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The Victims' Experience: Emotional Spiritual Abuse in the Christian Community

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

In recent years, greater attention has been paid to the effects of sexual abuse within Christianity. There was a need for greater understanding of the psychological aspect of spiritual abuse within familial dynamics. The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the phenomenon of emotional spiritual abuse that victims experience within Christian families. Using a theoretical foundation based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Bowen's family systems theory, this study focused on relationships within victims' microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. It also explored the concept of emotional triangles in times of conflict. The data source consisted of one-on-one participant interviews featuring semi-structured, open-ended questions. The nine interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai and then inductively coded. The 37 identified categories were further coded into eight themes: traumatic stressors, clerical, prejudicial, activities, familial/relational, intimacy, satanic, and Biblical literature. The themes indicate the strategies and tactics utilized against the participants to commit emotional spiritual abuse. Identifying the common strategies and tactics that are used to commit emotional spiritual abuse may contribute to early identification. The study may also foster positive social change by informing professionals of the need for a more victim-centered approach to addressing emotional spiritual abuse.

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this research to the memory of my loving father, Maurice Dotson Jr., whose kind spirit and love continue to inspire me, and to my mother, Deborah Lampkin, for always believing in all of my dreams, even when they seem unreachable - you both helped to lay my foundation, which remains unshakeable. To my friends, whose hands diligently lay each brick, which shapes who I am and provides never-ending support. To the divine architect, God, whose grace forms the sturdy rooftop, forever sheltering me.

Finally, I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my younger self. An inventive explorer who dreamed big dreams, this dissertation is a testament to the power of perseverance. May these pages serve as a reminder that even the longest journeys begin with a single step and that God's plans for our lives are always greater than we can imagine (Jeremiah 29:11).

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To all my amazing friends and family who helped me share my flyers, held me accountable, and encouraged me. Without you all, I would not have been able to gather participants as quickly as I did - I cannot thank you all enough. I acknowledge the profound impact of my mentors and therapist, whose guidance has been instrumental in my personal and professional growth. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all the participants. This dissertation would not have been possible without the generous participation of nine individuals. Their willingness to take time to share their experiences has truly enriched this research beyond measure.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Study

Research on the pathology of offenders can be easily found by conducting a literature search. The public has been fascinated with understanding the minds of sexual offenders for many years. Research on the effects of crimes is not as abundant as that of offenders, which can leave victims to navigate the aftermath of traumatic events on their own. Sexual and physical abuse can have a significant negative impact on victims. Still, this study seeks to explore victims' experiences with emotional and psychological abuse committed against them by the people closest to them. This research study will also emphasize how spirituality can be used as a tactic to commit abuse. Insight regarding the strategies and tactics used to abuse victims spiritually will assist in proper identification and potential treatment techniques for those suffering from ailments such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The abuse occurs within immediate social groups such as families, schools, prisons, churches, and occults. When other forms of abuse are present, it may underscore additional problems in the identification of emotional spiritual abuse. Momtaz et al. (2022) asserted that sexual abuse and physical abuse within these social constructs are more likely to be investigated (p. 2). The incongruency of sexual and physical abuse versus emotional abuse was evident during the literature review.

Moreover, numerous victims of emotional or psychological abuse may present themselves in a manner that is unusual to those not accustomed to normal victim pathology. Yusoff et al. (2018) maintain that the best approach for victims of spiritual abuse is to ensure they "feel at ease, safe, and secure" (p. 86). Particularly in situations

where an individual is not trauma-informed, it may be challenging to connect the victims' actions to their traumatic experience.

Many outside influences can affect the abuse victim and their decision-making process. Substance use, affluence of the perpetrator, financial dependency, familial dependency, and mental health concerns are some of the outside influences that may affect victims of abuse. Some victims who experience abuse before adulthood can be at risk of self-harm, anxiety, PTSD, high-risk sexual behaviors, and substance abuse (Schaefer et al., 2018). The literature review revealed the variety of effects that victims of abuse may experience.

The level of religiosity is a consideration that could result in slight deviations within the findings of studies. One study utilized a questionnaire and determined that religiosity positively correlated with adolescents' self-regulating and problem-solving abilities (Abdollahzadeh Rafi et al., 2020, p. 1882). Another study analyzing Christian college students found that some positively coped with their faith, while others negatively coped based on their self-perception, as outlined in Higgins' Self-Discrepancy Theory of 1987 (Klausli, 2019, p. 36). This study will allow readers to understand how abuse driven by religiosity impacts victims.

Studies that analyze physical and emotional spiritual abuse focus on how it presents itself within different cultures or social groups. A 2021 study conducted by Gray et al., theorized how spiritual abuse surfaces within the Native American culture (p. 207). For this study, the researcher will focus on the Western denominations of Christianity. This study will focus on victimology rather than offender profiles. The access to more

experts in the victimology field will allow for inclusivity of varying types of abuse cases that are being brought to justice. Finally, understanding how psychological and emotional abuse presents could considerably benefit victims of spiritual abuse by supporting policy with research data in the future.

Background

Multiple concepts were identified throughout the literature review. The search to determine what studies on religious abuse, of any form, exposed a considerable number of studies regarding the Catholic church. The identification of studies on the Catholic church highlighted the lack of studies on other religions (Dreßing et al., 2019; Dressing et al., 2021; Foley, 2019; Heyder, 2022; Pereda & Segura, 2021; Roblero Cum, 2021; Sadlon & Nowotny, 2022; Winters et al., 2022).

The studies on the Catholic church further showed that most studies focused on sexual abuse, specifically within the church or with clergy members (McGraw et al., 2019, p. 242). In the studies about sexual abuse, the researchers tended to focus on the offender's behavior rather than the victimology. With the knowledge that most abuse offenders know their victims, I began to research theories that described the intricacies of familial relationships within abusive systems. The literature review identified many types of abuse that plague familial structures across generations. However, sexual and physical abuse were studied most often within familial structures, and fewer studies focused on emotional or psychological abuse.

The effects of emotional and psychological abuse were another constant within the literature review. Many studies referred to the types of religious coping and the

development of resilience that victims of spiritual abuse may experience after a traumatic event. Before the 2019 study by Klausli, a 2018 study conducted by Schaefer et al., clearly defined positive and negative religious coping. Additionally, Schaefer et al. (2018) found that trauma survivors could use positive religious coping to help them experience resilience and a phenomenon called post-traumatic growth (PTG) (p. 18). The literature demonstrates that while examining the victimology of emotional spiritual abuse, the coping mechanisms of each participant could differ significantly.

Another concept identified throughout the literature review was the specific victim groups studied. Several studies focused on particular groups of victims within certain cultures, such as Catholic clergy; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/aromantic/agender (LGBTQIA+); Black Christian clergy; Native American elders; spouses; and Jewish Unorthodox (Dehan & Levi, 2009; Ginicola et al., 2017; Gray et al., 2021; Schiffman, 2019). These groups have special considerations that should be carefully assessed for current and future studies. The specificity of victim groups was essential to note which groups had experienced similarities and differences amongst the types of abuse and identify gaps within the literature.

One concept that was clear and ever-changing throughout the literature review was the inconsistency in the naming of spiritual abuse, yet the definitions were generally similar. The inconsistency in naming could make it difficult to conduct thorough literature reviews and prevent policies from being made to assist victims of spiritual abuse. Fortunately, the use of synonyms allowed for a proper literature review. With

consistency in calling spiritual abuse the same name in every instance comes the ease of identifying it and the creation of future policies regarding how to legally manage these cases.

The literature review helped identify a clear gap in the research based on the identified concepts. Notably, many studies called for the need for a victims' perspective on matters of spiritual abuse. Understanding the experiences of the victims could prove just as beneficial as understanding the offender's perspective. This study is needed to improve the identification of spiritual abuse cases, provide the victims with the appropriate services, mitigate generational abuse, and provide the justice system with the knowledge to help properly handle instances where spiritual abuse might be a factor.

Problem Statement

The situation that prompted me to search the literature was the potential effects of emotional abuse within familial structures that practice Christianity. Sexual abuse was a central point of focus during the initial literature review and prompted me to research studies that had a focus on emotional and psychological abuse. The new focus resulted in the identification of a gap within the literature. Some studies indicated that emotional and psychological abuse could have lasting effects on victims and continue throughout the familial structure. The specific research problem that will be addressed through this study is to understand the different strategies and tactics used to manipulate emotionally and spiritually abuse within familial structures under the guise of Christianity.

While similarities exist regarding religiosity, several religious populations have different constructs that may offer unique experiences for the victims. In 2020, Davis and

Johnson highlighted how clergy viewed spiritual abuse amongst intimate partners within the Black Christian Church and found common themes and phrases that were used amongst the Black clergy members to describe the phenomena (pp. 959-961). This study seeks to understand the different tactics used within multiple Christian denominations to abuse victims emotionally or psychologically.

Within the last 5 years, researchers have studied the topic of emotional and psychological abuse extensively (Abdollahzadeh Rafi et al., 2020; Briggs & Whittaker, 2018; Duprey et al., 2021; Gama et al., 2021; Kwok et al., 2022; Momtaz et al., 2022; Nobakht & Dale, 2018). Childhood emotional and psychological abuse was directly related to a lack of developed resilience and self-compassion (Kwok et al., 2022, p. 8). Adding the religious aspect to this study will provide readers with a new approach to consider regarding emotional abuse. Moreover, there was a lack of understanding of the different emotional tactics used to abuse victims spiritually. Dissecting the commonly used tactics will offer the ability to create future policies on response and treatment in the future. Focus on emotional spiritual abuse tactics used within familial structures against victims proves necessary based upon the literature review.

The problem will provide insight into the victims, and potentially more information regarding the subjects. Forensic psychology examines the mind and behavior of people within the legal system. This study seeks to analyze the behaviors of those who have been emotionally or psychologically victimized under the guise of Christianity. Victimology explores the psychological effects on victims and the relationship between the victim and the offender. This relates to the current study because it seeks to

emphasize the victims' experience in the spiritual abuse cycle. Identifying the interactions between the victim and the offenders will allow actionable prevention methods that professionals and victims can use to put an end to the abuse cycle.

The cycle of abuse is something that has been explored, and researchers have attempted to understand why some abuse spans generations. Victims are impacted by many forms of abuse. All victims may experience acute trauma, secondary trauma, or vicarious trauma. The problem that was identified applies to what the current literature review portrayed. The problem is concentrated within the forensic psychology and victimology disciplines. The field of forensic psychology and victimology can benefit from the findings of the current study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the phenomena of emotional spiritual abuse that victims experience within Christian families.

Research Questions

The research questions (RQ's) were as follows:

RQ1: What strategies/tactics may be used to perpetuate emotional spiritual abuse in families under the guise of Christianity?

RQ2: What spiritual abuse strategies/tactics, if any, are the most prevalent in Christian families?

The Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (n.d.) outlined different strategies and tactics that are used to describe domestic abuse. The tactics were named in the organization's power and control wheel. Coercion and threats, intimidation, emotional

abuse, isolation, minimization, denying and blaming, using children, using male privilege, and using economic abuse are all tactics of abuse. As this study will analyze familial relationships and those close to the victim, it is likely that some of the same tactics will be recognized in the data analysis.

The Domestic Abuse Intervention Project. (n.d.) detailed how gaslighting, humiliation, and blame are all signs of emotional abuse. A few forms of abuse that could have emotional or psychological effects are financial, economic, and reproductive abuse. The National Domestic Violence Hotline defined reproductive abuse as one person stripping another of the ability to control their reproductive system. Reproductive abuse can be used to force, guilt, shame, or pressure an individual into having or wanting children or not having or wanting children, it noted. Within many Christian denominations, abstinence is something that is taught to many adolescents. Faith-based abstinence is defined as an intervention delaying or reducing sexual intercourse drawing on biblical Scriptures (Jemmott et al., 2020, p. 107). Understanding the standard practices of Christianity was essential for the researcher to distinguish the religious norm, what could constitute abuse, and what could fit into both categories during data analysis. Categorization of the data will be integral when answering the RQ's posed for this study.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical framework for this study will consist of two theories: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) of 1979 and Bowen's Family Systems Theory (FST) of the 1950s. Both theories help explain how different "systems" within an individual's life may impact them. Concepts from EST and FST enabled the

resolution of the RQ's based on the findings of this study. This descriptive study presents a better understanding of the common tactics and mechanisms that are used upon victims by their perpetrators of familial, emotional spiritual abuse. The theories allow readers to grasp subtle differences in the victimology of those who experience familial abuse versus nonfamilial abuse. The theoretical foundation supports the study's goal. The concepts within EST and FST satisfy the RQ's and address the propositions identified by the researcher. Both theories will be further detailed in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

For this qualitative analysis, I used a descriptive phenomenological design to help identify common strategies and tactics used to commit spiritual abuse across familial structures. The researcher will conduct a comprehensive analysis of emotional spiritual abuse by interviewing victims and discussing their experiences (Leigh-Osroosh, 2021). The descriptive design is best suited for studies that require additional information to better understand a phenomenon. The qualitative methodology will enable a more personalized analysis and results based on the themes identified during the data review. This qualitative analysis will help to identify common tactics used to commit spiritual abuse across familial structures.

