulated the interview questions for this project to explore circumstances related to the theoretical foundation of this research—feminist theory—and to gain insight into the phenomenon of interest—the stigma of divorce for Christian women in violent marriages (see Appendix A). The interview questions focused on when the participants, as women, may have been victims, believed they were required to be silent about the situation, or thought they were powerless to change their condition. The

questions also concentrated on the mark of negativity and shame these women experienced in their circumstances and how they navigated through it.

Procedures for Participation and Data Collection

Informed Consent

Before participating in this study, I fully informed potential participants of all aspects of the project (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Vagle, 2018). The informed consent form denoted the purpose and nature of the project, the interviewee's right to terminate participation at any time, a request for their permission to audio record the interview, the risks and benefits of involvement, and their right to privacy and confidentiality. Additionally, all participants were made aware of the limitations of confidentiality according to ethical and legal standards (see APA, 2017). I also informed potential participants that this study was not seeking nor would allow any participants from a protected or vulnerable group (see Office of Research and Doctoral Services, 2021a). The purpose and nature of the research, along with possible risks and policy of confidentiality with its limitations, were explained verbally to every prospective participant. All accepted participants received a copy of the informed consent form by email or in person. Each participant receiving the informed consent by email was instructed to reply to the email with the words, "I consent," if they agreed. The email containing the informed consent form served as their copy to print or save if so desired. For those participants who did not have an email address, they were provided in person with written copies of the informed consent form. They wrote, "I consent," on the bottom of the page. I scanned each of these consent forms into my computer and

shredded the originals. A copy of the informed consent was given to these participants for their own records.

Data Collection

I gathered primary data for this study through personal individual interviews with women who had firsthand experience with the phenomenon of interest (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Vagle, 2018). Face-to-face interviews were my preferred method of interviewing because they provide full content and context so that a deeper insight and richer understanding may be had (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). However, due to the distance of some participants, video interviews were also offered. Interviews were only attended by one participant and this researcher; there were no group interviews.

I scheduled the interviews by appointment at times convenient to both me and the interviewee. Each appointment lasted between 1 and 2 hours so as not to overwhelm, harm, or otherwise place undue pressure on participants (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Vagle, 2018). I had previously planned that should there be a need for further discussion, a follow-up appointment would be scheduled. Second interviews were to also last between 1 and 2 hours. I estimated that one interview per participant would be sufficient, two at the most. In the end, one interview per participant was all that was needed.

It is ideal that interview conversations be audio recorded for transcription and analysis. I used a handheld digital voice recorder to audio record every interview. The recordings were immediately transferred off of the handheld device onto my personal

computer which is password protected. I had previously determined that if, after the interview, it became apparent that a participant did not share information that fit the inclusion criteria, her data were to be excluded from the study (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018).

Exiting

Participation in a research project should not bring harm to those who agree to be involved. Even so, participation does carry some risk, such as uncovering memories or triggering anger and anxiety (Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Vagle, 2018). When these interviews were drawing to a close, I gently probed participants' reactions to involvement in the study and debriefed with them their thoughts and responses on the matter. I again reviewed the nature of the study and asked if the participants had any questions or concerns about the project or their participation. If any participants revealed distress, they were to be referred to a counselor to guide them through healthy coping to return to their optimal level of functioning (see Appendix B). No participants noted any distress about being involved in the study, and none stated they would be using any of the resources that were provided. Two participants revealed they already had a counselor they were familiar with should they need to process any distress resulting from participation. As far as I am aware, no participants opted to use any of the suggested support contacts. All of the participants stated that they were happy to participate in this research, and they verbalized hope that the outcome would be to reduce suffering and stigma for Christian women in abusive marriages.

Participants were not required to attend any follow-up meetings once they had completed their interviews. However, the option was explained and remained open if they later decided they would like one more meeting to discuss the project further. Participants were asked if they would like to review the conclusions of their interview after analysis, called member-checking, to clarify and enhance insight and understanding (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018). Each agreed to do so and stated they would also like a concise summary of the final dissertation findings to be provided by email or mail. Additionally, a copy of the completed study will be available to participants if they desire to read it.

Data Analysis Plan

All data included in analysis was found to be fully connected to, aligned with, and answered this research question: What is the lived experience of religious stigma surrounding divorce for Christian women in abusive marriages? Any data collected in interviews which did not meet the criteria was excluded from analysis. After all the interviews were completed, I fully analyzed and manually coded data that were accepted for inclusion in the study.

Procedure of Analysis

The first step of analysis was word for word transcription of the recorded data. This process provided a foundation for coding the data, and in going over the data repeatedly to transcribe, I was able to consider not only what each interviewee stated, but also what was not stated—a form of reading between the lines (see Sutton & Austin, 2015). This procedure brought insight into the nuances ascribed by participants as they

described their experiences; this is the bedrock of phenomenology (see Saldaña, 2016; Sutton & Austin, 2015).

A cyclical system of coding the data was then used to uncover and explore meaning (see Grbich, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). As initial meanings were delineated, they were repeatedly reviewed and consolidated into categories according to meanings and patterns (see Grbich, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). In this way, the data was summarized, broken apart, and resummarized repeatedly until all meaning was uncovered and explored (seeGrbich, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). I analyzed only one interviewee's data at a time so that other sets of data did not influence each other. Once I uncovered categories within each set of data, then I compared them across sets.

I manually coded the data according to the technique of values coding (see Saldaña, 2016). Values coding reflects participants' values, beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives according to the subject of interest. This technique is especially appropriate for research such as mine which I designed to explore the stigma of divorce and the belief systems and cultural values surrounding the stigma (see Saldaña, 2016).

During analysis, I was careful to remember that the researcher is the primary instrument and can have monumental effect on the outcome (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018). It was vitally important for me to focus on what the interviewees were truly communicating so no distortion occurred. I employed a series of questions to myself in order to stay on track during analysis. These questions included the following (see Emerson et al.,2011; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012):

- What was this woman doing or trying to accomplish?

- What means or strategies did she use?

- How did she describe and characterize this situation?

- What assumptions did she make?

- What do I see happening in what she described/assumed?

- What is the broader significance?

- What are the similarities and differences from other interviews?

- What surprised me?

- What intrigued me?

- What disturbed me?

Software

Several computer-assisted qualitative data analysis programs (CAQDAS) are available to aid in coding data. Promoters of CAQDAS insist they are a good fit with phenomenological research because they handle, organize, and retrieve data in an easier and more efficient manner than other analysis methods (Sohn, 2017). These programs are highly recommended for research projects involving a large number of interviews and extended fieldwork, but they are not often endorsed for small studies such as this one (Saldaña, 2016).

Critics claim CAQDAS are not appropriate for analysis in phenomenological studies due to dehumanization of data and lack of recognition of rich detail within the data (Sohn, 2017). While these programs are very efficient for organization and transcription, they lack the human ability of discerning subtle expressions and meaning; they are often inadequate for the nuances which are foundational in qualitative coding

(Saldaña, 2016). Additionally, attempting to learn a new computer program, with its complexities and myriad of functions, seems overwhelming at the same time as pouring over data. Some researchers become bogged down in learning the software rather than focusing on the data (Saldaña, 2016).

For these reasons, I decided not to use any CAQDAS, but I chose instead to analyze the data manually. I used basic Word and Excel documents as I transcribed, coded, categorized, and themed information. In this way, I was immersed in the data and had full ownership of the work and the outcome (see Saldaña, 2016). I did utilize peer discussions, without breaking confidentiality, to consider and review insights that were gained into the data and any dilemmas experienced in coding (see Saldaña, 2016).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

This qualitative phenomenological study was formulated to contribute to the fundamental body of knowledge about the religious stigma of divorce many Christian women experience in leaving abusive marriages. Credibility was established in several ways: a firm research approach, appropriate sampling strategy, methods of gathering data, interview questions, and analytical process (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Tracy, 2010; Vagle, 2018). There was full alignment across the research problem, the research question, the interview questions, and method. I became extremely familiar with the subject matter through exhaustive literature review and then furthered that knowledge with deep and meaningful discussions with participants. I accomplished triangulation through utilizing the expertise achieved in literature review, different interviewees'

reports and insights in the phenomenon of interest, and comparison of participants'

varying perspectives. Lastly, member-checking was employed to share interpretations

and conclusions with participants, so they had an opportunity to clarify if necessary or

give additional insight (Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Tracy, 2010; Vagle, 2018).

Transferability

The findings of this research can only be truly understood in the context and

boundary "of the particular characteristics" of the specific participants involved (see

Shenton, 2004, p. 70). However, further studies can and should be completed to deepen

the body of knowledge and engender a broader understanding of the stigma of divorce

within abusive marriages for specifically Christian women. This current project was

conducted with detailed descriptions of recruitment and inclusion parameters so that

reproduction in further research projects is possible (see Shenton, 2004; Tracy, 2010;

Vagle, 2018). To recap, the participants were all required to be female, be Christian, have

previously been in an abusive marriage which they left, be divorced, have experienced a

mark of negativity about the divorce, and no longer be in any abusive situation. Data

collection involved a set of open-ended questions used in a semistructured interview

format that can be replicated easily using the questions in Appendix A.

Dependability

Dependability of this research and findings has been ensured by provision of

thorough detail sufficient for procedural replication of the project. Every facet of this

project has been fully described, from purpose to participants to analysis of data. Further,

careful descriptions are made in chapter four of the completed research process along

with any discrepancies or adjustment that became necessary. Peer discussions were utilized in the analysis process to ensure objectivity and rigor (Saldaña, 2016; Tracy, 2010).

Confirmability

The findings of this research are confirmable in that my role as the researcher has been well-described along with my affiliation and inevitable biases with the phenomenon on interest. The descriptions and outcomes reported in the upcoming chapters are from the actual experiences and perceptions of the participants rather than reflecting the researcher's preferences or beliefs. I ensured confirmability by transparency and reflexivity, peer debriefing, and triangulation of data (see Tracy, 2010).

Ethical Procedures

It was imperative that this research be conducted in an ethical manner according to university requirements, ethical code, professional association, and federal regulation (see APA, 2017; Lantos et al., 2015; Office of Research and Doctoral Services, 2021b; Protection of Human Subjects, 2018). A major concern of mine in this research was minimizing risk of harm to participants so that the anticipated harm would equal to or less than that encountered in ordinary daily life or in routine physical and psychological exams (see Lantos et al., 2015; Protection of Human Subjects, 2018). I put several boundaries in place to ensure this study adhered to these guidelines.

I only began recruiting participants and gathering data after full approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB; Office of Research and Doctoral Services, 2021b). The IRB approval number for this study was 06-09-22-0655921 which expired on June 8,

2023. This approval information was documented in the informed consent immediately upon being granted. After approval, I proceeded with recruitment of participants in a way that did not impart pressure or judgement, as according to the plan described in the recruiting section of this paper. Participation was voluntary, and participants were aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time (see APA, 2017).