The methodology for this study will include recorded audio-only interviews with victims of emotional spiritual abuse. Audio-only interviewing could allow the participants to feel more comfortable discussing a personal topic with the interviewer. Interviewees will be over 21 and have practiced at least one of the Christian denominations identified within the Definitions section of this chapter. The interviews

will then be manually analyzed to find common themes that are used in the commission of spiritual abuse and the effects on each victim. The descriptive phenomenological design will be most appropriate for the study's goal. The methodology will concentrate on the participants' experiences with being spiritually abused. The results will be manually analyzed to highlight common tactics and mechanisms used to perpetuate spiritual abuse in Christian families.

Definitions

The following are definitions that are used to describe important terminology used throughout this study:

Christianity/Christian: The Western Denominations were identified after the 1054 AD Schism of the Christian Church. This study will include only the Western Catholic Church (Roman Catholic) and four Protestant denominations (Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal), (Ready to Harvest, 2022).

Emotional Abuse: Non-physical abuse, including verbal threats, insults, degradation, humiliation, instilling fear, and lowering the self-esteem of the victim.

Family/Familial: Immediate members, members that you have a close relationship with, members that you have lived with or have had immediate proximity to, including unrelated caregivers and adopted parental figures.

Intrafamilial Trauma/Abuse: When a member causes emotional injury to another member (Figley,1995).

Psychological Abuse: Abuse that affects the mind or mental status of an individual.

Religion/Religious: A personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, or practices (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Referring to a specific religion or practicing rituals based on the belief system of a particular religion.

Secondary Trauma: Occurs when traumatic stress appears to "infect" the entire system after first appearing in one member (Figley, 1995).

Spiritual: Relating to religion or religious belief that affects the human spirit/soul.

Trauma-informed: Understanding how trauma affects victims and how to ask questions in a way that will not cause further traumatization.

Vicarious Trauma: Refers to a transformation in the therapist's (or other trauma worker's) inner experience resulting from empathetic engagement with clients' trauma material (Figley, 1995).

Assumptions

Before conducting the study, it was essential to disclose the identified assumptions. The first assumption was that it would be challenging to find participants who were willing to disclose potentially traumatic details about acts of abuse. Acknowledging the difficulty and conducting trauma-informed interviews would mitigate participants from being retraumatized throughout the interview process. Resources for victims of spiritual abuse will be provided to victims after the interview, in the event they want to pursue mental health services. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were considered the most suitable data collection method for gathering the necessary details regarding the participants' lived experiences. Surveys would be less personable than a

one-on-one interview and may not have provided the detail required for the phenomenon of study.

The third assumption was that the participant would be honest when detailing their experiences with emotional spiritual abuse. The participants must recall their experiences accurately so that their statements are not misinterpreted during the manual analysis of the data. The truthfulness of the participants will help maintain the validity and reliability of the study. The final assumption was that the participants' experiences would be somewhat similar. This notion stems from the fact that beliefs and behaviors within specific social groups, whether religious or otherwise, tend to be comparable.

Scope and Delimitations

The sample population of this study included adults aged 21 years and older. Each participant had experienced emotional spiritual abuse from their Christian parents, spouse, immediate family members, or caregivers. Participants were recruited through digital and physical flyers. They did not need to identify with or practice Christianity at the time of the study. The criteria allowed for the inclusion of individuals raised in the Christian faith who later converted to another religion as adults. The focus of this study pertains to experiences during childhood and adolescence while being raised under Christianity.

I posted a digital recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) on social media, and a physical flyer (see Appendix A) to acquire participants for this study. The flyer included the definitions for terminology spiritual abuse, emotional/psychological abuse, family/familial, and Christian/Christianity. The flyer also provided information about the

audio-only recording. Additionally, the flyer contained contact details for those interested in participating in the study.

The study did not pursue any specific geographical locations within the United States (U.S.). This standard allowed for a broader spectrum of potential participants, which, in turn, would enable the findings to be generalized to the wider U.S. This study did not have a limitation on the gender, race, or sexuality of the participants. Without boundaries on biographical identities, participants could provide perspectives based on their unique experiences. Allowing more than one denomination of Western Christianity to participate was another delimitation of this study. Allowing multiple large denominations within the Western Christian umbrella to participate in this study helped achieve data saturation. A population that is too narrow could increase the level of difficulty in finding participants who have experienced such a niche form of abuse.

The final delimitation was my experience with conducting trauma-informed interviews of victims. Although I am not a licensed clinician, my decade of experience interviewing victims from diverse backgrounds has allowed me to refine my interviewing skills. I have regularly practiced remaining unbiased, fair, and impartial when interviewing victims. My interviewing experience helped me overcome any rapport building barriers that might arise with the participants, as the interviews were conducted via audio-only. My ability to gather facts without inserting bias or asking leading questions to the victims would keep the participants of this study from being retraumatized and allow them to detail their experiences in their own words. Further, I understood how to ask clarifying questions without offending the participants. The

delimitations for this study allowed for the opportunity to reach the target number of participants. Conversely, the limitations would inherently narrow the sample for this study, allowing the criteria within the RQ's to be directly addressed.

Limitations

A potential barrier to the study was the limiting criteria that each participant was required to meet. The participant criteria included individuals over the age of 21 with Christian parents, spouses, immediate family members, or caregivers who committed emotional spiritual abuse against them. Additionally, in qualitative studies, the number of participants is much greater than that in quantitative studies. With the ideal sampling size being small (n=8-12), the study may cover a wide range of socioeconomic levels, races, genders, and ethnicities. However, the focus of this study did not highlight a specific race, gender, or socioeconomic status in answering the RQ's. Regardless of the number of participants, data saturation was the primary goal.

Christianity is the world's largest religion, currently practiced by approximately 2.4 billion people, or about 31% of the global population (Deshmukh, 2022). Without further research, spiritual abuse within Christianity could not be directly correlated to spiritual abuse within other religions. The limitation of not including other religions in this study left a gap within the literature. However, this gap allowed for future research to be conducted concerning the topic of spiritual abuse.

The third limitation is that the research topic might be influenced by personal bias due to my religious affiliation to Christianity. However, I intended to omit personal experiences and base any relevant opinions solely on the data collected. Excluding my

own experiences helped me reduce biases in my assertions within the study. During the interviews, I used neutral language and made sure not to lead participants' responses in any way. In a pilot study, similar interviews were conducted, which helped me minimize bias during both data collection and analysis.

The final limitation was the availability of the participants, as participation in the study was voluntary. With availability varying among participants, it was essential to prioritize and conduct each interview based on their best availability, allowing sufficient time for a thorough interview. Additionally, participants could withdraw their consent to participate at any time during the study. To account for those who did not wish to proceed with the study, the researcher would need to recruit more participants than necessary, ensuring that dropouts did not affect the final number of participants. Ensuring the sample size of participants was slightly larger than the goal sample size would allow for modifications if participants withdrew from the study. Researchers must identify limitations within their studies. The limitations can help to predict issues that may arise throughout the study. Additionally, identifying constraints could aid future researchers in similar studies by providing a framework for future studies with similar criteria. Overall, acknowledgment of limitations could also provide a level of transparency and validity to the study.

Significance

This study was important because it aimed to fill the gap in understanding how emotional spiritual abuse impacts victims and to include their perspectives on how they perceive it. Often, victims of emotional abuse exhibit similar behaviors after experiencing

physical abuse. For example, when working with strangulation victims, it is common to see victims not disclose being strangled in domestic violence cases. In strangulation situations, withholding disclosure often happens because, with no blood flow to the brain, an individual may become unconscious and might urinate or defecate. This can be embarrassing for victims to report autonomic dysfunction, leading to a delay or failure to report physical abuse. Similarly, someone who experienced emotional financial abuse may also delay reporting due to embarrassment and lack of autonomy. This study seeks to identify similar patterns in cases of emotional spiritual abuse that might be easily overlooked but have clear explanations when responders are trauma-informed.

Additionally, proper identification would not only recognize victims' experiences but also promote systematic social change. Giving victims the chance to access appropriate resources could help end generational abuse of many forms. The study's main goals included psychological assessments, trauma-informed professionals, support groups, and methods for identifying and preventing the transmission of abuse across generations.

Ultimately, studying the victimology of spiritual abuse can offer valuable insights into the types of individuals who are more vulnerable to such abuse. Just as offender profiling provides useful information about perpetrators that can aid in abuse cases, victimology offers data that is equally important. This understanding could promote positive social change within communities where victims have historically been ignored in research. With current studies, community leaders and activists can use this data to support efforts aimed at helping victims.

Summary

This chapter provides a general overview of the study. The literature review in Chapter 2 supports the background, problem, and purpose statement. The research scope aligns with the study's descriptive phenomenological design. I provided appropriate definitions to help understand the matters addressed throughout this study. The theories that comprise the theoretical foundation would address the RQ's and clarify the hypotheses. I addressed assumptions, biases, limitations, and delimitations. Proactiveness has allowed for specific issues to be addressed and prevented others from becoming a detriment to the validity and reliability of this study. Transparent research can mitigate misinterpretation and contribute to similar, more reliable studies conducted by future researchers. Finally, I discussed the significance of the study and explained how the findings can lead to social change. Chapter 2 provides readers with a more comprehensive understanding of the theoretical framework and an extensive literature review that supports this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the phenomena of emotional spiritual abuse that victims experience within Christian familial constructs. Chapter 1 defined emotional abuse as non-physical abuse, such as verbal threats, insults, degradation, humiliation, fear induction, and lowering self-esteem. Building on this, emotional spiritual abuse is characterized as non-physical abuse — including verbal threats, insults, degradation, humiliation, fear induction, and self-esteem reduction — disguised as religious practice. This definition is based on literary descriptions of religious abuse and current understandings of emotional abuse.

Abuse disguised as religion is not new, but literature has not identified the different types of abuse or what that abuse looks like from the victim's perspective. Currently, the literature recognizes the phenomenon of spiritual abuse. However, it has been called by several different names. During the early stages of the literature review, it became clear that search terms needed to vary because of the inconsistent naming of the phenomenon. Another pattern noticed was that only one type of abuse was mainly studied.

As the literature review began, I recognized that sexual abuse within religion was the primary type of abuse studied in relation to religion. The failure to acknowledge other forms of emotional abuse within Christian family structures was evident. This oversight created a research gap because if emotional abuse is never documented, it can have long-lasting effects on victims and may be passed down through generations, weakening the

family unit. Another pattern identified in the literature review was that much of the research on religious abuse focused on sexual abuse within the Catholic community. This lack of information on abuse occurring in other religious groups introduced another gap in the literature. Additionally, most of the literature concentrated on sexual abuse perpetrated by religious leaders.

Both gaps in the literature fueled the need for the current study. Understanding the strategies and tactics used to emotionally manipulate and spiritually abuse within familial structures, under the guise of Christianity, is a needed addition to the current literature. This chapter will outline the search strategy employed in conducting the literature review. Next, an explanation of the theoretical foundation for this study will outline how the literary gaps will be addressed. Finally, a synthesis of the existing literature related to key concepts will be explained.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review consists of resources primarily from 2018-2022. The literature was accessed through the Walden University Library, as well as books and various internet resources. The Walden University Library, Google Scholar, APA PsycINFO, SAGE Journals, Criminal Justice, Thoreau, and Counseling databases were used to conduct the review. The principal keywords used were abuse, emotional, emotional abuse, psychological abuse, non-sexual, non-sexual abuse, maltreatment, victim, victimization, survivor, spiritual, abuse, domestic, domestic violence, religious, religion, religiousness, religions, religiosity, spiritual, spirituality, faith, faith-based, ritual, ritual abuse, trauma, Christian, Christianity, and clergy. No more than three

keywords were entered into each database at once. If there were little to no results, the timeframe was adjusted slightly to determine if any relevant literature from older sources was available.

Upon conducting a cursory search of the literature, I observed that the majority of research was U.S.-based and featured a White-majority sample. There was also significantly more qualitative research and gray literature available. I chose to utilize the Catholic sexual abuse research to my advantage in an attempt to find more related research. Citation chaining facilitated the identification of related literature during the iterative search process. Citation chaining is the process of searching for articles that are cited within the relevant articles that are found in the initial search. As the original literature search yielded little current research applicable to the topic of this study, citation chaining helped identify more related works and new keywords or search terms. Furthermore, expanding the time frame of the literature search also helped identify articles that were not included in the primary search. Galvan and Galvin (2017) suggested that expanding the search time frame may be necessary if date restrictions are in place and resources are limited (p. 31). Expanding the search time frame helped find articles and gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic's history, which was not revealed in the original search or citation chaining.