A comprehensive informed consent was also an imperative ethical procedure in this research (see APA, 2017; Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Vagle, 2018). This consent encompassed privacy, confidentiality, purpose of the research, use of data, possible risks, and potential benefits. The informed consent also delineated the voluntary nature of agreeing to participate and permission to audio record interviews. Additionally, the informed consent contained details on who to contact with concerns or questions (see APA, 2017; Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Vagle, 2018).

I was careful to interact with research participants in this study in such a way as to protect their dignity along with their physical, psychological, and financial status (see Lantos et al., 2015; Tracy, 2010). The information they shared was received and analyzed in a respectful manner that lends to trustworthiness and connectedness (see Tracy, 2010). I behaved honestly while "avoiding fabrication, fraud, omission, and contrivance" (see Tracy, 2010. p. 847).

I treated all data with the utmost care. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning each participant a random even number; I, and only I, have access to the list associating numbers with names. All data were contained in electronic form and

password protected. I was and remain the only person with the password to the computer. All data will be kept for 5 years and then will be destroyed.

No participants were gathered from my current or past work environments. Persons interested in participating who may have been current or former patients of mine were excluded due to imbalance of power and dual relationship issues. No organizations or institutions were involved in this research, data collection, handling or analysis of data.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I have included detailed descriptions of the methods and rationale for this research. Each facet has been fully aligned with the purpose and research question: What is the lived experience of religious stigma surrounding divorce for Christian women in abusive marriages? I crafted this phenomenological study to stress in-depth detail in personal interviews and provide thick rich descriptions of the phenomenon of interest (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Vagle, 2018). The role of the researcher was defined as the primary research instrument who is an objective observer managing reflexivity through bracketing and journaling (see Chan et al., 2013; Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018). I carefully disclosed methodology including recruitment, boundaries of inclusion, interview specifications, analysis of data, and trustworthiness (see Grbich, 2013; Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Saldaña, 2016; Tracy, 2010; Vagle, 2018). Lastly, I discussed how this research was planned in such a way as to fully adhere to ethical codes and federal law for the protection of participants and the information they shared (see APA, 2017; Lantos et al., 2015; Office of Research and Doctoral Services, 2021a & b; Protection of Human Subjects, 2018).

I transition with Chapter 4 into describing the actual research process as it happened. This discussion includes participant demographics while still guarding confidentiality and privacy, the final sample size, and how data were collected. I then cover the intricacies of data analysis while describing the patterns, categories, and themes which emerged. I again visit trustworthiness and discuss evidence of implemented strategies. Finally, I provide the results of the research and examine them carefully along with rich descriptions from each participant.

Chapter 4: Results

I designed this phenomenological research project to gain insight into and an understanding of what some Christian women endured when divorcing abusive husbands and to answer the following research question: What is the lived experience of religious stigma surrounding divorce for Christian women in abusive marriages? The focus of this study was to discover the thoughts and emotions these women experienced as well as to gather descriptions of their perceptions of divorce within the circumstances of their violent marriages. I also explored the types of abuse they endured, how their religious beliefs affected their decision to divorce, and what religious or spiritual advice they were given about divorcing from abusive marriages.

In the previous chapters, I described the foundational reasons for why this study was conducted as well as how preceding literature has interacted with the subjects of marriage, divorce, religious beliefs on divorce, and abuse/IPV. In addition, I provided detailed descriptions of how the participants were recruited, how data were analyzed, and how the integrity of this project was maintained.

In this fourth chapter, I provide details of those research processes, including the setting and results of recruitment, along with the demographics of the participants included in the study. This chapter also contains descriptions of the evidence of trustworthiness. I discuss the details of the data collection and analysis processes as well the central themes which emerged during analysis. The chapter closes with a presentation of the findings of this study, including direct quotes from every participant.

Research Setting

I conducted participant interviews for this research in two different settings. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face in the participant's homes and three were conducted by video or phone calls due to the participants living in different areas across the United States. Other than churches where the recruitment advertisement was put on display, there were no organizations involved in the setting of the study; therefore, I experienced no organizational influences or pressures at the time of the research preparations, interviews, data analysis, or interpretation of results.

Demographics

Six participants were involved in this research project. All participants were female and between the ages of 34 and 70 years old. All participants identified as Christians during their marriages and identified as Christians at the time of their interviews. They described being part of either Baptist, Methodist, Evangelical Free, or Nondenominational Christian churches. One reported that she walked away from her faith for about 3 years after her divorce, mainly due to what she had suffered in the church and the questions she had about how she was treated in opposition to Biblical examples. She returned to her faith after prayer and scripture reading that gave her peace about her own decisions in the divorce. All participants were fully divorced from husbands who were abusive in multiple ways during their marriages. All former husbands of the participants were described as Christian when they married and were very active in their churches. Two husbands were pastors' sons. Participants were married for various timeframes before divorcing. The shortest marriage of these participants was for about 2

years before divorce. The longest marriage was 20 years. One participant married and divorced twice from two different abusive husbands. The other five reported one abusive marriage each. Four participants had remarried. All participants reported experiencing stigma related to their religious beliefs about divorce and how they were treated by church leaders and fellow church members. No participants were in abusive situations at the time of or even near the time of this research.

Data Collection

Recruiting

I placed flyers for this research project in several local churches and on social media sites to accomplish purposeful sampling. Multiple people contacted me to ask about participation. Two prospective participants were gently turned down; one was in mourning after the very recent death of a close loved one while the other was told by her current husband that she should not participate because the research focused on negative issues. He believed that Christians should focus only on positive issues. Three participants told me that several women they knew had voiced a desire to be part of the study. However, none of these individuals contacted me, and the participants did not provide me with any contact information for these women who expressed interest. The advertisement on social media brought in several women curious about the research, yet only one chose to participate in the interviews.

Data were collected from six individuals who volunteered to participate in this study. Two participants were recruited from flyers placed in local churches. They both contacted me and asked to be involved in the study. I recruited three participants by

snowballing, word-of-mouth, from those who had participated or those who had seen the advertisements and told them about the study. One participant was recruited by the flyer being posted on social media.

Interviewing

The interviews were individual and semi structured. Only myself as the researcher and the participant were involved in the interviews. Three interviews were face-to-face in the participants' homes while two interviews were conducted over video calls. One was completed by phone call due to the participant's preference. All interviews were audio recorded, with the participants' verbal and written consent, on a digital voice recorder. I then transferred the audio recordings to my personal computer which is password protected. The interviews lasted between 51 minutes and 1 hour 13 minutes. The same set of open-ended questions was used for every interview to guide participants in providing rich details about the topic of interest (see Appendix A). No follow-up interviews were necessary. Interviews were stopped after six due to data saturation being reached.

<div align="center">

Data Analysis

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After completing word-for-word transcriptions of the recorded interviews, I began the process of analysis of the raw data by manually coding the information while utilizing the technique of values coding (see Saldaña, 2016). This form of analysis reflects participants' values, beliefs, and attitudes along with their perspectives relating to the subject of interest. This technique is especially appropriate for phenomenological research such as this current study that was designed to explore the stigma of divorce in

abusive marriages and the belief systems and cultural values surrounding it (see Saldaña, 2016).

I completed data analysis in a cyclical fashion. Each interview was analyzed separately at first so that codes could be uncovered and meaning explored (see Grbich, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). Second and third rounds of analysis ensured that evaluation of the raw data was repeated for deeper insight. This cycle guaranteed thorough analysis wherein initial codes were repeatedly reviewed and consolidated into categories according to meanings and patterns (see Grbich, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). Analysis was also completed across interviews and comparisons made between codes and categories that had emerged. I continued to analyze the categories until the themes were established and saturation of data was reached.

Themes which Emerged

Initial coding indicated specific values of the participants that included the importance of family and church, beliefs about abuse, values of marriage and divorce, seeking help, being shunned, and losing hope. Further coding saw the emergence of the cycle of violence, advice by the church, treatment within the church, broken self-worth, and loss of personal identity. Patterns and categories became more noticeable, and I grouped them together until six themes emerged. Each theme is fully described and substantiated in the Study Results section. These were the themes which emerged:

1. Family and church connections were very important.

2. All forms of abuse were experienced in their marriages.

3. Religious leaders gave unsafe and contradictory advice.

4. There was a strong stigma for divorcing from abusive marriages.

5. Help came mostly from outside the church.

6. Christian women in abusive marriages need better advice and substantial help.

After coding each interview in several rounds, I provided a summary of the interviews to each participant as a way of member checking. Four summaries were sent by email while two were given to participants in person. I asked each participant to review my summary and either confirm its accuracy or guide me in making corrections. No participants reported any divergence in the summaries but reflected them as accurate in describing their thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

Discrepant Information

All participants in this study described a strong religious stigma related to divorce. They each went through times of extremely poor support from their churches and experienced fear from wondering how they would survive. Four of the six participants received some help from outside their churches, while the other two described receiving no help or support at all, mostly because their churches were unwilling to help, and they did not seek help outside their churches. Two of those participants who did receive outside help stated that they also received a negligible amount of help from within the church. Overall, four participants presented different information about how and when they were supported or helped, if help was given at all.

Two participants stated they received some, although minimal, help within the church during their separation and divorce. Participant 2 was able to find a church that offered a divorce recovery class, though she had to change churches to get away from

negativity and engage with that class. Participant 4 had one lady in her church who offered to pay her to babysit a few days a week to earn a little desperately needed money.

Two participants described receiving no support at all from inside or outside their churches. Participant 6 stated she was not given any support, only judgement and constant questioning during her lengthy separation and divorce. She did not describe receiving any help from outside of her church either. However, she explained that once the divorce was over, she felt a little more accepted by her church body. Participant 16 described receiving no support or encouragement from inside or outside her church. She talked about thinking she was living under constant scrutiny and not being able to do anything right. In the end, she decided to move away, leaving the church and even the state to start life anew.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

I established credibility using several strategies including a firm research approach, a sampling strategy suitable to the intent of the research question, a method of gathering data appropriate to phenomenology, a semistructured interview sequence, and a manualized detailed analytical process (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Tracy, 2010; Vagle, 2018). I ensured full alignment across the research problem, the research question, the interview questions, and the method. Further, I engaged in triangulation by utilizing the expertise achieved in a thorough literature review, different interviewees' reports and insights into the stigma of divorce, and comparison of participants' varying perspectives. I also used member checking to share my interpretations and conclusions with the

participants and provide them with an opportunity to clarify if necessary or give additional insight (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Tracy, 2010; Vagle, 2018).

Transferability

Qualitative researchers do not seek to generalize their findings across entire populations. Instead, qualitative researchers aim to highlight details about the phenomenon under scrutiny. These details are only understandable in the context of the distinct characteristics of the participants in their specific situations (Shenton, 2004). Even so, evidence was provided in this current study showing the relevance of the findings to be replicable with other women in similar contexts, outside the bounds of this study. Rich and thick data surrounding the topic of interest, the stigma of divorce for Christian women in abusive marriages, was provided in this text along with numerous direct quotes from participants to support the findings.

Dependability

Every detail of this research project has been fully documented to provide an audit trail and establish the stability of the data. I described the minutiae in planning the project, reviewing the relevant literature, distributing recruitment flyers, screening applicants, conducting the interview process, demographics of participants, transcription of recordings, analysis of the data, and carrying out the member checking process. Through completing all of these components, the research question was carefully and consistently answered.

Confirmability

Confirmability has to do with the researcher's ability to remain as unbiased as possible throughout the project to be able to present findings "as close to objective reality as qualitative research can get" (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 28). Throughout this work, I used bracketing as the foundational strategy for managing my thoughts and beliefs about the data I was coding (see Chan et al., 2013). I intentionally focused on setting aside my preconceptions, values system, and prior knowledge of the subject so that I could concentrate on what was being revealed by the participants' stories. I utilized reflexivity to examine my own beliefs and assumptions because, as mentioned previously in this document, the researcher is the primary instrument (see Lewis & Staehler, 2010; Vagle, 2018). I journaled throughout this project, recording my thoughts, emotions, and reactions. Taking these purposeful steps was fundamental for engaging in quality research and arriving at accurate outcomes. Confirmability was accomplished through the transparency and reflexivity of the researcher, peer debriefing, and triangulation of data (see Tracy, 2010).

Study Results

The purpose of this research was to gain insight into and an understanding of the lived experience of the stigma surrounding divorce for Christian women in abusive marriages. After recruiting qualified participants and conducting interviews, I carefully analyzed the raw data. Six themes emerged from the data. All six themes lent themselves to a deep comprehension of what the participants experienced and the meanings the participants formed for themselves.

Theme 1: Family and Church Connections were Very Important

The participants (referred to by number as P2, P4, etc. in these subsections) in this study all discussed their belief that strong connections to family members as well as church community were very important to them. All participants grew up in Christian homes wherein everyone was expected to attend church and live a lifestyle reflecting Christian values. Each participant discussed enjoying their familial as well as church relationships.

> P2: I grew up on a farm, a small farm…three older brothers and lots of nieces and nephews that I grew up with. [The connection was] very strong, very strong, and it centered around the family…Um, I was raised in a Southern Baptist church and my mom would say that I was on the, she taught Sunday school, and I was on the table in front of her at the age of 2 weeks. And that continued because when you lived in mom and dad's house, you went to church, and you went to church with them. Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, or any other time the church doors were open.
>
> P4: It was a close-knit family. We were, um, very happy. I felt, I guess, safe and secure growing up. Most of my education was homeschooling, and so, my family, we were together frequently, and I think we had a pretty good relationship and enjoyed spending time together. Um, just overall, happy childhood…Church was an important part of our lives. We were very involved, and participated in choir and outreaches and, um, the youth group and various activities the church would have. At home, faith was also very important. My mom made sure that daily Bible

study was normal for us. Like I said earlier, we were homeschooled, so Bible

class was part of our daily education. And so, we learned a lot about, "What does

the Bible say about these topics? What does the Bible say about living your life

and treating other people?" We also learned about historical facts that support our

faith and um, so overall my entire upbringing, my teenaged life was very faith

centered. The way that we lived our lives and the way that we treated other

people, the way that we viewed the world was very much based off of our faith.

And that carried into my adulthood as well.

P6: So, actually we had [lived], it's in the mountains between two big cities…We

had animals, we did 4-H we, had agricultural animals, pigs, and sheep, and all

that, too, so. I would say I had a really good time. My parents were believers. I

grew up in the church at [a well-known pastor's] church…and then we moved to a

smaller church when we lived farther away. We had Awana, yeah, so that was a

big part of growing up as well…So pretty much my whole life I've been growing

my faith and love the Lord and, but that was taught to me at a very young age by

my parents.

P8: Life was good. Back in the day I lived quite a long ways into the [swamp

area] and I grew up on a cattle ranch…Any chance at all, chances I got, I spent

with my grandparents…So, my biological grandmother wanted to be a preacher,

so she went, she was going to school the whole time I can remember…and I was

baptized in the river.

P14: So, I grew up in the Episcopal Church until about second grade. And then we [my family] moved to an evangelical free church, but it felt very evangelical. The, the closest thing I can say is it was probably, probably pretty close to Baptist. If I had to kind of pick something.

P16: Spiritual, religious background…would be Southern Baptist whenever I was very young, um, and then that kind of transitioned to nondenominational probably around age 14-15 if I had to guess. Umm, and the church that I currently go to at 32 is a nondenominational church.

Those Important Connections Were Lost

Despite placing such importance on family and church relationships, the participants all described losing those connections. The losses were related to the abuse going on in the marriages as well as to the ways in which family, friends, and fellow congregants reacted as they discovered what had been occurring. Further loss of connection came as these women separated and divorced.

P2: He isolated me from my family. He, um, moved me down here…836 miles away from home…then would not allow me to go home unless he went home. In the 21 years that we were married, I went home three times…And then when we did go home, I was very controlled as to where I went and it had to be with him. Um, I remember my mom telling me when I left, or after I got married before I moved, "don't bring your problems home." And so that isolated me even more 'cause I couldn't go to my mom. Um, at the end of my marriage, my daddy nor my oldest brother wanted to hear why. They didn't want to understand why I was

divorcing. Um, many of the congregation just kinda, you know, I was OK to be there, but I was not allowed to really participate in anything.

P4: We [moved] from our hometown, with our family and some amount of support for me, well, all of my support was here. We knew no one there. We had no connections. So, our whole world was uprooted, and we were moved across the world. Um, I did not wanna move. I begged and begged and begged him not to put in [a request] to go [so very far away]. But he did it anyway. My son was in a great school for special needs here, and there was nothing for him [there]. There were minimal services available to help him. And we were [there] for 6 months and he had nothing…People [at church] were condemning me for leaving my husband. I had friends who told me their husbands weren't comfortable with them spending time with me because I had left my husband. No one would talk to us. And it just got to the point that even my young children were asking me, "Mommy why don't we have friends at church anymore?"

P6: So, we moved in our marriage, which was not helpful for us, because we needed that accountability. He also isolated; we became very isolated. When it turned to a divorce, I was not supported. The pastor was more conservative and did not wanna support me if I was the one divorcing him, yeah. And that was really hard because I felt the questions were very hurtful because I felt like he thought I was twisting things to make it a divorce. You know, like me trying to get the divorce to happen. It was very difficult. Umm, I feel like there was no hope, and like, no help from the church.

P8: I didn't live close to my grandmother because I lived away from home. I didn't wanna go back home. I didn't want them to know what I'd been through. I was embarrassed and ashamed. [My husband] ran everyone, everybody off with his, you know he, behind my back he would say things [about me]. [Friends] just quit coming to see me, so then I became isolated. Well, I tried to be friendly at church and in Sunday school and things like that. But I would avoid them if they didn't agree with me.

P14: Um, well, so we had just moved here and we got um, we went to see a Christian counselor…There was a lot of judgment, I think, from people who don't know what it looks like, and [I would] see smiling faces, um, you know at parties or church or wherever you are, you know. And [they] don't understand, and I mean there were even some husbands of some women in really bad situations, who didn't want their wives to hang out with me.

P16: Um, it was very isolating. It was very lonely…I remember one night my daughter had an extremely high fever. And I had to put her in the car to go get medicine for her because I did not, I did not have support. Partly on my own because I was ashamed, so I didn't even talk about my life to my own family. Um, so partly that was on me because I didn't open up to them very much…So [I] was just kind of avoided altogether. As I began to make a stand for what was right for myself and for my daughter, and what I believe to be the right thing to do overall, that I wished anybody would do in that situation, um I began to very much get, just shunned.

Theme 2: All Forms of Abuse Were Experienced in Their Marriages

Each participant experienced abuse in multiple ways. They described sexual, physical, and psychological abuse from their husbands. The abuse typically started very early in the marriage and continued throughout. Often the abuse escalated in severity as time went on.

P2: Um, I was used. Sex for [him] was used number one for controlling because if he'd get mad at me, there was no sex. So that was withheld, or the affection was withheld. If he couldn't sleep, I was his sleeping pill. Sex was his sleeping pill. In the mornings, I would have to go to the bathroom, but I wouldn't move. I didn't dare move. Because he was going to use me sexually and I didn't want to be used, so I just laid there. Very still, very quiet, needing to pee…and the using my body for his, not my pleasure, or not mutual pleasure, but for his satisfaction and his satisfaction only, he used me as his whore. [My husband] wouldn't do anything for me…Um, He did not help me with [our] boys…He worked five blocks away from home. I needed to go to the grocery store. But he wanted to drive the van to work. So, I took two small children who were supposed to be in car seats, to the grocery store in a two-seater car, sports car…I think that the belittling in front of others, you know our friends, was probably the hardest thing and was done…it took a long time to admit that I was being abused and I was allowing it and had allowed it for a lot of years.

P4: It would be a lot of tension and that feeling of walking on eggshells, like, well if I say the wrong thing or if I do something that he's not gonna like, is he gonna

snap and start yelling at us? Which was not uncommon. And, I mean, even if I was just smiling, cause I'm generally just a happy and smiling person, that would make him angry. And he would tell me that I just walked around grinning like an idiot all the time and he didn't know why I walked "around like an F-ing idiot grinning all the time." And that would make him angry. And then he would start insulting me and be very angry with the children, particularly with our son who does have autism. And he would make demeaning remarks toward our son or bully him. Um, and he would often threaten all of us like, "well you know, you might think I'm mad now, but you don't wanna make me really angry because you don't know what's gonna happen when I get really angry." He would follow me from room to room just nitpicking and "you're going to talk to me" and "don't you dare walk away from me!" And he would start calling me names and yelling and screaming at me. And my son told me after the divorce, a couple years later, that apparently my ex-husband would go in his room and hold him down by his shoulders on his bed and like, talk to him in a scary growling voice. And I had no idea that was happening. Or shake him. Like, he would go in his room and grab him by the shoulders and shake him really hard. Um, I didn't know that was happening either. Um, but he would do similar things to me…as far as like grabbing me by the shoulders or twisting my arms behind me or cornering me in a room and not letting me leave. Um, and then it kind of took a more almost, like, sadistic turn where he just started delighting in hurting me during, um, sexual intimacy…he was very addicted to pornography. If he had a day off, and I had

already made plans to go out and go shopping for the day, and I would have the

children with me because he would not babysit his own children, and [when I

came home] he would still be in front of the computer. And he would have been

there all day long. And the vast majority of what he was doing was watching

pornography.

P6: So, it was very difficult. From the very beginning, so like, even on our

honeymoon, really challenging and difficult. There was a lot of up and down

emotional outbursts…like throwing things or punching walls, that kind of thing.

Really abusive in the marriage, and you know, even physical, uhm, physical abuse

as well, choking me. Well, he very much said I was the crazy person. I was the

one who was causing him to act the way he was. He also had like, suicidal times

and would grab the gun and leave saying he would end his life…There was like,

this bully behavior, and then the suicide. He had taken guns, again, in the house,

and at one point he even waved a gun in front of me like, threatening [suicide]…

He was very demeaning and mean and that was hard to live with, you know. Oh,

he also had an affair pretty early on. I think we'd been married 2 years and he had

just graduated seminary and then he had an affair. There was also drugs involved.

P8: It started with getting up in my face and screaming at me and me backing up.