Psychology databases proved to be the most effective in finding related literature for this review. The APA PsycINFO database produced the most results related to the topic of this study. I was able to find related journals and articles synthesizing multiple works that were related to emotional spiritual abuse. Additionally, keeping a journal of

the databases, search years, and keywords was effective in facilitating the completion of this literature review. The process of searching for literature further justified the need to include broader Christian denominations. Research that encompasses a broad range of denominations within Christianity will ultimately yield data that can inform prevention strategies, which could be implemented across multiple settings. Research that focuses on specific denominations could inform future studies on other denominations or sects within the same or other religions.

Theoretical Framework

In order to critically examine emotional spiritual abuse within Christian families, it is essential to anchor the current study within a strong theoretical framework. Theoretical frameworks serve as an interpretive lens that not only helps researchers understand what is happening but also how and why patterns emerge, persist, and affect individuals over time. The use of theories is essential in studies about religious abuse as it is often ingrained in relationship dynamics, religious power structures, and cultural expectations, rather than limited to isolated acts of abuse. Emotional spiritual abuse within religious contexts can be subtle, systemic, intrafamilial, and perpetrated through doctrinal belief systems. It is highly appropriate to use system-based theories for the framework of this study.

Two theories that provide an essential lens for understanding emotional spiritual abuse within Christian families are Bronfenbrenner's EST and Bowen's FST. Both theories emphasize the complexities and interconnected influences on a person's development and cognitive functioning. While EST focuses on the broader ecological

layers that impact a person's life, such as community institutions and cultural ideology, FST details relational patterns within the family unit, including emotional roles, intergenerational trauma, and enmeshment. These frameworks allow for a complex understanding of how abuse is experienced, maintained, and potentially internalized.

The relevance of these two theories to the current study is twofold. First, they help illuminate how spiritual abuse is rarely just a personal experience but one that emerges within and is shaped by multiple nested systems: religious organizations, family dynamics, peer groups, and cultural beliefs. Second, they help explain why survivors may experience long-term psychological and spiritual consequences, as the abuse often occurs within systems that are supposed to be sources of safety, identity, and meaning. For many individuals, questioning or leaving these systems can result in emotional burden, familial disruption, and existential crises — phenomena that both EST and FST are well-equipped to help interpret. I explore how Bronfenbrenner's EST and Bowen's FST relate to the experiences of individuals who have endured emotional spiritual abuse in Christian families.

Ecological Systems Theory

Russian-American developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, in 1979, developed EST as a response to earlier theories that overly emphasized either biological determination or environmental inputs in isolation. In contrast to theories that viewed development as a linear or static process, Bronfenbrenner proposed that human development occurs within a complex system of nested environments that interact with one another over time." Bronfenbrenner observed that the environment has an impact on

an individual's development and that improvements to the child's environment could be linked to improvements in the child's development" (Ecological systems theory, 2020). His model, often visualized as a series of concentric circles, includes five interrelated systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. These systems range from immediate relationships and settings, such as family and school, to broader cultural ideologies and historical periods, all of which shape an individual's growth and psychological well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tudge et al., 2009).

This theory emerged at a time when psychology was heavily influenced by the nature vs. nurture debate, particularly shaped by Freudian and behaviorist theories that prioritized either internal drives or external stimuli. In comparison, Freudian psychoanalysis emphasized biological instincts and psychosocial stages, and behaviorists like B.F. Skinner focused on observable behavior shaped by reinforcement, while Bronfenbrenner offered a more contextual and dynamic approach. He was among the first to argue that children’s development could not be fully understood without considering the interplay between biology, individual experience, and complex environments. This approach marked a shift in developmental theory and laid the foundation for successive research into how cultural systems, institutions, and family dynamics influence psychological outcomes.

In the context of this study, EST is beneficial for examining how emotional spiritual abuse within Christian communities is shaped not only by interpersonal relationships (such as those with clergy or family) but also by wider systems like

ideologies and societal norms surrounding obedience, gender roles, and spiritual authority. For example, the macrosystem may involve dominant religious doctrines that promote submission or silence, while the exosystem could include denominational policies that shield abusers or discourage disclosure (Neal & Neal, 2013). Even the chronosystem is relevant; changing cultural conversations around religion and trauma influences how survivors interpret and process their experiences over time. Thus, EST allows this study to move beyond individual psychology and explore the systemic dimensions of religious trauma.

The EST outlines five layers of environmental influence that surround and shape an individual's development. These systems expand outward from the most immediate relationships to broader societal and temporal contexts, each playing a distinct but interconnected role in influencing behavior, identity formation, and psychological well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While each system differs in its proximity to the individual, they are all capable of exerting a meaningful influence, either directly or indirectly, on a child's developmental outcomes. The five systems identified by Bronfenbrenner are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

Each system contains its own set of people, organizations, and social dynamics, which interact not only with the individual but with one another. The sections form a complete ecological network that either supports or constrains healthy development. In particular, this model emphasizes that the environmental context is not passive but dynamic, constantly shaping and being shaped by the individual. This layered approach is

helpful in studies of trauma and abuse with multiple levels of influence overlap, such as family dynamics, religious teachings, institutional leadership, and cultural expectations. The following sections will explore each of these systems in more detail to show how they may interact in the context of emotional spiritual abuse within Christian families.

The first layer is closest to the person and could impact their development the most. Parents, teachers, siblings, peer groups, and religious organizations fall into the microsystem because they interact with the child face-to-face. The mesosystem is the interaction between the child's microsystems. An example of a mesosystem interaction is an interaction between parents and religious organizations. The third level, the exosystem, comprises extended family, neighbors, the school board, and the media. The first three levels are likely to have a profound impact on a person's development.

The fourth system, the macrosystem, is composed of the child's attitudes and ideologies of the culture. An individual's ethnicity and socioeconomic status fall into the macrosystem layer. The last layer, the chronosystem, is composed of environmental changes that occur throughout life. Moving, historical events, parents divorcing, and starting a new school all fall into the chronosystem. It is not likely that the outer two layers will impact the person as much as instances that occur within the first three. However, it is dependent on the person and other environmental factors.

EST enables researchers to understand a person's behavior based on the environmental system within which they fit. Each person's environment is complex and can have a significant impact on their development, potentially leading to issues in adulthood. In relation to this study, if abuse occurs within one of the five systems, it can

be assumed that it may have a detrimental effect on the person's development. Furthermore, if the abuse occurs within a system close to the person, it is likely to have a more significant impact on their development.

Family Systems Theory

FST emerged in the 1950s through the work of several influential theorists who shifted psychological inquiry from individual pathology to the complex dynamics within familial relationships. One of the central figures in this theoretical movement was American psychiatrist Murray Bowen, who proposed that the family operates as an emotional unit wherein each member's behaviors and emotions are interdependent and cannot be understood in isolation (Bowen, 1978). A core principle of Bowen's framework is the multigenerational transmission process, which explains how patterns of functioning, such as roles, coping strategies, emotional regulation, and even unresolved trauma, are passed down across generations (Helm, 2021). According to Bowen, this process contributes to repeated cycles of intrafamilial trauma and dysfunction, including those impacted by emotional spiritual abuse.

Bowen also introduced key concepts such as triangulation, where unresolved tension between two family members may be managed by drawing a third party, or differentiation of self, which refers to an individual's ability to balance emotional autonomy with familial attachment (Bowen, 1978). In religious households where conformity, guilt, or silence are emphasized, low differentiation may lead to internalized shame, blurred boundaries, and fear of asserting personal beliefs - conditions often associated with spiritual trauma.

Salvador Minuchin, another prominent theorist, extended FST through the development of structural family therapy, a model that focuses on family organization, rules, and boundaries (Minuchin,1974). Minuchin argues that both overly rigid and overly diffuse boundaries can hinder relational functioning. Caregivers can either exert an excessive amount of control under the guise of religion or fail to protect children from harmful experiences. These spiritually abusive actions could lead to emotional confusion and maladaptive roles within a family unit. Conversely, healthy family systems establish clear and flexible boundaries that help promote relational connection. As Minuchin's work suggests, behavior can have long-lasting effects, particularly when it can be justified through distorted religious beliefs or hierarchical power dynamics.

Together, Bowen's and Minuchin's theories provide a strong foundation for analyzing how family systems can reinforce and conceal spiritually abusive dynamics within religious communities. FST not only explains how emotional harm may be perpetuated through systemic patterns but also emphasizes the relational fractures that are necessary for healing. FST is applicable to many relationships, including friendships, intimate relationships, in-laws, and adopted familial structures. The relationships can be symmetrical or complementary in FST. A symmetrical relationship occurs between two peers or individuals of equal status. An example of a symmetrical relationship in FST is a mother and father. Complementary relationships occur between two individuals who are not equals or peers. A typical example of a complementary relationship is that between a parental figure and a child.

Emotional triangles are one central concept of the FST. The triangle is made up of three people and is the smallest relationship within the system. Bowen explained that tension between two people would make the relationship too unstable. When a third individual was brought into the "triangle," it would help to relieve some of the tension. One example of this triangle is when a counselor, child, or family member is brought into a couple's marital issues. When the third individual enters the triangle, it allows the first two individuals to avoid conflicts within the initial relationship.

Within FST, family diagrams are often used to visualize the patterns and identify significant events in familial history. Family systems theorists then use diagrams, known as genograms, to help treat and correct issues within families, thereby mitigating the further spread of abuse. When professionals analyze family systems and provide feedback on how to prevent the further spread of toxic patterns, this is sometimes referred to as structured family therapy. Unlike the origin of FST, Minuchin's practices focused more on pushing familial boundaries and redistributing the power within familial systems. These therapy concepts are what drove Minuchin to his success when working with families with recurring forms of abuse.

Rationale for Selection of Theories

The EST applies to this study because, in attempting to understand the victims' experiences of emotional spiritual abuse, an examination of their microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem will need to be conducted. These systems are the closest to the child who experienced emotional spiritual abuse. The study will build upon the EST by helping other scholars gain an understanding of how spiritual abuse within ecological

systems can affect the victim's development. The developmental delay could be socially, within the context of religion, financially, emotionally, or with family and clergy members.

The FST relates to the current study because abuse can span generations and become "normal" in family units. Understanding how spiritual abuse spans multiple generations in the Christian community will help build upon the current concepts of FST. This study will likely highlight how the victims of spiritual abuse went through what is known as the differentiation process, where they separate themselves from the building blocks that their families formed in adolescence. Helm (2021) asserts that the differentiation process occurs when an individual differentiates themselves from their family of origin. It is a method that allows individuals to remain part of a family system while maintaining their emotional and psychological autonomy. Inquiring about the families' religious practices/background that the participants experienced throughout the victim's childhood versus their current religious practices as adults will provide insight into the multigenerational patterns within their familial structure.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

In this section, I will outline the fundamental conceptual themes found within the literature regarding emotional spiritual abuse within Christian families. The key constructs include the historical and ongoing prevalence of sexual abuse in Catholicism, the challenges in naming and defining emotional spiritual abuse, the psychological impact that emotional spiritual abuse has on victims, resilience and PTG, therapeutic implications, sociocultural dimensions, the cultivation of abuse, victimology of spiritual

abuse, and the gaps in the literature. Each concept will be explored through the lens of the EST and FST, providing a framework to understand the patterns within the literature.

Catholicism and Sexual Abuse

The earliest literature focusing on spiritual abuse of any kind dates to the 19th century. As scholarship on spiritual abuse began to rise, it focused primarily on sexual abuse within religious communities. Tailor et al. (2018) found that sexual assault in adolescence perpetrated by nonclergy compromised the religious lives of adult survivors and fostered psychological and spiritual disharmony (p. 873). Consequently, there is a need for studies that focus on non-sexual spiritual abuse. Much of the literature focused on the perpetrators within the Catholic church and rejected the plight of other religious communities and victims. In fact, Briggs and Whittaker (2018) suggested that more research detailing the survivors' accounts of faith-based abuse was urgently needed (p. 2168).

Studies have also arisen regarding sexual spiritual abuse, specifically within the Catholic church. Based on female victims' accounts of childhood sexual abuse, stigmatizing beliefs and attitudes of blame were prominent in the Catholic church (Tailor et al., 2014, p. 868). McGraw et al. (2019) found that in cases of Catholic sexual abuse by religious authorities, 81% of the victims were male children and adolescents between the ages of 11 and 14 years (p. 246). The same study noted that 33% of female victims were known to the perpetrator, and often between the ages of 15 and 17 during the time of the incident (p. 247).

In addition to these findings, Hunt et al. (2024) analyzed religious organizations in Australia. They observed that while child sexual abuse had decreased overall, the abuse was more common in Catholic settings than in other Christian denominations. This study noted that many perpetrators were men, which reinforced global patterns of sexual abuse. Similarly, Stevens et al. (2019) found that students who were sexually abused by religious authorities, often within Catholic contexts, experienced anxiety and depression at levels that were similar to those who experienced abuse from parents. The 2019 research by Stevens et al. further highlighted the psychological toll of abuse in religious contexts, particularly involving clergy.

While Catholicism has often dominated these discussions, there is increasing recognition of faith-based abuse occurring in other religious traditions. Kinkin and Dekel (2025) found that in Orthodox Jewish communities, sexual abuse by rabbis severely disrupted family relationships, showing that institutional betrayal and spiritual disorientation are not restricted solely to the Catholic Church. Farrell (2024) explored the long-term impacts of religious abuse on a population of Millennials and found strong themes that were consistent regardless of geographic regions and denominations. This research study emphasizes the necessity for expanding the research beyond Catholic sexual abuse to incorporate broader faith contexts, including emotional spiritual abuse. There is an abundance of studies on Catholic sexual abuse offenders, while not many focus on non-sexual abuse and its effects on the victim. The following review will examine the strengths, weaknesses, and additional concepts identified in the literature, providing further rationale for the importance of this research.

Definition of Abuse in Religion

One key issue that emerged in the literature review was the inconsistency in how abuse within religious settings was defined. Terms such as ritual abuse, church hurt, faith-based, religious trauma, and spiritual abuse were all used interchangeably across studies, with no standardization in terminology. This inconsistency presented a challenge in synthesizing the existing findings and locating relevant literature, as it required navigating a complex web of overlapping keywords. A study by Cashwell and Swindle (2018) noted that the ambiguity in naming creates barriers for clinicians, educators, and researchers attempting to build a coherent understanding of what constitutes religious abuse.

In an attempt to provide conceptual clarity, Nobakht and Dale (2018) offered one of the more comprehensive definitions of religious/pseudoreligious abuse. They described it as "any inappropriate act under the guise of religion/pseudoreligion which can include psychological abuse, physical harm or harassment, and humiliation (p. 3584)." This definition highlights the different behaviors that can be hidden within abuse under the guise of spirituality. When both physical and psychological aspects are considered, it underscores the need for a standardized framework to identify and address such harm. The research highlighted by Nobakht and Dale emphasized the potential for systemic abuse when power and beliefs intertwine. The incorporation of pseudoreligion ensures that other beliefs can be included, regardless of whether the act was committed within a formal religion. These inclusions are essential for policy-making, protecting, and implementing trauma-informed practices and protecting the victims of religious abuse. A

goal of this study is to create a definition that covers aspects of the phenomenon to include victims who are abused under the guise of religion or pseudoreligion.

Furthermore, while there is widespread acknowledgment that religious abuse can be deeply damaging, few sources offer a comprehensive or unified definition. Marlene Winell, an American developmental psychologist, coined the term Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS) in 2011(a). Winell (2011b) emphasized that religious abuse is not only about overt harm but also includes psychological manipulation, foundations of fear, abuse of power, and control tactics that shape a person's worldview and understanding of self (pp. 23-25). RTS describes the residual mental health challenges individuals face after leaving high-control or abusive religious environments. In the absence of physical and sexual abuse, the framework from RTS laid the foundation for nuanced conversations about how religious harm can occur.

Recent studies have supported the need for a formalized, inclusive definition. Singh et al. (2024) described religious abuse as a "psychospiritual fracture," which presents as a crisis of identity, agency, and moral grounding that can be shattered when religion is manipulated (p. S310). This damage may take place subtly over time through fear-based teachings, authoritarianism, or community pressure. In cases of pseudoreligious abuse, such tactics can be misrepresented as acts of spiritual guidance or correction, further blurring the lines between religious instruction and abuse (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018).

A more standardized and inclusive definition of religious abuse would not only aid future researchers but also support clinicians and policymakers in recognizing and

responding to it. Without such clarity, there is a risk of minimizing victims' experiences or overlooking less visible emotional and psychological harm that occurs under religious pretenses. One aim of the current study is to contribute to this definitional clarity by integrating insights from the existing literature and highlighting the lived experiences of survivors.

Psychological Impacts of Emotional Spiritual Abuse

Another concept that emerged consistently throughout the literature review was the psychological toll that emotional spiritual abuse could have on victims. While physical abuse often receives more immediate attention, emotional and psychological forms of abuse are just as damaging - often more so in the long run. After the physical wounds have healed, the emotional scars can remain for a lifetime. Briggs and Whittaker (2018) emphasized that emotional and psychological abuse is often underreported or difficult to identify, mainly due to the primary focus on physical abuse in both research and institutional responses (p. 2160). Nevertheless, the long-term psychological consequences of emotional abuse are profound and well-documented.

An array of mental health outcomes was noted across the literature. Schiffman (2019) found that religious trauma victims displayed PTSD-like symptoms, social inadequacy or withdrawal, and anxiety. While these symptoms are not always visible, they can profoundly disrupt a person's quality of life and emotional security. A study by Ellis et al. (2025) reinforced Schiffman's concept by highlighting how religious or spiritual abuse had a significant impairment on a person's psychological functioning and caused deep emotional wounds (p. 141). Finally, Ellis et al., (2025) found a positive

relationship between religious or spiritual abuse and trauma-related symptoms such as anxiety, headaches, loneliness, sexual abuse, memory problems, sleep disturbance, and depression (p. 139).

Children and adolescents were shown to be particularly vulnerable. Sutton-Adams (2023) observed that exposure to religious abuse during formative years often results in internalized shame and self-doubt, especially when the abuse is masked as spiritual formation. Her work noted that the interviewing of abusive dynamics with spiritual language often creates confusion that impairs both emotional regulation and the development of one's identity. These effects can linger well into adulthood, affecting victims' capacity for trust, self-worth, and relational safety. Although some victims find ways to navigate or resist these impacts over time, the psychological damage caused by emotional spiritual abuse often goes unnoticed or untreated. Continued research and clinical attention are essential to understanding and intervention to prevent long-term effects.

Resilience and Post-traumatic Growth

Victims cope with trauma from spiritual abuse in a variety of ways. While some survivors draw strength and comfort from their faith, others struggle with spiritual disillusionment or turn away from religion altogether. Positive and negative religious coping strategies often reflect the complexity of a victim's traumatic experience, spiritual background, and personal development. These strategies can differ widely in form and outcome, but both are responses to the deep emotional and psychological inquiries that spiritual abuse can cause.

Positive religious coping occurs when victims of any form of trauma seek positive religious/spiritual strategies to manage the psychological damage. Positive religious coping strategies can involve turning to a loving, nonjudgmental image of God, reinterpreting Scripture through a compassionate lens, or rebuilding spiritual practices in safe and affirming communities. Perry (2024) found that individuals who experienced religious abuse but re-engaged with faith on their terms often reported increased self-awareness, empowerment, and meaning-making. These victims described a conscious effort to separate divine love from institutional harm and leaned into spiritual healing as a tool for growth. Schaefer et al. (2018) and Klausli (2019) similarly observed that survivors sought God's love, compassionately reassessed their relationship with religion, and forgave (pp. 22, 38). Ultimately, Schaefer et al. concluded that when victims used religion as a positive coping mechanism, they were able to reduce the psychological distress symptoms in the aftermath of trauma.

On the other hand, some survivors cope through spiritual avoidance or religious rejection. This form of negative religious coping may include internalizing shame, experiencing spiritual discontent, or viewing God as punitive (Schaefer et al., 2018, p. 19). As a result of coping with religion negatively, higher levels of anxiety, hopelessness, perceived stress, and depression are associated with the victims (Klausli 2019, p. 35). Jerome et al. (2023) highlighted how this kind of disconnection often stemmed from prolonged exposure to controlling or shaming religious narratives, especially among women who faced compounded oppression. These individuals often reported a period of spiritual grief before reaching any sense of clarity or peace. Schaeffer et al. (2018) noted

that negative coping strategies were frequently associated with heightened anxiety, depression, and spiritual dissatisfaction, primarily when victims blamed themselves or feared divine punishment.

Despite these challenges, many survivors experience significant post-traumatic growth through a gradual process of reclaiming autonomy, spiritual agency, and inner resilience. Farrell (2024) found that Millennials who had experienced religious trauma displayed altered health outcomes, loss of spirituality, self-subjugation, and loss of community (pp. 188-191). Similarly, Swafford (2023) found that gay men who were raised Pentecostal redefined their identities by embracing the journey, finding a sense of community, and living unapologetically (pp. 466-470).

Together, these studies emphasize the importance of recognizing the diverse ways victims of spiritual abuse respond to their trauma. Whether victims employ positive or negative religious coping, the journey toward healing often involves critical reflection, the reevaluation of beliefs, and the cultivation of personal strength. Resilience and PTG are not linear outcomes but an evolving process that is shaped by the survivor's context, support systems, and willingness to confront and move through pain toward something more whole.

Therapeutic Implications of Spiritual Abuse

The strength within prior literature lies in the researchers' ability to identify apparent gaps within the current system and a need for new policies regarding spiritual abuse. Oakley et al. (2018) conducted a mixed-methods study on policy and spiritual abuse. They concluded that policies and practices needed to be developed so that the

appropriate interventions could be taken for victims (p. 152). Likewise, Briggs and Whittaker (2018) noted that informed practice could be built upon if policymakers and practitioners shared more information (p. 2171). The persistent call for policy and procedural changes for spiritual abuse was noticeable throughout the literature.

Recent research in the counseling and psychotherapy field has begun to shift attention to the unique trauma responses associated with spiritual abuse. Zaeske et al. (2024) took a close look at harmful religious and spiritual experiences. They pointed out that clinicians should not focus on what someone believes but on how beliefs and environments can cause emotional harm (pp. 2-3). Zaeske et al. (2024) also highlighted that spiritual abuse could mirror other forms of trauma but often goes unnoticed due to religious sensitivities or lack of awareness among providers (pp. 5-7). The study emphasized the importance of creating a safe environment in therapeutic spaces, where clients feel empowered to process these experiences without judgment or dismissal.

Cashwell and Swindle (2018) also stressed the importance of clinical training when supervising cases of spiritual abuse. Many therapists lack the language or framework to name religious abuse as trauma, which limits the care clients receive. According to their findings, when therapists are equipped with culturally sensitive supervision and training, clients are more likely to disclose spiritual harm and receive meaningful treatment (p. 190). This supports the argument that supervision models in counseling programs should include explicit instruction on religious trauma and spiritual abuse, especially given the difficulty many survivors face in describing their experiences.

In 2024, Oakley et al. extended previous literature to include implications for counseling and psychotherapy practices. Oakley et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of trauma-informed care approaches, which would help professionals engage with victims of spiritual abuse with care and sensitivity (p. 199). Counselors were encouraged to center topics such as religion and faith and to continue to develop training that focuses on their ability to be reflexive when working with victims who have religious or spiritual beliefs (p. 199). These recommendations align with comprehensive trauma care principles while remaining sensitive to the religious characteristics of the abuse.

Altogether, these studies depict the increasing recognition of religious trauma within the therapeutic context. The literature calls for responses that are ethical, thoughtful, and informed with clinical training regarding trauma and theology. Spiritual abuse appears to be increasingly identified as a cause for legitimate concern and requires specialized attention and competence.

Sociocultural Dimensions of Spiritual Abuse

Sociocultural dimensions play a critical role in shaping how spiritual and religious abuse is experienced, interpreted, and transmitted across communities. Gray et al. (2021) conducted a study on spiritual abuse and elder mistreatment in Native American communities. A distinct feature of this abuse involves the unauthorized selling of sacred items, such as ceremonial pipes, which are essential for daily prayer rituals and hold significance across generations. When these sacred objects are lost, it disrupts both personal spiritual practices about cultural continuity as well as the generational legacy. Gray et al. (2021) argued that this abuse extends beyond financial exploitation to extreme

spiritual and cultural violations, impacting multiple generations (p. 208). In many indigenous traditions, the inability to engage in prayer or ritual can fracture identity and spiritual wellness. The intergenerational effects of spiritual abuse are not limited to emotional harm but also interrupt the way families continue to carry on their traditions, culturally and spiritually.

Generational trauma was a recurring theme throughout the literature review, especially in contexts where religious abuse is normalized or concealed by cultural silence. Jerome et al. conducted a qualitative study on women's spiritual stories in 2023. Jerome et al. (2023) noted that narratives of religious trauma were often married with broader societal expectations around topics like submission, gender roles, and religious duty. For many of these women, spiritual abuse was personal, and they described how their spiritual traditions influenced their coping strategies, spiritual questioning, and healing journey (pp. 180-183). These women's reflections illustrate how sociocultural frameworks reinforce silence, guilt, and spiritual confusion, yet also demonstrate that resistance and resilience often emerge through the reclamation of personal agency and reinterpretation of spiritual identity.

Sexual abuse in religious settings also reveals distinct sociocultural characteristics. Raine and Kent (2019) explored the unique dynamics of grooming and sexual abuse of children within religious organizations. Raine and Kent's (2019) findings depict that grooming is often hidden behind spiritual leadership, religious language, and the trust victims have in their faith communities, which makes identification and reporting difficult (p. 187). Abusers can twist religious language to pressure children into

obedience and silence, which makes it easier for them to avoid capture. It is essential to look at the larger social and cultural issues because, oftentimes, religious communities unintentionally protect abusers by putting tradition, secrecy, or authority above the safety of people.