And then if I'm backed into the counter, pushing on me…And then shoving,

started more shoving. He ripped my shirt off me. He tore my clothes up. That was

awful. He thought sex would fix everything, and I didn't think it would fix

nothing, and it wasn't very pleasant…If anybody showed me too much attention, I

got in trouble when everybody left. [My husband] said I was flirting, or [the man] was being too friendly with me, it got real bad. Like, "What, you like him?" or, you know, just accusing me of things. Uhm, he was jealous. "Where did you go, and why did you stay so long at the grocery store?" He wouldn't let me have any friends. What came out of his mouth was worse. Accusations. You know, there's mental abuse, terrible mental abuse. I was scared of him. He was a big man. He was 6'4" you know, and a big guy, very big guy. Well, I decided to get a job, when my children got a little older and they got, you know, in kindergarten, preschool or whatever, like from 8:00 to 1:00. And I saved money. I hid money. But, Oh my goodness! and so he came up to the sales place on an early day off. And the drink man was there. We had a drink machine outside of the office. I don't even know what we were talking about, but we were laughing. I'm trying to pay him, you know, I had the receipt, had to write a receipt and everything for filling the drink box, and he was going to the next place. And [my husband] came in there…and drug me out of there in front of [the drink man] and threw me on the floorboards of the car and drove off…I was scared what he was gonna do to me when we got home, because he was so angry. He took his hand and was shoving me against the wall, that's like choking. But he didn't, he didn't call it choking because he's using his forearm. He's saying "I knew you were a whore! I know you're probably sleeping with that man!" He told me he's gonna lock me in the bedroom.

P14: [My first husband] wanted me to believe that he was better than he actually was or, you know, would frame things in such a way that I didn't fully trust. And then, and then quickly thereafter I discovered the ongoing infidelity that had been present really from day one. I remember if we would have a fight, I would wind up feeling very, like, spun around in a circle. Like just very dizzy. Like that. You know what I'm saying? (Big sigh). Just manipulated. And more information came out about, a few, maybe 6 months after this, about him being dishonest, about porn usage and you know some other burner accounts. [With the second husband] the good days were really really good and bad days were really really bad to the point where I'm huddled in the closet under my clothes, just like, crying and, I remember biting on a shoe because I was just so angry and just so frustrated. He, I mean, he was just a different person…Just, just attacking, like I was his emotional punching bag. Like, I'm thinking, my first marriage where he was unfaithful the whole time, that was healthier than what this is, you know? But like, he ended up, he was five years sober from drugs and he ended up relapsing…and I remember hearing his footsteps come upstairs, and I just like, looking back, I'm so sad for myself because I felt the fear in my body of like, what was coming. Umm, and he just, I mean he just railed. It was just words. It wasn't fists, but it was just, I, I can't even remember the words to be honest. But I just remember the energy and I just remember feeling really fearful…This person that was supposed to be my safe person is just, just completely attacking me…You know, I try my best to like, work on the marriage and do what I was supposed to do. I went to him and I was

like, "hey, I just really felt like that was unfair. I felt hurt by this." And he was

like, "Why does everything have to be a freaking conversation!!?" You know, one

time he cursed at me and called me, called me names. I mean, I think it's abusive

to let somebody think they're crazy…And [he was] reading my journals to see if

there was anything that I had done bad that he could use against me. It was

hellacious. Our marriage was a sham the whole time.

P16: [It was] not what marriage should be. It was stressful and it was unkind. and,

um, a feeling of being very unwanted and, um, it was just, it was not what

marriage should have been…So, I mean, just, my husband would flip a switch and

just get extremely angry…I was probably about 6 months pregnant, and he just

came home from work. I don't even remember what the discussion was, but we

were standing in the kitchen. We weren't even arguing. He was just in a bad mood

like he always was. And just always was very much "you're an idiot. Your

existence irritates me" and he got super mad. And so, by that point we had holes

punched in almost every single wall, above where I slept in the bed, every door,

Um, the bathroom, things like that. And so, I just went, and I went to take a

shower and um, the shower curtain was, like, it was a shower curtain you couldn't

see through, and he punched me right in the middle of my back, through the

shower curtain. He would have had no way of knowing whether that was my

stomach or not. Over nothing, it turned into that, even whenever I tried to just

separate myself. Um, I had a small dog that the entire time I was pregnant would

try to bite him if he entered into a room I was in, because she felt the, um, the

turmoil and just the dynamic of the relationship and was very, um, protective.

Um, but it was really just me trying to exist the least amount possible to not make

him angry. I spent all my days just trying not to make him angry…When I would

try to like, initiate a conversation, there were things said like, "You're dirt to me."

Like, "I don't care. Go away. Leave me alone." Like, "You're horrible."

Everything like that.

Theme 3: Religious Leaders Gave Unsafe and Contradictory Advice

The women who participated in this research all described going to church leaders

and other church members for help in their marriages. Each recalled telling at least one or

more people in their church some of the issues they were experiencing and asking for

guidance on how to proceed according to their Christian beliefs. All participants

described advice which enabled their husbands to continue abusive behaviors, caused

more harm to them and their children, laid the overwhelming extent of the blame for the

abuse on their shoulders, and made them personally responsible for improving their

marriages.

> P2: I was taught marriage is always, forever. Once you say I do, you stay, no
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> matter what…Um, but they didn't wanna hear what I had lived, what I had lived
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> through…When I called the pastor, we were in the Methodist Church at the time,
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> and the pastor came over that night and he put it all on me. "You caused this to
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> happen to [your husband]! You did this to him! So, what are you going to do to
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> fix it? Are you willing to go into counseling, you know, in order to fix this?" And
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> at that point I told him, I said "I've tried for years to go to counseling and get

marriage counseling, and he would not go." And I said, "I don't wanna talk anymore. I'm done." Again, I think it was the, you know, um, the key of, you know, submit to your husband, but never the rest of that, never the rest of the story…"Just submit. Just submit" and, um, "If you divorce, you're committing adultery." You know, those were the two biggies…I tried to be the one to fix it, or I tried to be the one to change so that he did not have to. And again, it wasn't a partnership. It was a one sided "you fix it because you're supposed to do what he tells you to do."

P4: I was given scripture to look at. Um, oh where is it? Is it in 1 Peter, maybe, where it's talking about, you know, the witness of a godly wife can win her husband. And basically, I was told that if I walked right with the Lord the way that I needed to, eventually my husband would come around. If I submitted to him the way the Bible told me to, eventually he could see what a good life and a good marriage he could have, and he'll come around. You know, I was told to pray more. I was told to, um, submit more. I was told to be sexually available as much as possible, um, make yourself attractive, make sure that you look nice when he comes home. Make his favorite meals. Basically, appease him. That's what it boiled down to. That if I did more to appease him, then he would become the husband that he needed to be. While being told that I needed to be very sexually appealing to my husband, I was chastised because I would get a Victoria's Secret catalog and was told, "You're setting your husband up to fail." Um, I was told to read a book about men and pornography addiction and sex addiction so I could

better understand, but [my husband] didn't have to read those books. He was severely addicted to pornography, and I brought this up to my pastor multiple times. And I asked, "Well Jesus said that if you lust after a woman in your heart that you have committed adultery, and my husband is chronically addicted. Isn't that committing adultery?" And he told me "No, that doesn't count." And basically, I was told, you know, "Well maybe you need to be more sexually available to him." And the pastor's wife told me "Consider meeting his sexual needs as your sacrifice to the Lord." Um, but a lot of it ended up feeling like the weight of responsibility for the state of our marriage was placed on me. And I felt kind of like, "Well, this is what I'm already doing and you're just telling me to do it more. That doesn't make sense. And why is it my fault that he's horrible to everybody?" So, I was trapped in an abusive toxic marriage where my husband abused me and our children emotionally, verbally, physically, financially, and on my part sexually. And basically, I was told [by the clergy] there was nothing I could do about it. And because I had no bruises on my body from his physical abuse, and my son wasn't left with bruises, and I'd never called the police, no one really believed me that he was physically abusive. And I just remember thinking that I was trapped and there was nothing I could do. My life was a living hell. My pastor…basically told me I was wrong because I left my husband and I could never fix my marriage because I left him…[The pastor] didn't want to hear what was going on in the marriage. Um, he told me he didn't need the gory details to tell me that I was wrong and that I needed to go back to [my husband]. And my

pastor had told me, "You know, you don't need to tell everybody why you left or that you are separated because your husband isn't here to defend himself, and we only have your side of the story. So, I would appreciate it if you would just not throw stones." And I had voicemail after voicemail from my husband with him screaming and cursing me out and calling me names and blaming me for the situation. And I told [my pastor and another leader], "I have this," and they would not listen to it. They told me they didn't need to listen to it…I told [the pastor] "I would rather go to hell than go back to that marriage, so if what I'm doing is horrible and wrong and God's gonna be mad at me and hate me and send me to hell, I would go to hell before I would go back to that man." I see a very flawed religious viewpoint of what is or is not acceptable in marriage, who is or is not responsible in the marriage, and a very unbiblical view of what a marriage should be. The overall impression that was left with me from my interactions with the pastor, the pastor's wife, even some of the elders within the church, and overall the church body was it doesn't matter how bad, toxic, nasty, abusive your marriage is, unless you have had a spouse who is physically unfaithful to you, you cannot leave that marriage because God hates divorce and you're making a mockery of the covenant of marriage by leaving it…Um, the idea that a spouse who is being abused, the thought that you have to stay in that type of marriage and environment, or you are displeasing God, is just heartbreaking to me. Because God hates abuse. God hates lies, and pride, and my whole marriage was full of those things from my husband. He was a destructive evil person, yet somehow I

was blamed for my marriage falling apart because I was the one that said I will not live in this anymore. Um, that is a tragedy! An absolute tragedy. My husband had abandoned me in every single way possible, and I found out after we were separated, he was also being physically unfaithful to me. Um, while simultaneously messaging me how much he loved me and wanted our marriage to work, he was seeking out online prostitutes.

P6: I knew it was wrong because I know biblically, this is not how a marriage should work . But when, you know, reaching out to get help, I feel like, it was hard to really get that help…One lady I remember her looking at me with like, deer in headlights look, like, "What are you talking about ?" And then another lady, she was more, this was early, early on in our marriage, she was like "Oh you're newly married, you know. You're working out these kinks that are typical." I think people thought, "Oh these are typical, newly married, working together, kind of thing." But it wasn't!…It was very much you know, "You need to make sure you're the submissive wife."…When I shared, I felt like they were really shocked at what I said and had no way of understanding. They didn't even try to understand or have sympathy…So, I did feel like, with what [my husband] was telling me and then this as their response, from the church, I did feel like, "Oh I just need to try harder" and be like, "It must be me I need to work on, what I need to work on - me." So, there is like, safety things that were, that happened towards the kids. So not like hitting the kids, but there was like, this bully behavior, and then the suicide [threat]. He had taken guns, again, in the house, and at one point

he even waved a gun in front of me like, threatening [suicide]. So, it was a very bad situation. I ended up sharing that with someone at our recent church, and they were like, "Oh, that's not OK." So, the pastor got involved and started doing marriage counseling. And then, my ex, you know, we did counseling through that time and he just was the same behavior, just blaming me for everything. I do think it took a lot for the divorce to go through with our church. Our church is a very conservative church, and obviously they're not supportive at all of divorce. It was very difficult, and it took them a lot, like, it was very very hard, to a point where the pastor was questioning me. And the questions were just so…I don't know what the word is, accusatory, almost that it was me causing the divorce. And that, that was wrong…It was very difficult because, yeah, it was really hard for me because I wanted their support and I felt like they were very critical to me and of what I was doing, and they thought that I was causing this to happen…at the end of the day, I mean, I think that divorce was OK because, because of [my ex husband's] choices and there was also drugs involved and all that as well.