Sowe et al. (2021) highlighted the intersection of how religious beliefs can fuel anti-gay prejudice in conservative Christian spaces. They found that when members of LGBTQIA+ faced homophobia rooted in faith, it was linked to health issues, such as anxiety and shame, and also substance abuse and spiritual damage (pp. 591-593). When Spiritual teachings are weaponized against sexual minorities, the resulting trauma includes not only individual distress but also social alienation and community exclusion. This form of socioreligious abuse disproportionately affects those who are already marginalized and may lead to long-term psychological effects that persist throughout someone's lifetime.

Similarly, Swafford et al. (2023) analyzed the experiences of gay men raised in Pentecostal settings. They noted that many of them had to reconcile feelings of intense shame with their emerging sexual identity (p. 472). The men also described their religious upbringing as both formative and traumatizing, with spiritual abuse being embedded in sermons, rituals, and expectations of purity (pp. 458, 468). However, as the authors noted, some participants were able to forge meaningful identities by reconstructing their faith outside of traditional church structures, illustrating a form of sociocultural resistance and reclamation.

These studies collectively demonstrate how religious and spiritual abuse are deeply rooted in cultural structures, community norms, and generational narratives, whether through the loss of sacred objects, silencing gender and sexual identities, or misuse of authority within religious organizations. Sociocultural factors profoundly shape the impact and visibility of religious trauma. Understanding these factors is essential for contextualizing victims' experiences, creating culturally sensitive interventions, and addressing systemic complacency around spiritual abuse.

Cultivation of Emotional Spiritual Abuse

Studying the effects of any phenomenon can help researchers identify and prevent further generational trauma through education. A study that focused on how victims experience emotionally abusive episodes and how they impact emotional regulation found that it could prevent similar abuse regarding intergenerational attachment styles, marital violence, and mental health disorders (Gama et al., 2021, p. 12). This underscores the need for more focused research on understudied phenomena such as emotional spiritual abuse, especially their role in cultivating cycles of trauma that span generations. Although generational abuse has long been documented in the contexts of physical violence, alcoholism, substance misuse, and disordered attachment patterns, there is a stark gap in the literature that addresses how non-physical abuse spreads over time.

Novsak et al. (2012) speculated that the behaviors of an emotional abuser were often linked to multiple generations of maltreatment from parental figures or prior romantic relationships, which created a pattern of dysfunction that was inherited instead (p. 35). While the study did not determine whether such abusive behaviors were

conscious or unconscious, the outcomes for the victims remain consistent. These inherited dynamics are cultivated and perpetuated within specific socioreligious frameworks, making identification and intervention even more complex.

Simonic et al. (2013) expanded this perspective by examining how religion was used as a disciplinary tool within family systems. They explain how emotion is often viewed as "spiritual correction," with children being told it is for their good and masked as love or obedience (pp. 343-344). Emotional spiritual abuse is particularly harmful because it combines spiritual devotion with emotional harm, making it more difficult for victims to identify the abuse or seek help. Children raised in these harmful environments carry guilt, fear, and the idea that love has to be earned, and sometimes, these patterns can persist well into adulthood.

Institutional betrayal is another mechanism by which abuse is cultivated and normalized. Moncrief-Stewart and Pooler (2025) examined the traumatic aftermath of adult clergy sexual abuse survivors and highlighted how institutional complicity exacerbates PTSD symptoms through betrayal trauma (pp. 5-6). Many survivors report that abuse occurred in places they were taught to trust, such as churches or religious schools. These same organizations either ignored the abuse, looked the other way, or handled it poorly, causing more emotional damage and secondary trauma to the victims. This institutionalized silence and safeguarding of abusers sustains a system where abuse can flourish under spiritual leadership.

Riane and Kent (2019) dove further into grooming within church settings and found that abusers often manipulated spiritual authority, religious rituals, and community

trust to build secret relationships with children. These tactics can be covert and go unnoticed until the child has suffered much emotional damage (p. 180). This process is not incidental but cultivated through a culture that discourages questioning religious authority and prioritizes institutional reputation over victim safety.

A quantitative study by Hunt et al. (2024) on child sexual abuse perpetrated by religious leaders in Australia found alarming prevalence rates amongst 8503 people. Hunt et al. (2024) found that about one in every 250 people reported being sexually abused in a religious setting, with the vast majority of the perpetrators being men and the majority of the victims being boys (pp. 2-5). Additionally, Catholic churches and institutions made up 72% of the lawsuits. Another finding from the Hunt et al. (2024) study was that the group of men who were 65 and older had the highest rate of child sexual abuse by a religious leader or an adult in a religious organization (p. 5). These findings indicate the vast scope of the problem and depict the importance of examining the environments that helped to foster these abusive incidents.

Finally, Kirken and Dekel (2025) studied the effects of rabbi-perpetrated abuse in familial relationships. Their study found that the families of victims also feel the effects of the abuse, known as vicarious traumatization. Disclosing traumatic events also became a secondary wound when community members denied or minimized the abuse. Such dynamics highlight how abuse is not only cultivated through individual perpetrators but also through familial and communal systems that fail to protect victims or acknowledge their suffering. In summary, the cultivation of emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse within religious contexts is not accidental: It is structured through generational legacies,

theological justifications, and institutional inaction. These dynamics must be acknowledged and addressed if meaningful prevention and healing are to occur at both individual and communal levels.

Victimology and Gaps in Knowledge of Emotional Spiritual Abuse

The final theme identified from the literature review was victimology. Victimology centers around the experiences of victims and how their surrounding system supports or fails them. While the field of criminology frequently focuses on offender profiling, understanding crime selection and outcomes is equally vital. Victims often hold critical insights into the motives and mechanisms of abuse, showing us how abusers operate and how organizations enable or ignore abuse. Despite this, the literature reveals a striking absence of focused research on the victimology of emotional spiritual abuse, particularly within religious contexts.

Emotional spiritual abuse manifests in both overt and covert ways, including verbal degradation, spiritual manipulation (e.g., enforced fasting or public shaming), spiritual neglect, or restricting access to personal rituals and beliefs. These experiences can produce profound consequences ranging from mental health disorders and PTSD symptoms to disordered attachment, generational trauma, and, in severe cases, even death through extreme neglect or self-denial. Ahammad et al. (2019) emphasized that abuse can be more difficult to identify online, especially when social media algorithms target people based on their beliefs and use religious language to isolate and radicalize them (pp. 206-207). These points are to emergent areas within victimology that have yet to be addressed.

Briggs and Whitaker (2018) asserted that research on the victim's experience is urgently needed and called for personnel restraining as a means of protecting those affected by spiritual harm (p. 2168). Their study supports the idea that policies and interventions remain inadequate when victims are not at the center of research design or clinical practice. Similarly, Zaeske et al. (2024) drew attention to the adverse religious and spiritual experiences not being assessed enough in clinical settings and that psychotherapy protocols often lack the tools to distinguish between normative religious struggle and abuse-induced trauma (pp. 5-6). This gap in assessment reflects a broader systemic failure to validate the unique needs of survivors.

Another key gap concerns the intersectional vulnerabilities of victims, especially within marginalized populations. Hollier et al. (2022) explored how queer individuals in Australia's evangelical churches often internalized shame and fear around divine punishment and identity. These feelings were worsened by instances of excommunication from their families or communities (pp. 279-282). Such layers of marginalization demonstrate how victimology must account for cultural, sexual, and theological nuances to be effective. Likewise, Singh et al. (2024) introduced the concept of RTS, which is closely related to PTSD. Still, it is rooted in spiritual belief systems, and it shows that religious trauma can have deep emotional and clinical effects (pp. S309-S310). Their findings reaffirm that trauma-informed care must be standard, not the exception, when supporting religious abuse victims.

Cashwell and Swindle (2018) emphasized that therapists who work with survivors of religious abuse have often not received proper training or supervision. As a result, it

may be difficult for counselors to grasp the full impact of religious trauma, and they can unintentionally re-traumatize clients by brushing off traumatic experiences (pp. 182-203). The 2018 research by Cashwell and Swindle reinforced the critical need for specialized training and victim-centered approaches across therapeutic, pastoral, and even legal professions.

Taken together, these studies reveal a concerning lack of focused attention on the victim's voice within the context of emotional and spiritual abuse. The primary frameworks in both academic research and clinical practice continue to overlook the lived realities of survivors, particularly those whose abuse was non-physical and religiously sanctioned. Understanding the nuanced perspectives of victims highlights what is missing in current approaches and trauma responsiveness within organizations and institutions.

Ultimately, this section highlights how revictimization can be prevented. The literature suggests that this is possible when professionals are trauma-informed, victims are believed, and institutions are held accountable. A victimology-centered approach will strengthen academic scholarship in the emerging field of emotional spiritual abuse. Focus on victimology will also reinforce the ethical imperative to elevate survivor narratives. These insights underscore the importance of this dissertation's focus and lead to broader conclusions pulled from all key variables and concepts discussed.

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 2 includes a comprehensive review of the current research regarding emotional spiritual abuse within Christian families, including how it is experienced, recognized, and responded to. A structured literature search across multidisciplinary

databases yielded studies from psychology, theology, sociology, and counseling. Theoretical foundations were grounded in Bronfenbrenner's EST and Bowen's FST. These foundations helped interpret how abuse operates within nested systems — individual, familial, religious, and societal. These frameworks also emphasized how survivors are often trapped in environments that simultaneously offer support and inflict harm.

The literature revealed the complexity of spiritual abuse and highlighted the lack of consistent terminology across different fields. Emotional and psychological abuse often go unrecognized due to its invisibility and overlap with normative religious practices. Nevertheless, victims report deep psychological wounds - such as fear, shame, guilt, identity loss, and isolation- that rival or exceed those caused by physical harm. PTSD-like symptoms, anxiety, social withdrawal, and difficulty with trust were frequently cited. Victimology was underrepresented, yet crucial to understanding both the impacts and perpetuation of abuse. Victims are often selected based on vulnerability, age, gender, sexual identity, or spiritual devotion, and reported feeling revictimized when organizations failed to protect or believe them (Moncrief-Stewart & Pooler, 2025; Krinkin & Dekel, 2025; Raine & Kent, 2019; Hunt et al., 2025; Gray et al., 2021).

Coping and healing strategies varied widely. Some survivors found strength through positive religious coping, reframing their beliefs, and rebuilding meaning that allowed them to experience post-traumatic growth. Others struggled with negative religious coping, experiencing punitive views of God, spiritual disillusionment, or psychological distress. LGBTQIA+ individuals, women, and culturally minoritized

groups were often at the intersection of these dynamics, experiencing heightened stigma and systemic silencing. Additionally, sociocultural dimensions, including generational trauma, institutional betrayal, and cultural grooming patterns, were shown to perpetuate cycles of abuse and complicate recovery. Despite evidence showing the harmful effects, appropriate therapy and policy are still lacking in addressing the issue. Many clinicians have not received adequate training on religious abuse or trauma-informed care in faith-based contexts.

In summary, the literature review revealed an urgent need for deeper, survivor-informed research that centers on the lived experiences of those impacted by emotional spiritual abuse. Many trainings, policies, and terminology do not fully address emotional spiritual abuse, which has left gaps within the literature. This current study aims to address existing literature gaps, amplify the experiences of victims, and develop trauma-informed approaches to care, prevention, and policy advocacy within religious environments.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

Spiritual abuse causes trauma to a person's belief system, their internal strength accrued from faith, and their resiliency in life and survival (Gray et al., 2021, p. 207). Abuse due to an individual's spirituality and religiosity can have lifelong effects on a person's physical and mental well-being. This qualitative study will take a descriptive phenomenological approach detailing the experiences of spiritual abuse among adults who were reared under Christianity. The purpose of this study is to describe the phenomena of emotional spiritual abuse that victims experience within Christian familial constructs. This chapter outlines the research method, design, participant selection, and data collection. The research plan describes the phenomenon of interest and provides the rationale for the approach chosen by the researcher. Next, the methodology will detail the population and sample used for this study. The data collection and analysis plan will outline the methods to be used for analyzing the data collected from participants.

Research Design and Rationale

This study seeks to gain more insight into the strategies and tactics used to abuse individuals spiritually. The RQ's that I sought to answer in this study were

RQ1: What strategies/tactics may be used to perpetuate emotional spiritual abuse in families under the guise of Christianity?

RQ2: What spiritual abuse strategies/tactics, if any, are the most prevalent in Christian families?

The RQ's will explore the phenomenon of emotional spiritual abuse from a familial perspective. The qualitative phenomenological approach allows the researcher to examine the lived experiences of the participants related to emotional spiritual abuse (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). The central concepts within this study, as described in Chapter 1, include Christianity/Christian, emotional abuse, family/familial, intrafamilial trauma/abuse, psychological abuse, religion/religious, secondary trauma, spiritual, trauma-informed, and vicarious trauma.

The research tradition that this study will utilize is phenomenology. Two philosophies that this study will rely on are constructivism and interpretivism. Interpretivism and constructivism are often used interchangeably within research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that interpretive research assumes that reality is socially constructed and that there is no single, observable reality. There are multiple realities and interpretations. Researchers do not "find" knowledge, but they construct it (p. 9). Additionally, the two philosophies aim to understand social phenomena by adopting a subjective approach to the varying perspectives of the participants.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this study is solely an observer. The researcher can mitigate personal biases by not having any personal connection to the participants and maintaining an observer role throughout the study. Minimizing biases can foster a comfortable environment for the participants to share their experiences. The researcher will be the sole point of contact for the participants of this study. Having one point of

contact will help minimize the anxiety that participants may experience before participating in the interview.

I leveraged my experience as a special agent in the Special Victim Unit to mitigate biases, build rapport, and conduct semi-structured interviews with the participants. I am an African American woman who, at the time of the study, resided in the U.S. state of Virginia and identified as a Christian. I drew on my previous interview experience to prevent my biases from influencing the participants during the data collection phase. Journaling will primarily be utilized to help the researcher minimize bias throughout the study. Stadtlander (2015) stated that a journal is an excellent method for reducing biases and maintaining fairness and impartiality (p. 94). As the researcher will write down her thoughts throughout the interviews and data collection phase, it will lessen the need to interrupt the participants.

One of the difficulties in addressing spiritual abuse is the lack of a conceptual framework to understand what behaviors constitute spiritual abuse (Gray et al., 2021, p. 208). The primary method to collect data during this study will be semi-structured interviews, which will allow the researcher to gather first-hand experiences of the spiritual abuse strategies and tactics each participant faced. Based on past interview experience, the researcher prefers flexibility within interviews because it facilitates participants in providing more detailed recollections of their past experiences. During the data analysis, the researchers' experience as a transcription specialist will be helpful when reviewing the interview transcriptions for accuracy. The researcher will conduct coding and data analysis solely; no third-party coders will be utilized for this study.

Methodology

The methodology used throughout this qualitative study will be based on Gary Colaizzi's 1978 method. Colaizzi's qualitative method for the data analysis of descriptive phenomenological studies involves a seven-step process. Familiarization, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing an exhaustive description, producing the fundamental structure, and seeking verification of the fundamental structure (Morrow, et al., 2015, p. 3).

Participant Selection Logic

The population for this study will consist of adults in the U.S. who grew up identifying as Christian. As described in Chapter 1, this study will include only the Western Catholic Church (Roman Catholic) and four Protestant denominations (Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal). The inclusion criteria for this study will be adults, both male and female, aged 21 and above, who reside within the U.S. The participants will not be required to identify as Christian currently, but they must have grown up in a home that practiced one of the five Christian denominations mentioned. Participants who chose to no longer identify as Christian once they reached adulthood, but still may have experienced spiritual abuse in their adolescence will not be excluded from the study. Finally, the participants will need to self-identify as victims of spiritual abuse based on the definitions on the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A).

The exclusion criteria for this study will be individuals under 21 at the time of the interview and those who grew up practicing any denomination other than Roman Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or Pentecostal. This study will also exclude

individuals without U.S. citizenship and non-native English speakers. Keeping the participant pool within one continent will allow data to be generalized within the U.S. and Western Christianity. Native English speakers will facilitate the easy translation of the phenomenon being studied, with minimal misinterpretation of the data.

The researcher will recruit the participants using two primary methods of sampling. The initial method of sampling will be volunteer sampling, where the participants will self-identify based on the criteria. The second sampling strategy that will be used is snowball sampling. After each interview, the researcher will ask the participants to encourage others to volunteer for the study. Those who express interest based on the snowball strategy will be required to meet all criteria prior to moving forward with the interview.

Initial recruiting will be achieved through digital and virtual flyers. The researcher will create flyers that will be posted in public areas throughout the Washington Metropolitan Area, and social media groups. After the participants respond to the flyer, the researcher will ensure they meet all inclusion criteria for the study by asking them direct questions during a pre-screening. If the person meets all inclusion criteria for the study, the researcher will schedule a time for a virtual interview. The researcher will conduct the interviews via Zoom and will be audio-recorded only. The researcher will review consent with the participants, who must verbally agree at the start of the interview. A secondary hand-held recording device will also be utilized so that the researcher has an additional copy of the interview if the Zoom recording fails.

For this qualitative study, an ideal number of participants to achieve data saturation would be between eight and 12. Phenomenological studies typically involve between three and 10 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 186). The number of participants for this study was determined to prioritize data saturation. A higher number of participants were sought to provide room for additional interviews if data saturation could not be achieved. Data saturation is derived from grounded theory, and the researcher will know when data saturation has been reached when they are no longer gathering new information from interviews and the data categories and themes are full (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 186). To recognize whether data saturation has been reached, the researcher must combine the sampling, data collection, and data analysis stages.

Baker and Edwards (2012) referred to the combination of stages as theoretical sampling. They stated that, rather than treating sampling, data collection, and data analysis as separate stages in a linear process, they should be conducted simultaneously (p. 18). Further, Baker and Edwards (2012) stated that it is impossible for researchers to know at the beginning of the study how much data will be collected (p. 18). If, after eight participant interviews, it is determined that data saturation has not been reached, the researcher will continue to conduct interviews until data saturation is reached.

Instrumentation

The collection instruments that will be used are all researcher-developed. As a basis, the researcher will use similar wording from a pilot study for consent, open-ended interview questions, and debriefing. Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated that open-ended

questions “allow for the interviewee to respond any way he or she chooses, elaborating upon answers, disagreeing with the question, or raising new issues” (p. 29). Throughout the interview process, the researcher will use consent forms and interviewer notes to document any observations and audio recordings. If more detail is needed to gather more data for coding, the researcher will ask follow-up and probing questions for more detail. All follow-up questions will be accurately documented. The participant responses to the open-ended questions will provide the researcher with sufficient data to answer the RQ’s. The follow-up questions will vary by participant but will be similar and non-leading.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

To recruit participants, I created physical and digital flyers (see Appendix A). The flyers will be posted in several social media groups, and printed flyers will be placed around public spaces throughout the Washington Metropolitan Area. If there are too few participants in the initial recruiting phase, the researcher will reevaluate and prioritize efforts to advertise the flyers in more locations. Contact information for the researcher will be provided on the recruitment flyers to those interested in participating in the study. After expressing interest, the researcher will verify that each participant meets the inclusion criteria before scheduling an interview. The interviewer will schedule interviews as the participants are selected, based on the participants’ availability. Once chosen for the study, the interviewer will assign each participant a pseudonym for anonymity and privacy.

The interviews of the participants will have a primary recording and a secondary recording device to assist with any system failures. The primary recording method for the

participant interviews will be conducted on the application Zoom. Zoom recordings will be audio-only to help minimize the influence of the interviewers' non-verbal cues. A secondary audio-recording device will be purchased with the researcher's funds. I began each interview by reading a pre-interview script to ensure that each potential participant understood their engagement was voluntary. Participants could withdraw from the study at any point throughout the process.

Steps taken to withdraw will be briefed to the participant during the scheduling of the interviewing. The phase in which the participants withdraw from the study will determine if their data will be used in the findings. If the interview has already occurred when the participant withdraws, the researcher will still use their data but will not contact the participant for a member check. At withdrawal time, the researcher will also provide the participant with resources. The resources will also be provided to each participant at the end of the interview.

After each interview, the researcher will submit the audio files for transcription. The participants' experiences will then be coded by the researcher and debriefed to them so the researcher can ensure data is not misinterpreted. The member check to review the researcher's interpretation of the data will help uphold the trustworthiness of the study's results. Transparency throughout the study will minimize any surprises for the participants.

Data Analysis Plan

The researcher will use a transcription service called Otter to transcribe the interviews. The researcher will then review the transcriptions for accuracy before coding.

If the researcher has thoughts or biases while studying and reading the transcripts, she will use the journal to keep track of those thoughts. When conducting the data analysis of the transcripts, the researcher will use an inductive coding method. The researcher will use a color-coding system to analyze the data and answer the RQ's manually. I will utilize a table to code the transcriptions of the interviews. The table will have three columns for text, code/category, and theme. When discrepant evidence is found from the transcriptions, it will also be documented and considered in the study's findings. From the literature, it is believed that when discrepant cases can be explained, the general explanation for the typical case is strengthened (Hsiung, 2010). All data collected for this study will be analyzed and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Issues of Trustworthiness

This study addresses issues of trustworthiness through four different concepts. Quantitative studies address issues of trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Stadtlander, 2015, p. 102). The author will discuss how they will address each issue to improve the overall trustworthiness of the study. The issue of data credibility will be addressed at two different points of the study. In the collection phase, the researcher will use the saturation method to ensure the findings are wholesome. Another method that the researcher will utilize in the study is member checks. The member checks will occur after the data is coded to help fill any data gaps that were missed during the interview process (Stadtlander, 2015, p. 103). The researcher intends to verify that the data representation aligns with the participants' views on their

experiences (Patton, 2015, p. 685). Both methods will allow the study's credibility to be addressed and remain integral.

Transferability is the second issue of trustworthiness that the researcher will address. Transferability refers to the researcher's responsibility to provide sufficient information so that readers can establish a degree of similarity between the participants and other groups of people (Patton, 2015, p. 685). Two methods identified in the literature to assist with the issue of transferability are variation in participants and a thick description (Stadtlander, 2015, p. 102). The participants in this study will vary in terms of race, gender, and location. The primary similarity that will be required of each participant are the Western denominations of Christianity practiced during childhood and adolescence. The participants' experiences were documented as described in a 1973 book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, authored by an American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1973, as cited in Stadtlander, 2015, p. 102). High detail and in-depth analysis of the participants' experiences will permit this study's findings to be generalized to groups with similar characteristics and values. In future studies, the data from this study could reasonably be generalized to other regions that practice Christianity, smaller denominations within Christianity, and other religions with similar practices to Christianity.

The third issue of trustworthiness is called dependability. Dependability will demonstrate the accuracy of the data collection methods used in this study (Stadtlander, 2015, p. 102). Strategies previously discussed, such as member checks and thick descriptions, will simultaneously assist with the dependability of this study. Conducting

member checks after the transcripts are reviewed for exactness will improve the accuracy of the interpretations. The researcher will keep a detailed audit trail recording every action taken, anyone spoken to, and the information discussed in those meetings (Stadtlander, 2015, p. 102). Triangulation is another method that the researcher will utilize by asking the same questions of the different study participants. The researcher will document everything throughout the study to raise the dependability. The researcher will record any scripts read during the interview process, emails sent and received, and notes on interactions.

The final issue of trustworthiness is confirmability. Stadtlander (2015) described confirmability as "the degree to which the findings [of the study] are the result of the focus of the study and not of the biases of the researcher" (p. 103). Along with an audit trail, the researcher plans to minimize biases with a journal. The journal will be used throughout the data collection and analysis process whenever biased thoughts arise. Keeping a journal will enable the researcher to exercise discernment in linking assertions, findings, and interpretations to the data (Patton, 2015, p. 685). Any links confirmed in the data analysis process will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Ethical Procedures

I adhered to ethical procedures throughout the entirety of this study. An institutional review board (IRB) requires researchers to "assess the potential for risk to participants in a study, such as physical, psychological, social, economic, or legal harm" (Seiber, 1998, as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 91). The researcher will ensure

the ethical issues are addressed before conducting the study, at the beginning of the study, during data collection, data analysis, and while reporting, sharing, and storing data.

Before beginning the study, the researcher will complete any forms required by Walden University in order to gain approval from the IRB. When seeking participants for the study, the researcher will contact potential participants to inform them of the study's general purpose (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 89). Before each participant is scheduled for an interview, the researcher will require them to sign a consent form, after which the research process can proceed. The consent form will be explained thoroughly, and participants will understand that their participation in the study is voluntary and that the researcher will maintain their privacy in accordance with the methods outlined. The consent form will include information about the researcher, the sponsoring institution, the purpose of the study, the participant's confidentiality, and the withdrawal process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 92). Each participant will receive contact information for the researcher and the organization, Remembering Trauma after the interview.

During the collection phase, the researcher will maintain ethical standards. The researcher will reiterate consent and the purpose of the study. To maintain the privacy of each participant, a fictitious name and an anonymous profile will be assigned. The participants' locations will be identified by region [e.g. West, Midwest, South, Northeast] to keep anonymity. Throughout the interviewing phase, the researcher will avoid leading questions and refrain from expressing personal opinions and biases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 89). Personal opinions and prejudices will be written down in a research journal.

All data files will be stored in the researcher's office behind a locked door and a password-protected computer. The secondary copy of the recorded interviews and the researcher's journal will be in a sealed box at the researcher's office. The recordings will be transcribed using a transcription service called Otter. Before coding, transcriptions will be checked for accuracy by the researcher. The researcher will then store all data and materials for a period of 5 years following the study.

After the study, the researcher will continue to communicate with the participants. Creswell & Creswell (2018) assert that "a good hallmark of good qualitative research is the report of the diversity of perspectives about the topic" (p. 95). The researcher will ensure that a full range of positive and negative findings are disclosed. For the publication of this study, the researcher will ensure that all participants' identities remain confidential with the use of fictitious names and composite profiles.