P8: I started asking God to please, you know, "Get me out of this, if You can. Show, show me a way out of here." I talked to the preacher. I talked to friends, and they said, you know, maybe, one lady said, "Maybe you could wear more conservative clothes." But I already did!…I just prayed a lot. I prayed and prayed and prayed. I tried to talk to people that I thought would help me. But like we talked earlier, they go, "Just maybe think of some way to not make him mad." Well, how do you do that?…I was in my Sunday school class, I had a couple of

older ladies, I thought they would be my best choice. And one of them, one

supported me in a little way, she goes "I think you should try counseling." Uhm,

and the other one, uhm was that one to tell me maybe I should be more

conservative and wear different clothes. They didn't support the fact that "you

need to leave out of this situation." I didn't get that [advice]. The pastor walked

the middle of the road. He didn't say for or against, you know, [just] the middle.

They didn't see what was going on in my house, and I think sometimes they didn't

believe me. I didn't have any marks on me. I didn't have a black eye. I didn't have

a busted lip or broke limbs or had to go to the hospital. None of that. It was other

stuff, and that's what you can't prove. It's embarrassing. You're looking for

validation. You're looking for somebody to say, "You know, little girl, you need

to get out of this, and you're being abused." Nobody said that…And they tell you,

"You married him, and you're stuck." They didn't think I should have gotten a

divorce, no matter what…They were concerned about the children. Yes. And they

said, you know if he's hurting them you need to get out of there. When I told them

he was being [terrible] to me, as long as he was being good to the children, then I

was supposed to stay. And I go "Oh, please Lord, help me." I didn't know what to

do because if, if God was gonna be mad at me because I was breaking the law, the

law of God, what did that make me?…I was scared to death. I feared for my life.

That's where, that's, I mean, God just had to be mad at me, is what I thought. I

can't help it. I can't stay…That was my choice. And that, you know when

somebody, something like that pushes you to the point where you have to give up

everything you ever believed in to save your life, you've got to; you have no choice.

P14: I remember reconciling with my first husband. Um, because I thought I was supposed to because the elders told me to. I was conflicted, because I'm like, well I guess these people know better than I do. Because there is a multiple of people saying the same thing, and they're all listening to God. And what they were telling me is, "You're too close to it. You're not going to be able to see as clearly as we can because we are outside of it. And so why don't you just let us make this decision for you that's going to affect the rest of your life?" And I remember one day going, "Shit, he is the same person." I [didn't] think he's gonna be dumb enough to cheat again, which he was. Um, but, I now feel stuck because now I've reconciled. Now I'm stuck. And so that was very hopeless knowing I'm still gonna be with this self-centered manipulative person. And so even when more information came out, I kind of went back to [the elders]. And that was when I was like "OK, I'm done! I've been doing this for 2 years. I wanna see what y'all say now." And they were like, "Well we think it's permissible. We don't think you're in sin if you get divorced, but we still don't think it's God's best." And I was like, basically like, "F- you." I feel like the general advice was, "You just work harder," you know. That does not work in an abusive marriage. It just doesn't! And so, when you tell a person who is the only person actively working to make that marriage better to just keep trying, and to just keep sucking it up, and just to keep taking it up the ass, I'm sorry to be crude, but like it, it, it perpetuates

the abuse, in the name of Jesus. As if He would abuse. As if He cares more about the sanctity of an institution than He does the people in it. And toward the end, I was just kinda like, "Screw it. You don't understand!"

P16: So, we spent about 6 months, up until our daughter was born, going back and forth to counseling. It was just very much "Well you just need to pray for your husband." I was never once told, you know you, "It's OK if you were to separate yourself from the abuse." It was always "You need to stay, you need to pray for him, you need to make sure you are on your best behavior to help your husband." It was always, the pressure was always put there on me, me, me, me, me, to be doing all of this. Because, I mean, you're young, and you look at, you know, all these other husbands that like, love their wives and I did not have that. So, what was wrong with me? And I spent all those years trying to figure out what was wrong with me. I didn't have anyone telling me, like, "This isn't you. This is an issue with him." Or, you know it was just "You need to be the best wife you can be. You need to keep your family together. You need to make sure you don't divorce him because…God doesn't like divorce. You need to keep your family together." The pastor of the church was having me, he was setting up conversations for me to have with these other couples that had gone through um, both affairs and just really bad marriages, but they stayed married. And I remember, in one of them, I know, like, the wife said, "Oh, well you know most husbands get angry, but you know you just need to stick it out and stay married. It won't be like that for forever." I'm like, OK. And then the husband that was a

cheater and had admitted to me that he had currently been cheating on his wife,

was trying to justify it. [The pastor] had me you know, talk to this man because he

was encouraging me to stay married. It was like the only thing anybody cared

about was whether I stayed married. They didn't care about the safety or

environment for me or my child. [The abuse was] hushed down with, umm, things

being said like "OK, well you just keep it quiet. This is a very private issue. You

know, you don't wanna go telling everybody. We need to keep this quiet and

under wraps. You don't wanna embarrass your husband." Whenever I brought up

that he was having an affair, it was still, "Well we just need to keep it under

wraps" or " Well, what are YOU doing?" And I specifically remember, like, the

pastor of the church said, "Well what kind of wife are you being? You know,

sometimes after you have a baby, things are really hard on the wife. So, what kind

of wife are you being?" And it was put back on me every time. "Are you praying

for him? Maybe you just need to give him space." [My husband] wanted to

continue to live at home and then go visit his girlfriend. And when I made a stand

that I was not OK with that, it was not a good environment for me or for our

daughter, I was told, "You're pushing him away. You need to allow him to come

and go as he pleases" by multiple, multiple couples within the church." I did not

receive any encouragement to take a stand. If I stood up for myself, I would get

[told by the pastor] "You don't want to be vindictive. Women can be very

vindictive." That's what I was told many times. "Women can be very vindictive.

It's kind of in human nature for women to be vindictive."…It was always "God

does not like divorce. You just need to pray that his heart changes. And be patient and wait for that to happen. Because God promises that, you know, He answers prayers."

Theme 4: There Was a Strong Stigma for Divorcing From Abusive Marriages

The participants all described experiencing a strong stigma related to divorce, despite the abuse involved in their marriages. They discussed being shunned, abandoned, and ignored by pastors as well as people within their churches. The result was that these women felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness and hopelessness along with feeling judged, punished, disqualified, and humiliated.

> P2: It was confusing, um, because it doesn't, it didn't sound right. It just didn't sound right that one person has to be the one to make it work or be the one person to change…You know, I realized that all those years I had been abused and was still being abused and it was getting worse. I don't believe that our loving God requires us to stay in a relationship that is abusive. [When I left, it was] very scary. Very scary. Um, it was very frightening because I knew he was gonna fight me for my boys, and I knew they didn't belong with him. I was unsure where I would end up or how I was gonna support us. Um, very frightening…Oh, the people that are supposed to be there for you and love you just where you are, they didn't. I was cut off…experiencing the negativity, the lack of support, the cold shoulder, and feeling unloved. And not feeling part of the group. Again, isolated. I did a lot of things, got up in the morning, because of my boys. Um, had I not had

the boys and my obligation and my wanting them to be raised in the church, I would have quit going to church altogether.

P4: And like I mentioned a few minutes ago, I had several good friends within the church whose husbands told them "I don't like you spending time with her because she left her husband." And my good friends knew why I left my husband. And so, that made me like, "Well what is your husband doing that he's afraid you're gonna get inspired to leave him?" [Like] it's contagious to leave your husband (laughter)! I, and then I was left kinda hurt, like these people who had known me for years were suddenly kind of treating me like I had a disease. Um, kinda like I was the Typhoid Mary of marriage. And I just really felt like I was being ignored. Because they were so uncomfortable and they didn't know what to do with me until, instead of just telling me, "We'd rather you not come here, you're not welcome in the fellowship anymore," they just pretended like I wasn't there. I remember telling several of the ladies in the church, which was humiliating for me, "I really don't have winter clothes and I don't have any money to buy winter clothes. You know, if you have anything in your closet that you don't want anymore, would you please think of me?" Um, and one person gave me a jacket. And that was it. And I was just kind of shocked that there was not more of a "well let me help you. You have a need, let me help you." I felt like I was being passively punished. So, I just stopped going to church. And figured well, you know, there's no point in me going and being ignored. I went home and

I went back to my home church to be supported and helped and loved. And I did not find that at my church. So, I just stopped going.

P6: The reaction [of the church and pastor] was a list of questions drilling me…It was very difficult because, yeah, it was really hard for me because I wanted their support, and I felt like they were very critical to me and of what I was doing, and they thought that I was causing this to happen. I did not feel supported in the divorce at all. There were lots of tears that were shed, and I even almost left the church because of it. I stayed and I'm glad I stayed because [I] have good support there now for my kids. But I just still [feel] judged by [the pastor] and even, even, so when I go to church now, I don't really talk to him much. When I am still sitting in the pew, I feel like I don't know why I care, but I'm like, "What, does he still think I caused the divorce?" And there's still that thought in my mind that I feel like he doesn't believe me [about the abuse]. [I] feel like it's a very negative title to say I'm divorced, especially in the church, because it's looked down upon.

P8: I didn't want God to be mad at me. And you're caught with that. You're caught in the middle of a bad thing if you are a Christian and you go by scripture. It says not to do it. It's hard…They didn't think I should have gotten a divorce, no matter what, some of 'em. No matter what! I go, "No matter what?"…I went through a period of anger, um depression, um judging myself harshly, because I wasn't, I wasn't conforming to [their] idea of what a woman ought to do. And that's when I began to not care what anybody said because they didn't have to live it. And even

thinking God would be mad at me, I didn't care anymore about anything except saving me and mine.

P14: He cheated the whole time. It was embarrassing. It did feel like failure. It was very humbling, um humiliating even. Just really full of grief. And to be full of grief, when people are looking at you like "Oh you just gave up" you know, and to have not wanted to, to have wanted it to work. It just feels very lonely…And so I just think the church has, has so much influence there, to give people, um, encouragement or to just break them down or keep them stuck…I was literally told, "Hey, you have sin, too. You wouldn't get divorced if you were XYZ," if you were, um, more humble or if you were basically more Godly or, you know, basically it, it was seen as the selfish move. The selfish move was divorce. Mostly that same church body that I had been in, um, yeah, [they said] that I hadn't worked hard enough, that I had given up. That was the whole, that was what was communicated. It was just a lot of pressure. It was my fault, my responsibility to like, fix it…And so one of my closest friends, even she was like, "You should be grieving. You should be sad that your marriage is over." So basically, telling me how to feel about it, you know, the day that [divorce] was all finalized.