Ethical standards will be upheld throughout the entirety of this study. The participants will be made aware of voluntary consent from the beginning of the study. The participants will be informed of their ability to withdraw from the study at any point. The ethical procedures described and any requirements from Walden University will be adhered to by the researcher. The IRB approval number for this study is 01-02-25-1124513 and expires on January 1, 2026.

Summary

Chapter 3 detailed the methodology of the phenomenological qualitative study that will be conducted. The research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures were all mapped out for the reader. The

researcher will apply Colaizzi's 1978 method when analyzing data, which will be completed in Chapter 4. The fourth chapter will indicate the findings of the data collected and analyzed using the methods detailed in this chapter.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In this study, I sought to describe the phenomenon of emotional spiritual abuse that victims experience within Christian families. The data collection supplied a better understanding of the strategies and tactics that are utilized to perpetrate emotional spiritual abuse against Christian victims. Participants who volunteered for this study have been vulnerable in sharing their experiences. Beginning in the recruitment phase, all participants were responsive throughout the data collection and after the member checks. The participants' responsiveness enabled a smooth and efficient data collection phase. In this process, I have heard many compelling stories that have depicted the participants' journey of openness, patience, courage, recovery, and forgiveness after religious trauma. The participants graciously allowed me to ask in-depth questions to gather details about their situations. These participants have allowed me to gather the data to answer my RQ's and fill in the research gap. The data collection journey has exceeded my expectations and provided me with data that I can publish in numerous works.

The RQ's drove this study throughout the data collection phase. The first RQ addressed the strategies and tactics that are used to perpetrate emotional spiritual abuse in families under the guise of Christianity. The second RQ concerned the most prevalent strategies or tactics among the participants. I hypothesized that the data would present a better understanding of the mechanisms used and that readers would be able to grasp the subtle differences in the victimology.

This chapter will detail recruitment, data collection, analysis, and results. I will also review a pilot study I conducted during my coursework and explain the changes I made to this study. First, I will discuss the pilot study I conducted, highlighting the changes I made for this study. I will then detail the study's setting to help readers understand any conditions that could have influenced my interpretation of the study results. Then, I will review the demographics of the participants that I selected. Next, I will detail the data collection and analysis methods used to gather the necessary information for this study. Finally, I will review the evidence of trustworthiness and then address if and how the data supported the RQ's.

Pilot Study

Before beginning my study, I conducted a pilot study as part of my coursework for an Advanced Qualitative class. The pilot study had a narrower focus than this one, but they both used a phenomenological approach. The purpose of the pilot study was to explore spiritual abuse tactics within African American Christian culture and how it has affected victims. However, the RQ's were similar in that it sought to determine what strategies and tactics are used to commit spiritual abuse. I also used the same framework for my pilot study.

Several things were adjusted from the pilot study to this study. The pilot study had only two participants; although that was a good number, I wanted to increase the sample size for my research study. Increasing the number of participants would enable the analysis of more data. I wanted to broaden my participant pool from African Americans. I decided to include all adult U.S. citizens in this study. I then narrowed the religious focus

down to specific larger denominations within Christianity. In my research, I found that outside of the order of service and clergy hierarchy, the denominations in this study have similar foundations. Based on my research, many of the denominations included in this study also have large populations within the U.S. Modifying the participant inclusion and exclusion criteria from the pilot study was a deliberate decision I made to conduct research that could be applied to multiple groups of people and to encourage future research.

When I analyzed the participant data from the pilot study, I used an Excel spreadsheet, which facilitated the manual coding process. For this research study, I decided to use the Excel spreadsheet for the initial portion of inductive coding, which I will discuss in the Data Analysis section of this chapter. I also implemented hand-written coding for the latter portion of inductive coding. I believe that the pilot study helped me understand how to analyze a small dataset, which facilitated my analysis of the more extensive dataset for this study.

The interview questions for the pilot study were semi-structured, similar to those used in this study. As the research topic was similar, I altered some questions and arranged them differently. I also used a similar closing statement after my interviews, but I provided different resources to the participants of this study. Using a similar topic for the pilot helped me organize my research and set realistic expectations.

Setting

The proposal for this study was approved by the IRB at Walden University on January 2, 2025, with the approval number 01-02-25-1124513. I began disseminating

digital and physical copies of my recruitment flyers. I distributed flyers on social media and in public spaces throughout the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area. I posted flyers on Facebook groups, YouTube community spaces, and Snapchat. I asked my friends and family to post flyers on their social media pages, including Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok.

There were 136 inquiries from people interested in participating in the study. After speaking with the IRB regarding the need to verify that each participant met the criteria, they informed me that I could take the necessary steps during pre-screening to verify this. If I felt that a participant was not reliable or untrustworthy, I could cease contact. There was also no requirement to pay those deemed untrustworthy. I responded to each email informing them of the pre-screening requirements (see Appendix B) and expectations for the screening. In this email, I asked for a response with an available time and date for the screening. On the requested dates, I sent a Zoom invite for the prospective participant to join the pre-screening.

Each pre-screen took approximately 10–15 minutes. During the pre-screening, the potential participants were asked about each inclusion criterion. To verify that the participants were residents of the U.S., they were asked to show a valid form of identification. My initial email response indicated this would be an additional step to maintain the study's trustworthiness. The email explained to the potential participants that the pre-screening would not be recorded, and none of their private data (such as address or date of birth) would be documented. If someone could not produce a valid form of identification, they were thanked for their interest in the study and removed from the list

of potential participants. Unfortunately, many people expressed interest but either displayed blatantly fake identification or tried to enter the study twice [changed shirts or tried to alter their appearance]. However, verified participants were moved forward in the process to be scheduled for the interview. For those who advanced past pre-screening, I sent the approved consent form to review, ask questions, and sign if they wished to continue with the study.

Upon receiving the consent forms, I intentionally scheduled the participants as quickly as possible. This step, along with verifying the identification, helped me retain trustworthy and reliable participants. This study's goal number of participants was eight to 12, or until data saturation was achieved. Ultimately, nine individuals completed the pre-screening. I interviewed all nine participants in a timely fashion. I continued pre-screening potential participants while scheduling and conducting interviews with the nine participants.

Recruiting ended on March 6, 2025, and interviews were completed on February 7, 2025. After interviews were completed and the data were analyzed, each participant was sent an Amazon e-gift card valued at $20. As the recruiting took place at the beginning of 2025, and I worked for the U.S. government, there was an atmosphere of uncertainty in job security due to things occurring within U.S. politics. As the researcher, I understood that each participant was entitled to the payment that they were promised. I set aside the required funds to ensure that my participants could receive their gift cards, regardless of my employment status. I also gave myself a stricter budget and relied

heavily on my faith concerning my job security. Thankfully, my job was retained, and all participants received their $20 gift card.

Demographics

In this qualitative study, I used a phenomenological approach and sought to gather details about each participant's experience with emotional spiritual abuse. A good sample size for a phenomenological study ranges from three to 10 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 186). I sought to have a higher sample size of eight to 12 or until data saturation was achieved. The participants who met the criteria were asked to review the consent form and respond with "I consent." The participants were also asked to select a pseudonym. This step is something that was recommended during the IRB review. The IRB and I thought that this change would help mitigate any bias that might be present if I were to select the pseudonyms for the participants. Those pseudonyms will identify each participant throughout the remainder of this study and will be assigned to a region based on the U.S. region map (see Appendix C). The following will outline the demographics of each of the nine participants selected and included in the study.

The first participant selected the pseudonym Emma, a resident of the Southwest region of the U.S. At the time of this study, Emma was 38 years old and a divorced mother of two boys. A Baptist father and a non-denominational mother raised Emma. The second participant chose the pseudonym DCBS and was a resident of the Southeastern U.S., currently stationed in an OCONUS location as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces. DCBS was 41 years old at the time of this study and was raised in a Pentecostal environment in the Midwestern region of the U.S. The third participant chose the

pseudonym Lola and was a resident of the Northeast region of the U.S. Lola was 33 years of age, raised in the Roman Catholic denomination, and was a mother of one.

Participant number four selected the pseudonym Faith. Faith was 28 years old and a resident of the Southeast region of the U.S. Faith was raised in the Midwestern U.S. in the Church of the Brethren, a smaller denomination within the Lutheran branch of Christianity. Trey was the pseudonym that the fifth participant designated for himself. Trey was a resident of the Southeast region of the U.S. Trey was raised in a Roman Catholic household and was 34 years old at the time of the study. The sixth participant chose the pseudonym Joy, and she was 30 years old. Joy also resided in the Southeast region of the U.S. and was raised Roman Catholic.

The seventh participant, who preferred the pseudonym Jake, was a 34 year old man. Jake resided in the Southeast region of the U.S. and was raised in the Protestant denomination. Elise was the pseudonym chosen by the eighth participant. Elise was 25 years old and raised in the Converge/General Baptist denomination. At the time of this study, Elise resided in the Western region of the U.S. The final participant selected the pseudonym Leslie, who resided in the Midwestern region of the U.S. At the time of the study, Leslie was 29 years old and was raised in the Baptist denomination.

The pre-screening method was slightly modified from Chapter 3 after it was realized that prospective participants were using multiple email addresses to attempt to enter the study. In Chapter 3, I stated that I would conduct the pre-screening via telephone or Zoom without video. My concern was that my study would lack validity, credibility, and trustworthiness if I could not verify that my participants were not

residents of the U.S. As discussed briefly in the Settings section of this chapter, I was informed by the IRB that I could take the necessary steps to ensure the participants met the criteria after speaking with them. I then chose to conduct all pre-screenings via Zoom, with video on. After verifying these participants in the pre-screenings, I had no concerns regarding the trustworthiness of the nine selected participants.

In summation, nine participants were selected to participate in this study. Data were collected from seven women and two men. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 41, and they represented all five regions of the U.S., as shown on the region map (see Appendix C). The participants' ethnicities included African American, European American, African descent, Hispanic/Latin descent, and multiracial. Three participants identified as LGBTQIA+ members, but this was not asked or disclosed until they were interviewed. Overall, I was very pleased with the size of my participant pool and the diversity in their backgrounds and cultures. I believe this diversity has allowed me to gather more impactful data during the collection phase of this study.

Data Collection

For this descriptive phenomenological research, I wanted to ensure the data collection technique was the best fit for the needs of my study. Although Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that the most common method to collect qualitative data is interviews, I wanted to ensure that interviews would solicit the type of data needed for this study (p. 106). After considering other methods of collecting data, I proposed that interviews would best suit the needs of this study. I will explain each step of the data

collection process and how each participant's interview contributed to the data for this study.

There were nine participants from whom I collected data through the form of interviews. I made an effort to be timely following the pre-screenings and sent the consent forms the same day the screening was completed. When I received the consent form, I scheduled the interviews at the participants' earliest convenience. I used a semi-structured interview format to allow uncommon strategies and tactics to materialize. During the semi-structured interview, I posed 12 questions and subquestions to participants (see Appendix D). Still, I did not limit myself and asked additional or clarifying questions based on what the participants disclosed. A semi-structured interviewing technique proved advantageous, yielding a substantial amount of valuable data.

All data was collected from each participant individually via Zoom and was recorded. I used a separate handheld Sony ICD-PX470 audio-only handheld recorder before allowing the participant to enter the Zoom call. The handheld recorder was stopped after the participant left the Zoom interview. At the start of each interview, the video feature was turned on, and I explained to each participant what to expect from the interview. I asked each participant if they had any questions for me before beginning the recording. None of my participants had questions after I explained the process to them.

Following my explanation, I instructed the participant to turn off their camera and began recording on the Zoom application. I introduced myself to the participant using their chosen pseudonym, date, time, and interview location [Zoom audio]. I then read the

pre-interview script for each participant. The pre-interview script includes a paragraph detailing the purpose of the study, and I also restated my mandatory reporting criteria to the participant. Following the study information, I informed each participant that their participation was voluntary, and they could stop the interview at any time. Each participant verbally consented to continuing with the interview for the study.

After receiving the participant's verbal consent, I began asking them the questions I curated for the interview (see Appendix D). As the interview was semi-structured, I allowed each participant to answer questions freely. If the participant answered the subsequent question without prompting, I would move to the next question. I also took handwritten notes while conducting the interviews for ease of revisiting. As I took notes, I annotated with a star in the margin whenever the participant accidentally said their name or anyone else's name with the intent to change it during the transcription.

At the end of each interview, I thanked the participants for their time and provided them with resources for abuse victims using a closing statement script. At this point in the interview, I ended the Zoom recording, then the participant and I turned our cameras on. During this portion of the interview, I thanked the participants for their transparency and briefed them on the study's next steps. Participants were informed of my suspected timeline to complete interviews, data analysis, member checks, and payment. Participants were informed to contact me via telephone or email if they needed additional resources or had questions. After the participant left the Zoom meeting, I ended the handheld recorder. All interviews were completed by February 7, 2025.