P16: [I felt] a lot of shame. And then it did not get better because, um, I know I've mentioned this once, but it was constantly brought up in sermons. And it's not a large church. But there was just a lot of shame. Um, it was very isolating. It was very lonely…There was an occasional "I hope you're doing OK. How are things

going?" I mean, but there was never, to my memory, a support system or encouragement. So [I] was just kind of avoided altogether…It was awful. I mean, it was awful! One of the biggest things that happened over and over again, as far as like a stigma, was [the pastor] could not hide it any longer, that his son was getting a divorce, it began like, "Woe is me! MY son chose to leave his wife and child" in way too many sermons and way too many discussions. You know, so my feelings on it did NOT matter. But by that point I was just kind of numb. If there was a Sunday that I had to work, [the pastor questioned me], "why weren't you here last Sunday?" And I was still very much under the microscope almost as if, "OK well [she] just went back to work so she could go off the deep end." [That] was very much the impression that I got. Like, I couldn't, as a mother in an abusive relationship, choose to divorce without just going off the deep end altogether.

Theme 5: Help Came Mostly From Outside the Church

Each of the participants described serious struggles during their separations and divorces. They were in need of support and encouragement, but they found little. Four participants stated they received help from outside the Church, and this help provided them with the foundation they needed to move forward and heal. Participant four described no help from inside or outside her church. Participant 16 also described no help at all, yet she helped herself by completely removing herself from the situation geographically.

P2: I can, um, remember [some] neat friends, [the wife] and I were good friends…She was the ER nurse. But [she] always knew because she could see, you know, she knew what was going on and she never turned her back. And so, I was very thankful for her. She still didn't turn her back on me.

P4: I had a good friend who realized, "Oh you're back in [the state]! Hey when did you come home? What's going on? Come over for dinner." And once we got there she was like, "OK, what do you need?" And she just gave me bags and bags of clothes for my children. And another friend was 2 hours away. And she would call me every week to check in and talk with me and um, she launched into kind of like practical logical stuff to help me. I remember one time she called, and I was standing at the sink with three days' worth of dishes, crying. And so, her solution was she sent me you know, 500 paper plates and cups and things like that, so, "OK, You don't have to worry about dishes. That's one less thing you need to worry about." Um, so I did have a small core group of people that were extremely supportive and never told me you have to go back to him. And never condemned my decision.

P8: I kept thinking it would get better every day. No, it got worse every day. No, I didn't have any support at all. I even went to my deceased husband's people (participant was a widow before this abusive marriage). My [previous] sister-in-law, she would tell me all the time "you need to get the hell away from him. He's a bad dude." And she was the only one that was encouraging, or even, telling me "You need to pack your stuff and go home. Go home to your people." I got a job,

and my grandma helped me with the children. But, going to work, and I went

back to school. I started going to school. And that takes a lot of time away from

my kids and that was hard.

P14: It was almost like, when you lose a spouse to death, the church jumps into

action. When you lose a spouse to divorce, you're shunned…Very quickly I had

put together a little network of single moms. And so, like we, you don't even have

to say it. They, everybody just gets it. I feel like I could write a whole book on it!

P16: I think a big thing was whenever I moved, that was very helpful. Because I

kinda, I didn't isolate myself from God, but I isolated myself from that group of

people. That just, that stigma and everything that was there in that town. And so,

whenever I moved was probably a really big step. Over the years, I just began to

know those individuals are wrong and I'm not responsible for it.

Theme 6: Christian Women in Abusive Marriages Need Better Advice and

Substantial Help

The participants of this research went to church officials and church members for

help and advice on the best way to respond to their abusive husbands. Every participant

described being given advice which was unsafe, kept them tied to their abusers, brought

about further violence, caused them to continue living in fear, and engendered questions

about their faith. These women discussed wishing they were given more healthy and safe

advice, especially advice that more clearly reflected teachings within the Bible.

P2 [Some women] won't admit that they're being abused…just admitting that

you're abused [is hard]. I think that's where a lot of women are. It's that they can

stand on their own two feet, and they don't have to stay in a relationship. Yes, you

may have to go live…in a homeless shelter or a women's shelter or in a car. You

know, God always provided us a place to live and people to help with clothes for

my kids. I wore hand me downs. We had food, um, but there's help out there

somewhere. There's someone that will help you without going back into that

abusive relationship or another abusive relationship. Because that's what I did

after I left [my husband] and I divorced. [My next relationship] was controlling.

It's breaking that cycle of being controlled…That's what I tell so many, especially

young girls and young women, is that before you ever get into a long-lasting

relationship or particularly that marriage, you go out there and find that you can

stand on your own two feet. 'Cause you may one day have to stand on your own

two feet without a partner, and you have to know that you can take care of

yourself and support yourself. That you don't need a man. You may want him, but

you don't need him.

P4: Our pastor knew those [abusive] things and yet he still kept insisting that I

had to be the one to carry the weight of the marriage. And I think that perspective

keeps so many women just trapped and stuck in these relationships that are

absolutely destroying them. I would say to seek the Word outside of the verses

that talk about wives winning their husbands over to the Lord, outside of only

focusing on that one verse where Jesus said the only way God will allow you to

divorce is if one of you commits adultery. Look at the whole context of scripture.

Look at the entire description of how we are supposed to behave and treat one

another, how we're supposed to keep one another accountable. Look at where God talks about abandonment. Umm, and what love looks like. Nowhere in the scripture does it say that you are completely responsible for the state of your marriage as a wife. If anything, I would say it seems to indicate that the husband is more responsible because he's the one that's called to love his wife like Christ loved the church. Um, seek guidance from more than just your pastor because your pastor is just another human. He is fallible. [He] can make mistakes. Just because [church officials] have that title, does not mean they know everything…[I experienced] a level of toxicity within the church. I can take my experiences that I had with an unhealthy church body and unhealthy church leadership, and I can use that to create that ripple of change, and I can extend support to women. So, for women who have had these negative experiences, umm, with the stigma within their church bodies when they are in these type of relationships, I would caution them to be very careful not to allow that experience to completely color everything about all churches. Because all churches are not like that. All believers are not like that. Don't keep these things secret. Tell trustworthy people and get help.

P6: There's so many women in a similar situation which is very sad. I think, be OK to share, and maybe go to a counselor or someone that you feel like you can trust to talk to. And that's hard to find if they don't have someone that they can trust to talk to. Finding someone like a counselor would be helpful to try to get the help and understand what you should do, what they should do. I'm very thankful

to be out of it, and the Lord heard my cry when I was even just laying on the floor in the shower crying for help. And I think the Lord heard that and answered it through divorce. And I think divorce is OK for certain situations, yeah. So, I feel like having [been through this], I feel like I could help other people. I think, out of it the Lord has brought all these divorced women into my life which I would have never known and that's something, a huge blessing, too.

P8: I shoulda left sooner. I shoulda left sooner out of that situation because, um, and I shoulda not let my family or anybody persuade me to do something that I knew I shouldn't do. And I'm glad that I got brave enough and strong enough to get out of it, um, and I've never looked back. And nobody's gonna touch me, hit me, abuse me in any kind of way. I hope people are more open and don't stay in that abusive situation, ever. Don't! Run for your life! 'Cause if it starts, if it starts it's just gonna escalate. That doesn't end, they won't quit. They won't stop…Even if you love 'em. You can love 'em, you can love somebody from afar. You don't have to stay there to love 'em. You don't even have to stay there to be friends with 'em. Just don't be married to 'em. And get the law on your side some whicha way. Get a restraining order. You know, you're always forgiven, no matter what. And if there's any woman out there ever that's being punished, beaten, slapped, locked up, whatever, she just needs to gather herself together and get out. I don't care if she has to live in her car. It's better than that because [the abuse is] gonna get worse.

P14: It is not God's will for you to be destroyed. It is God's will for you to thrive. It's so hard if somebody is so deeply entrenched like I was in believing that it's God's will to stay there and fight forever and ever and ever. I would just tell them that God cares more about them than their marriage. God cares more about their kids than their marriage staying intact, and what they are more responsible for than the husband is themselves, and their own safety. I want women to know their hearts are more important, um, than sustaining a relationship. If I could yell that from the mountaintops, I would.

P16: God doesn't like divorce right? But God doesn't want you in an abusive environment. And it just kinda became more apparent to me that I was not getting advice from what the Bible says. I was getting biased advice to try to avoid embarrassment within the church…And I just wish that somebody would have said, "You deserve better than that, and that's not what God wants for you." You know, it's not OK for somebody to hit you. It's not OK to verbally abuse somebody and talk down to them and lose your temper…You shouldn't be embarrassed if you're in that position either. You shouldn't be embarrassed because it's not you, it's them. You know, if a woman is in that situation, [she] should, obviously nobody is perfect, so, you can look at changes that you might need to make in your own life. But you should not be embarrassed, and you are not at fault. And that if anybody puts that pressure on you, they are wrong! And that [you] are worth more than saying, "Oh I didn't divorce my husband." You're worth more than that. And that God doesn't want you to be in that situation. It's

like, "Show me a Bible verse that says that!" You know, that would be my

response now. "Can you show me where it says that [in the Bible]?" Because at

the time I could not. I did not do that. Because if you have another Christian

telling you what God wants, if it's not in the Bible, how is that what God wants?

When you are giving guidance that God wants this, well show me where that is,

you know. So that's what I would encourage at this point in life, in my 30s.

Summary

Within Chapter 4, I presented comprehensive details of the full research process

for this project. These details included the results of recruitment, the setting of the

interviews, and the demographics of the participants. I fully explained the data collection

procedure and documented how I completed the analysis of the data. The six themes

which emerged from the data were carefully described along with four discrepancies

between participants' descriptions of support, which were delineated and explained. I

also included in this chapter the evidence of trustworthiness according to credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The bulk of Chapter 4 was focused on

the results of the study wherein each theme was firmly supported with excerpts from

interviews across all participants.

The next and last chapter is dedicated to discussing and interpreting the findings

of this research, which was conducted to answer the question—What is the lived

experience of religious stigma surrounding divorce for Christian women in abusive

marriages? I include in Chapter 5 a review of the limitations of the study, any

recommendations that should be considered, and implications the study indicated which

may impact positive social change. The last chapter of this research will draw

conclusions and capture the essence of the study as a whole.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I conducted this research in order to gain a rich and deep understanding of the religious stigma Christian women experienced when divorcing from abusive husbands. The previous chapters contained descriptions of the foundation for the research, how the research was conducted, and the findings from analysis of the data gathered. Briefly, there were six participants in the study, and each described multiple types of IPV along with a strong stigma for divorcing their abusive husbands. Analysis of the data uncovered the following six themes common to all participants:

1. Family and church connections were very important.

2. All forms of abuse were experienced in their marriages.

3. Religious leaders gave unsafe and contradictory advice.

4. There was a strong stigma for divorcing from abusive marriages.

5. Help came mostly from outside the church.

6. Christian women in abusive marriages need better advice and substantial help.

In this final chapter, I provide my personal interpretation of the findings according to the lived experiences each participant described. The chapter includes discussion of how the knowledge that was gleaned from the study fills a distinct gap in the literature that was reviewed for this project. I also summarize the limitations of the study and end with a discourse covering my recommendations and the study's implications for positive social change.

Interpretation of Findings

The women who participated in this study suffered greatly. They were abused in numerous ways by their husbands. They were invalidated in their pleas for help. They were given very poor advice and nearly nonexistent support throughout their ordeals. These things combined created an overwhelming stigma which they each described as seemingly impossible to overcome.

This Research, the Literature, and IPV

It is well documented that IPV is a serious global problem with a multitude of harmful consequences (Breiding et al., 2015; Dillon et al., 2013; WHO, 2021). Breiding et al. (2015) and Smith et al. (2018) described various abusive behaviors in the three categories of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. The participants in my research all described being victimized in all three ways. The abuses they suffered included pushing, grabbing, shaking, punching, hitting, restraining, and strangling (i.e., physical); being treated with indifference, name calling, yelling, degrading speech, stalking, unwanted contact, threatening further damage, coercive control, isolation, mind games (i.e., psychological); and unwanted sexual contact, unwanted exposure to sexual content/behaviors, verbal sexual harassment, forced penetration, and inability to refuse sexual behaviors (i.e., sexual).

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 demonstrated that there was a trend toward minimizing or discounting psychological abuse while focusing on physical or sexual IPV (Pickover et al., 2017; Vernick, 2013, 2022; Walker, 2017; Yoshihama et al., 2009). There has been a documented hesitancy to accept psychological abuse as real and

damaging to the victim (Nash et al., 2013; Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005; Vernick, 2022; Walker, 2017). Furthermore, Yoshihama et al. (2009) reported that not only are the effects of emotional abuse just as damaging as other forms of abuse, but emotional and verbal abuse may often be the predecessor to physical and sexual abuse.

The findings of the current study confirmed the trend toward minimizing psychological abuse and failing to accept it as harmful. All participants were denounced by church leadership when they reached out for help. They described being told, "What are you talking about?" "He was processing; he was just thinking things out." "He is just responding to your behaviors," and even, "Well, you have no bruises." Although the participants experienced all three types of abuse, the psychological component was exceedingly difficult for them and was the first form of abuse they encountered, confirming previous findings (see Yoshihama et al., 2009). P2 reported that her husband belittled her often, especially when in front of others, and was very controlling and isolating. Her statement about the abuse was that the belittling was "probably the hardest thing." P4 described her spouse as one who would insult her and call her degrading names; follow her from room to room while picking on her; not allow her to leave a room; yell at her; and use intimidating language, threats, and manipulation to get what he wanted. She stated, "You know, if you are told a lie enough, you begin to believe it as the truth." P6 reported that it was difficult from day 1 with her husband having emotional outbursts, anger fits, throwing things, yelling, and threatening suicide. Her response was, "I just died inside…I felt as a person that I was kind of dead. I became more of a robot."

P8 recalled her husband screaming in her face, making wild accusations at her, isolating

her, and speaking to her in terrible ways to demean her. She said,

> They didn't believe me. I didn't have any marks on me. I didn't have a black eye.
>
> I didn't have a busted lip or broke limbs…What came out of his mouth was
>
> worse…You know, there's mental abuse, terrible mental abuse.

P14 discussed manipulation, name calling, mind games, and "emotional punching." She

stated, "I think it's abusive to let somebody think they're crazy." P16 described her

husband as very angry, yelling a lot, calling her names, punching things, lying easily and

often, or otherwise ignoring her completely for days on end. She stated, "I probably had

severe panic attacks for maybe 3 or 4 years after that."

This Research, the Literature, and Christian Perspective on IPV

The findings of this study confirmed the literature describing that the

overwhelming majority of Christian women who were victimized in IPV tended to first

seek help from their religious leaders (see Drumm, 2018; McCoy, 2016; Zust et al.,

2021). Indeed, all the women participating in this research did first attempt to find help

within their faith groups and from church leadership. They did not find the help or

support they needed but instead were given directives to remain in abusive situations.

This harmful advice confirmed literature noting that the Christian teachings of

submission, obedience, and forgiveness were being misused in IPV situations to sustain

marriages without regard to the consequences (see Leong, 2018; McAllister & Roberts-

Lewis, 2010; McCoy, 2016; Nash et al., 2013; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Zust et al.,

2017). The conclusion the participants came to was that couples who remain married are

called successful despite ongoing abuse. P2 stated that she was told repeatedly to "submit to your husband, but never the rest of that, never the rest of the story. Just submit." The pastor of P4 told her that she was "just bitter and needed to be more forgiving" toward her husband. P6 was admonished to be a submissive wife and to find a mentor to help her "be that nice submissive wife that I'm supposed to be." P8 was left with "just maybe think of some way to not make him mad," laying the responsibility of peace in the home on her. P14 recalled one of her pastors telling her, "God's best is always reconciliation, and it always looks like staying in the marriage, and so [you need to] just work really hard." P16 summed it well up by saying, "It just kinda became more apparent to me that I was not getting advice from what the Bible says. I was getting biased advice to try to avoid embarrassment within the church."

This Research, the Literature, and Christan Divorce

The advice these study participants received confirmed the literature indicating that the majority of Christian leaders see themselves as protectors of the sanctity of marriage, and they have continued to teach that IPV is absolutely not a reason for divorce (see Levitt & Ware, 2006; Olshewsky, 2001; Zust et al., 2021). Previous research has documented the majority of Christian leaders as having minimal to no training on IPV and feeling completely unprepared or inadequate to address IPV in their congregants (Drumm, 2018; Zust et al., 2021). Despite these facts, the participants' Christian leaders continued to offer advice and counseling to women desperately seeking help in violent marriages and continued to rebuke these women who wanted to remove themselves to a place of safety.

The current study findings disconfirmed literature that delineated adultery as an accepted or approved reason for divorce in the Christian church. Longstanding Christian doctrine is that that divorce is only to be sought in the instance of sexual infidelity (Hobbs, 2020; Leong, 2018; Levitt & Ware, 2006; Olshewsky, 2001; Zust et al., 2021). Contrarily, while 4 of the 6 participants of the current study described chronic infidelity by their husbands along with IPV, none were told that divorce was acceptable. Only P14 was told that divorce would not be sinful in her case, but she was also instructed that she should not choose to divorce since it was not God's best plan for her. She described being pressured to remain with her husband despite ongoing adultery and abuse.

This Research, the Literature, and Stigma of Divorce

Monumental suffering was experienced due to the stigma these participants felt throughout their ordeals. This stigma confirmed literature exposing that women who leave marriages marked by IPV tend to experience very negative responses from their churches. These responses resulted in a stigma of divorce despite harmful and abusive nature of their marriages (see Adjei, 2017; Focus on the Family, 2016; Gerstel, 1987; Konieczny, 2016; Konstam et al., 2016; Perry, 2018; Vernick, 2013). Every participant in the current study described being shunned, excluded, unsupported, and isolated in their churches to the point wherein the small children of P4 were asking, "Mommy, why don't we have friends at church anymore?"

I conducted this study to extend and build upon the knowledge acquired in previous research, such as the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. This expansion was accomplished by gaining insight into and understanding of the stigma Christian women

experienced in divorcing from marriages characterized by IPV. All participants of this

study experienced substantial stigma and were very clear in explaining what this stigma

felt like for them and what it meant to them. Throughout the interviews, participants used

similar words to describe their pain at how they were treated by other Christians. P2 used

the words "confused," "scared," "cut off," "not allowed to participate in anything,"

"given the cold shoulder," "abandoned," "hurt," "wounded," "unloved," and "not

worthy." P4 stated she was "exhausted," "ashamed," "misunderstood," "confused,"

"trapped," "angry," "miserable," "hopeless," "condemned," "humiliated," and

"punished." She continued with, "I kind of just lost who I really was, my identity…I just

wanted nothing to do with God anymore, or the church 'cause I was so very hurt and very

exhausted." P6 described herself as "helpless," "hopeless," "demeaned," "dead,"

"afraid," "misunderstood," "hurt," "depressed," "judged," "criticized," "looked down

upon," "not supported at all," and "shut down." P6 shared that "I even almost left the

church because of it." P8 reported she was "embarrassed," "so alone," "isolated," "felt

total and complete hopelessness," "scared to death," "had no support at all," "stuck,"

"angry," "depressed," "blaming myself," and "judging myself harshly." She said, "I left

that whole town. I never saw any of them people again…I shoulda left sooner." P14

stated she was "stuck," "angry," "hopeless," "had no peace," "felt fearful," "afraid,"

"powerless," "confused," "manipulated," "trapped," "isolated," "lonely," and

"frustrated." She went on to say, "I think just darkness, hopelessness, just kinda like

sitting in the ashes…It was hellacious." P16 used the words "painful," "angry,"

"extremely difficult," "ashamed," "embarrassed," "guilty," "isolated," and "completely

failed." P16 shared that, "All of this falls on me because clearly there's something wrong with me…I was getting so much backlash."

This Research and its Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation for this study was feminist theory. To review, feminist theory was developed to aid in uncovering and attempting to correct instances when women are considered or treated as if they are inferior and unequal to men (Conlin, 2017). It is an applicable theory when women are excluded, oppressed, victimized, dominated, suppressed, silenced, or powerless merely because they are women; it also applies when women are expected to be passive and weak in the presence of men (Conlin, 2017; Weitz, 1982).

The results of this research confirmed that women are continuing to be victimized, silenced, and oppressed while expected to behave in passive and dependent manners, especially within their religious groups (see Adjei, 2017;Callahan, 2021; Conlin 2017; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001b; Hobbs, 2020; Weitz, 1982). The participants in the current study were all victimized, they were invalidated and even ignored in their cries for help, they were repeatedly advised to be more submissive to men who were violently harming them, and they were even told to keep the issues quiet so as not to embarrass their husbands. Each woman expressed feeling utterly powerless to change her life's dynamics and was unable to move toward safety outside of her marriage until she was at the breaking point. P4 came to the place of declaring that she would rather "go to hell than back to that man," while P6 expressed terror in thinking "this is gonna be my forever." P8 recalled that she was told multiple times by her husband to go to her room,

like a child who was in trouble, and "I went to my room…You have to give up everything you ever believed in to save your life, you've got, you have no choice."

Limitations of the Study

I noted a few limitations in the first chapter. One such limitation was the possibility of risk to the participants. In research conducted with humans, all risk must be minimized to the level that would equal the anticipated discomfort encountered in ordinary daily life or in routine physical and psychological exams (Lantos et al., 2015; Protection of Human Subjects, 2018). I employed protective measures in this research that included informed consent, security of identity, confidentiality of information, disclosure of the purpose for this research, voluntary participation, acknowledgement of emotional activation risk, and availability of help if needed (see APA, 2017). I was also very conscious of my presentation and interaction with all participants in order to protect their dignity and validate their experiences along with the meanings they made of their experiences. Every participant denied any distress before, during, or after the interview, and none reported a need to utilize any of the provided resources.

Another limitation noted was ensuring that participants were no longer in abusive situations or fragile states of mind. People in violent situations or those who may be fragile or impaired are vulnerable to further harm. Such applicants were not included in this study that adhered to the rules of the Walden University Office of Research and Doctoral Services (2021a). One such applicant was no longer in an abusive situation but had recently experienced the death of a close loved one. She was in counseling with a peer counselor at her church. A second applicant was advised not to participate by her

current husband. I offered both women resources for support should they need it, and they were gently declined as participants.

Lastly, the results of this study were limited by the small sample size with participants from only four Christian denominations, which resulted in the findings not being transferable across the general population. The particular details provided by each participant can only be understood in the context of the participant's situation (see Shenton, 2004). The findings, however, are certainly relevant to other Christian women in similar circumstances and delineate a need for further investigation.

Recommendations

In this study, I explored the experience of religious stigma surrounding divorce for Christian women in abusive marriages. The findings showed that participants experienced a severe stigma as they separated from and divorced their abusive husbands. I also found that participants suffered that stigma in direct relation to how they were treated by fellow church members, leaders, and pastors.

For Church Leadership

I previously highlighted the basic Christian belief surrounding marriage; it was designed and ordained by God to be a place of unconditional love, acceptance, and safety (Crabb, 2013; Johnson, 2020; Martinez, 2017). This belief in itself denotes that there should be no IPV in Christian marriages, yet Christian women are being abused by their husbands at the same rate as women in the general population (Nason-Clark, 2004; Vernick, 2013). These victimized wives are absolutely not in a place of unconditional love, acceptance, or safety.

Many Christian pastors and church leaders are woefully unprepared for how to intervene Biblically in cases of IPV (Drumm, 2018; Weaver, 1993; Zust et al., 2021). Participants of this research project described the advice of pastors and leaders in their churches as very harmful to them and that it fully enabled further and ongoing abuse. When women are advised to forgive and be submissive in order to preserve the family, the perpetrator is empowered to continue the violence (Leong, 2018; McCoy, 2016; Nash et al., 2013; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Vernick 2022).

Several trainings have been developed for clergy and church leader to guide them in addressing IPV within their congregations (Drumm et al., 2018; Pack, 2020; Vernick, 2013; Weaver, 1993). For example, several Christian authors have written that abuse is the sin rather than divorcing the abuser (Moore, 2022; Vernick 2013). Moore advised pastors to recognize that there was probably at least one person in the pew of every church who was being abused. Vernick called for pastors to understand the biblical process of church discipline and apply it to the abuser. Both Moore and Vernick instructed that abuse is abandonment of the covenant the husband made with his wife at marriage and that a divorce is merely the legal recognition of what has already happened. There has been very poor use of such trainings, to the detriment of women who are victimized and to their families (Zust et al., 2021).

P4 recommended that people "look at the whole context of scripture. Look at the entire description of how we are supposed to behave and treat one another," while P14 said, "I just think the church has, has so much influence there, to give people, um, encouragement or to just break them down or keep them stuck." The Christian church is

clearly poised to provide support and demonstrate love and safety to victims of IVP. The findings of this research point to a recommendation that more of these trainings be developed to include an emphasis on the Biblical teachings about violent and abusive behaviors and to highlight the effects IVP typically has on women. I highly recommended that pastors and church leaders regularly attend such trainings and then preach clearly to their congregants on the subject of IPV.

For Research

The findings of this research are limited by the small sample size and the participants only having backgrounds in Baptist, Methodist, Evangelical Free, and Non-Denominational Christian churches. Saturation was reached at six participants. However, the body of literature would be enhanced by further research on the topic of the stigma Christian women experienced in divorcing abusive husbands. There is also room for investigation of this stigma within other Christian denominations. Lastly, further research is recommended to gain insight into the experience of pastors and church leaders who have provided advice to women experiencing IPV in their marriages.

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Implications

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The results of this research have brought insight and understanding into the stigma that the participants experienced as they moved out of their abusive marriages toward physical and psychological safety and searched for healing. Participants provided rich and deep information as they described their situations, their perspectives, their values, their beliefs, and the meanings they made. Several implications for positive social change have emerged as a result of the findings of this research.

Social Implications

The occurrence of IPV is well documented and continues to be a formidable problem (Breiding et al., 2015; WHO, 2021). This study implied the need to raise awareness that some Christian women are grievously suffering. They are suffering in marriages fraught with abuse from husbands who do not uphold their promises to love and cherish their wives. They are suffering in their churches that are not offering help to those in dire need. They are suffering in their communities where they often have found only minimal support (Augustin, 2016; Walker, 2017). There is a vast opportunity for communities to not only raise awareness of the plight of these women but also to unite in designing methods to alleviate some of the suffering.

Church Implications

At the organizational level, pastors and church leaders need to become aware of the regularity that IPV is occurring within many congregations. Recent statistics noted that an alarming number of pastors believe IPV occurs in less than 10% of their congregants while the actual rate was found to be 25% to 35% (Nason-Clark, 2004; Smith et al., 2018; Williams & Jenkins, 2019). Other pastors reported that they did not believe there was any IPV among their members (Williams & Jenkins, 2019).

The implication is that pastors need to be equipped to address IPV and to intervene in situations of IPV. Being educated will result in more preparedness to overcome the documented hesitancy to become involved or even preach from the pulpit about the various issues within IPV (Ellison et al., 2012; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a;

Moon & Shim, 2010; Zust et al., 2017). As pastors become knowledgeable on the subject

and pass that knowledge along, the families within their churches will benefit.

Family Implications

Healthy families are foundational to healthy societies, communities, and churches,

and all families need support in some way (Duncan & Duncan, 1978; McDougall &

Pearsall, 2017). The participants in this research depicted families that were being torn

apart by IPV. All six women who participated in this research had children during their

abusive marriages as well during their times of experiencing stigma in divorce. Many

children, having lived through such experiences, go on to have very negative thoughts

and attitudes regarding marriage or having families of their own (Buri et al., 2018;

Shimkowski et al., 2018). Further, childhood exposure to parental IPV is related to a

myriad of problems such as decreased academic achievement, increased aggressive

behaviors, and substance use problems (Holmes at al., 2018). The implication is that such

families need considerable intervention and support.

Individual Implications

The participants each described being victimized on different levels. They were

harmed by the abuse they experienced—physically, emotionally, spiritually, financially,

sexually—from their husbands. They were revictimized in their churches and extended

families from harsh judgement. They endured distress in navigating how to best care for

their children. They suffered in their communities from poor support systems. The

implication is that there needs to be increased awareness of the phenomenon of stigma of

divorce for Christian women who are victimized in IPV, what they go through, what they

need, and how to best meet them at the point of their need. This study is one step toward that awareness.

Conclusion

This research has provided much needed insight into the phenomenon of the stigma Christian women have experienced in divorcing from abusive husbands. Despite numerous past studies highlighting the seriousness of IPV and various detrimental effects, IPV continues to be a critical problem and is occurring at the same alarming rate within Christian churches as outside of them (Breiding et al., 2015; Dillon et al., 2013; Holmes at al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2018; Pickover et al., 2017; Piotrowski et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2019; Walker, 2017). Despite several training programs being developed and available to clergy and church leadership, few have taken advantage of them while most are unable to provide safe interventions, help, or healing within their congregations (Drumm, 2018; McCoy, 2016; Nason-Clark, 2004; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018; Williams & Jenkins, 2019; Zust et al., 2021). Despite Christianity being a faith standing strongly on the foundation of loving behaviors with marriage as the pinnacle of trust, safety, and selfless consideration for each other, many Christian marriages are instead places of destruction (Ademiluka, 2019; Crabb, 2013; Johnson, 2020; Martinez, 2017; Nash et al., 2013; Nason-Clark et al., 2018; Popescu et al., 2009). My strongest desire it that the destruction ends and, instead, the love of Christ is reflected.

My research has provided insight into the stigma the participants suffered in attempting to get to a safe place. I believe that individuals, Christians, churches, and communities need to begin providing that safe place without condemnation or judgment.

I envision people simply reaching out and helping victimized women at the point of their need, offering desperately needed assistance. Just helping one individual could begin a ripple effect touching families, churches, communities, and even further into cultural and global circles. The end result may very well be safer individuals, safer families, safer communities, and a safer world.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little about where you grew up.

2. What is your spiritual/religious background?

3. When did you marry?

   o How long were you married?

4. What was your marriage like?

   o Walk me through a good day in your marriage.

   o Were there any bad days?

      ▪ If so, tell me what that was like.

   o Were there times in your marriage when you thought it was abusive?

      ▪ If so, would you describe a time when you felt abused?

         • What did it mean for you?

         • What feelings did you experience?

5. How did you experience your religious beliefs in your marriage?

   o What meaning did your beliefs have in your marriage?

6. Did you speak to anyone about your marital situation?

   o If so, please describe who you talked to.

      ▪ Tell me more about the conversation.

7. Were you ever given religious advice about the state of your marriage?

   o If so, please tell me about it.

8. When you received that advice, what was your reaction?

   o How did that advice feel to you?

- o What were your thoughts about that advice?

9. What was your perception of divorce in your situation?

   - o What role did your Christian beliefs have, if any, in your perceptions about divorce in your situation?

10. How long were you in this situation?

11. Tell me about your decision to leave the marriage.

12. As a Christian, what was it like for you to leave the marriage?

    - o What were your thoughts about divorcing?

    - o What emotions did you have about divorcing?

    - o Describe times when you felt a stigma related to the thought of divorce. This would be a mark of negativity, shame, or disgrace about divorcing.

13. What was this stigma like for you?

14. How supported did you feel when you moved toward divorce?

    - o How did others react to your decision to divorce?

    - o What was it like for you?

    - o How did you move through this and get past it?

15. Now that you are on the other side of divorce, as you look back on what you have been through, what do you see?

16. Would there be anything you would want other women in similar situations to know?

    - o If so, please tell me about it.

17. Is there anything else you would like to share before we close?

Appendix B: Aftercare

Should you desire to speak to a mental health professional about any distress you experienced as a result of participating in this research, here are some resources that can help. Some provide low or no cost mental health services. Several accept most insurances. Some use video mental health sessions (TeleMental Health) as well as in-office face-to-face sessions.

- Coastal Counseling Center
  205 Lakeshore Point.
  St Marys, Georgia 31558.
  Phone: (912) 225-1120
  https://www.coastalcounselingcenter.org/

- Gateway Behavioral Health
  701 Charles Gilman Jr Ave
  Ste A, Kingsland, GA 31548
  912- 576-4357
  800-557-9955

- Family Matters
  605 Osborne St
  Saint Marys, GA 31558
  (912) 825-8488

- US Department of Health and Human Services
  https://www.mentalhealth.gov/get-help/immediate-help

- Headway
  https://headway.co/

- TalkSpace
  https://help.talkspace.com/hc/en-us

- BetterHelp
  https://www.betterhelp.com/