Following each interview, three files were exported onto my desktop. Zoom created two files per interview: one was audio-only, and the other was audio-video. The third file was input onto my desktop directly from the handheld recorder and was audio-only. Of the three files, the two audio-only files were then transferred to a separate 1TB hard drive. The Zoom audio-only file was then input into the transcription service Otter. After transcribing each file, I manually reviewed it while listening to the audio file and referring to my notes from each interview. I edited any errors within the Otter transcription and labeled speakers appropriately. At this time, I redacted any portion of the transcription where someone other than the participant was named. Likewise, I changed any instances where the participant stated their actual name to the pseudonym they previously selected. After completing each transcription, I listened to the audio recording and reviewed the transcription one final time for accuracy. The transcription document was saved to my desktop under the participant's pseudonym and subsequently added to the external hard drive for record-keeping purposes.

The participants in this study were very gracious with me throughout the process and were extremely patient with my timeline. I began data analysis on February 8, 2025, and completed it by March 6, 2025. Due to unforeseen surgery, I had to take 3 weeks off before I could schedule member checks. I could schedule all member checks between March 10, 2025, and March 14, 2025. Member checks were conducted via Zoom with the researchers video enabled, while participants were given the option to enable their video. The member checks were not recorded.

During member checks, participants were informed which categories I found after analysis. The participants were then told which categories were and were not considered strategies and tactics. I explained to the participants that I would potentially write future articles on categories that were not strategies and tactics, as well as some of the patterns I recognized during my analysis. The participants were then given an overview of the participant pool demographics and whether other participants expressed similar strategies and tactics. During this portion, I ensured that I did not provide any identifying information and used very broad identifiers. For example, "seven of the nine participants also mentioned guilt/shame during their interviews." The participants appeared excited to hear how they compared to the other participant interviews. Many of them expressed initial uncertainty in how their experiences aligned with those of others prior to the member checks.

Next, I allowed participants to add any additional information that they felt qualified them for categories in which I did not code for their interviews, but did for others. If a participant had questions about a category, I provided a broad explanation of the data type that could fit into that category. Still, I assured the participants that if they felt like a category applied to them, we could discuss it. I then typed each participant's statements about the additional categories into a separate document and read what I typed to mitigate misinterpretation. This document, with additional comments, was saved on my desktop in the same folder as my coding spreadsheet. Many of the participants explained that they recalled things following their interview. Allowing the members to add any information they deemed pertinent to the study also helped relieve any pressure

the participants may have felt following their interviews. If applicable, additional comments were added, the participants were thanked, and the Zoom meeting was stopped.

I anticipated each member's check to take approximately 30 minutes, but many took over 30 minutes. The longest member check took an hour. The participants in this study were interested in the data and had many questions about future research that could be conducted using the data from this study. The participants appeared to find solace in knowing that other participants were coded in the same categories as themselves. Following the member check, I sent each participant a $20 Amazon e-gift card with a simple thank you note in the comment box. I then used the Snipping Tool to take a photo of the receipt, which showed that the gift card had been emailed to them. In this email, I asked the participants to contact me if they had any issues or delays with the gift card. None of the participants experienced any issues receiving their gift card, and all acknowledged receipt of the gift card within 10 minutes of its delivery.

Throughout this study and the data collection process, I kept a research journal. In this journal, I keep the contact information for my chair and second committee members, lists for appendices and references, ideas for future research, and much more. During the data collection phase of this study, I also used this journal to keep track of each participant. I have a page dedicated to each participant, which includes contact information, biographical data, and important dates. I referred to the journal to recall the dates that the consent forms were sent and received by the participant, member check dates, and when the $20 e-gift cards were sent.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data from the transcribed interviews independently. As stated in Chapter 3, I used an inductive coding method to conduct the analysis. While listening to and reading each interview transcript, I began taking notes in my journal on things that stood out to me. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) encourage researchers to take notes to help identify "data that strike you as interesting, potentially relevant or important to your study (p. 204)." I then used these markers as "codes" gathered from the text. After listening to each interview, a total of 72 codes were identified.

Next, I highlighted each code that could be considered a "strategy or tactic," as this was the purpose of my study. There were 36 codes of the 72 that were either a strategy or tactic. After this, I went through each interview once more to copy and paste the text of each participant into an Excel spreadsheet. I only added text that applied to the highlighted sections onto the Excel spreadsheets. Each participant had a spreadsheet within the same document labeled with their pseudonym. After inputting the text from each transcript into the spreadsheet, I made two additional columns for codes and themes.

I then manually grouped each category to fit into larger themes. I vacillated on the nomenclature that best fits the group of codes and made several adjustments to determine which codes worked together best. The completed list had eight themes that I felt summarized the group of codes (see Table 1). Next, I added the codes and themes to each participant's spreadsheet. After analyzing the data, member checks were scheduled and conducted as mentioned in the Data Collection section.

Table 1

Categories and Themes Derived From Inductive Analysis

Code/category	Theme
Fear, anger, anxiety, guilt/shame, isolation, worry	Traumatic stressors
Submission to clergy, reporting victim to pastor/clergy, become a pastor, pastors' wife, missionary, directed sermons	Clerical
Other religions, gender, LGBTQIA+, other Christian churches, homeless/unhoused, racial	Prejudicial
Retreats/camps, fasting, prayer, tithes and offerings, memorizing Scripture, deprivation, misusing Scripture, toxic positivity	Activities
Fear of sharing with believers, prolonged relationships, forced forgiveness, generational, mental illness, pastors' children/living with pastor	Familial/relational
Celibacy, puberty	Intimacy
Hell, demonic	Satanic
Bible stories, Gospel songs/podcasts, Scripture	Biblical literature

Note. LGBTQIA+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/aromantic/agender.

Traumatic Stressors

The first theme that I identified covered the different emotions and feelings that were used to perpetrate emotional spiritual abuse against the participants in my study. This theme contains the codes: fear, anger, anxiety, guilt/shame, isolation, and worry. As someone who has studied psychology, I quickly recognized that they were all indicators of potential traumatic stressors. Among my participants, I noticed that guilt/shame was the traumatic stressor that was used on each participant. They all expressed being made to

feel guilty or shameful for behaviors and choices that did not align with their families' [and churches'] Christian beliefs.

Traumatic stressors that are used to manipulate or control someone could potentially lead to more significant mental health struggles. My participants worried about themselves, their children, future relationships, and their families. At the same time, others were isolated from friends, family, and even their home churches. Joy expressed that she recalled being fearful that she would be "destroyed" by her father, who was a pastor. In comparison, Emma expressed anxiety about how her ex-husband was raising her children to believe in hyper-religious concepts. Many participants detailed being made to feel isolated and angry towards the people who spiritually abused them. The traumatic stressors were the easiest to identify among the participants, as the emotional spiritual abuse focuses on why abuse is perpetrated psychologically.

Clerical

The second theme relates to codes that pertain to strategies and tactics used under the guise of clergy. Four of the 36 codes fall into this category: submission to clergy, reporting victim to the Pastor, becoming a Pastor, Pastor's wife, or missionary, and directed sermons. Submission to clergy was coded in every instance where the participants mentioned having to "report" to their clerical leader for everyday things. DCBS recalled that while she was in college, her pastor became upset because she had not discussed buying a new vehicle with him. Emma expressed that her ex-husband was raising her sons to become integral members of the church. While several of the women participants expressed being "raised to become a Pastors' wife or missionary." The most

disturbing clerical strategy was the directed sermons, which five of the nine participants experienced. The participants expressed that after someone had reported their activities to the Pastor, they experienced directed sermons. The participants explained that the sermons would be so detailed that it was apparent the specific topic was about them. Strategies included under the clerical theme relate to a toxic hierarchy within the church or push the victim to seek societal status by becoming a part of the clerical structure.

Prejudicial

The third theme used to commit emotional spiritual abuse is called Prejudicial. This theme covers the codes that pertain to discriminatory practices that were used to inflict emotional spiritual abuse. This theme included the following codes: other religions, gender, LGBTQIA+, other Christian churches, homeless/unhoused, and racial. This theme is the most self-explanatory and covers the types of prejudicial treatment that are used to perpetrate emotional spiritual abuse within Christianity. The participants all recalled experiencing discrimination against themselves and witnessing it being experienced by others. Three of my participants openly identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. All three participants stated that when they first began being accused of being LGBTQIA+, they were young and not interested in dating anyone. Two other participants witnessed discrimination against those within the LGBTQIA+ community, one of whom was also accused of being a part of the community but was not.

Another prevalent tactic that was used against the participants of this study was discriminatory behavior and language against other religions. Further, some participants explained that there was discriminatory language and behavior directed towards other

Christian denominations. Surprisingly, participants clarified that their families [and churches] discriminated against people and churches of the same denomination. Six participants reported experiencing discrimination against other religions or Christian denominations in their interviews.

One participant recalled an instance that stuck with her throughout her life. Faith stated that an unkempt man entered their church when she was younger. Faith expounded that the congregation members blatantly stared and whispered about the man so much that he did not stay for the entire church service. Faith stated that even after the man left, the congregation continued to speak negatively about the gentleman. This incident remained with Faith because she realized that the church was not as welcoming as they should have been and did not treat the man kindly. Faith noted that, unlike the other members of the congregation, she hoped he "came back" and that she wanted to "talk to him."

DCBS recalled that her pastor refused to marry two individuals who were not "your [their] own [race]." DCBS further explained that the rules were based on phenotypes, and as she was of mixed race but appeared to have a lighter skin tone, her pastor would only marry her to someone who was Caucasian. DCBS's pastor focused on how individuals presented phenotypically rather than genetically or racially. DCBS stated that people in the church hesitated to go against what the pastor said, as he would give them consequences, including banning them from the church. DCBS recalled the pastor banning her mother from the church but allowing her to return after about a year.

Activities

The fourth theme includes the codes: retreats/camps, fasting, tithes and offerings, prayer, toxic positivity, memorizing Scripture, deprivation, and misusing Scripture. I called this theme “activities” as this tactic requires the participation or belief on the victims' behalf. Memorizing Scripture and misusing Scripture were identified among five participants. Participants recalled being forced to memorize Scripture at a young age. Lola recalled spending hours each night before bed reciting Hail Marys and conducting rosaries. Leslie detailed being unaware that her mother was using Scripture out of the intended context to control her behavior as a teenager.

Three participants noted that the category of toxic positivity was used to commit emotional spiritual abuse against them. Faith detailed being raised to “over-spiritualize” any good thing that happened in her life, and still struggles with speaking about the “fortune” and “blessings” that God gives her when anything good happens in her life. Although she is still a believer, she believes that she speaks in this manner because she was raised to relate anything good in her life to God first. Participants coded for toxic positivity noticed that their perpetrators were always instructing them to stay positive.

Three participants explained that they were made to fast as children on behalf of others in their families. Joy detailed that tithes and offerings were used as a tactic when her father gave such a large donation to the church, putting their family in a financial bind. Joy explained that after the offering, her family could not afford her education. Joy said she lied to her peers, telling them she was taking a “gap year.” Joy believes that her father’s actions deprived his own family of their needs. Jake also explained that he

experienced emotional abuse through tithes and offerings. Jake stated that his church made tithes and offerings so significant that he believed those who did not pay would go to hell. Jake recounted that his family was low income, and as a child, he would often be extremely fearful that his mom could not afford to pay tithes and offerings.

Of the nine participants, five reported attending retreats or religious camps. Lola had the most egregious experience while attending a retreat. Lola explained that the retreat took place in an old Catholic school, and the camp leaders led the young girls into a classroom. Lola detailed that the camp leaders played an abortion video while they forced the girls to hold jelly fetuses of different gestational ages. Lola explained that if they turned their heads from the screen, the camp leaders would physically turn their heads back to the screen. Lola stated that the camp leaders were yelling, “This is what is going to happen to you if you have sex outside of marriage,” and “If you do this, you are going to hell.” Lola recounted that after this specific retreat, she began experiencing issues with panic attacks, which went untreated by her family. Like Joy, Lola believes that her family deprived her of mental health treatment that could have been beneficial to her following the retreat.

Familial/Relational

The fear of sharing with believers, prolonged relationships, forced forgiveness, generational, mental illness, and pastors' children were the codes that I labeled under the Familial/Relational theme. Many participants expressed having experienced prolonged relationships themselves or witnessing prolonged relationships within their families due to their religious beliefs. Four participants identified as children of pastors or members

high within the church structure, while two lived with their pastors due to other circumstances. Five participants expressed that their parents had experienced forms of spiritual abuse, some of which left the Christian religion as a result. One participant noted that they were instructed to forgive the person who spiritually abused them because "Jesus forgave them." Overall, forced forgiveness refers to Instances where the participants were made to forgive those who wronged them under the guise of Christian values.

Guilt and shame plagued the participant pool following instances of emotional spiritual abuse, which prohibited them from openly sharing or discussing their thoughts with believers. Having no one within their microsystem or mesosystem to share with, the emotional spiritual abuse continued well into adulthood for all but one participant. Three participants expressed mental illness within themselves or their familial structure, which hindered the recognition and discontinuation of emotional spiritual abuse. One participant, Faith, was kicked out of her Master's Seminary program because she did not have stable employment and had a mental health condition that was brought on by past trauma. It was common for the participants to express that their families and church did not believe in counselors or therapy.

Intimacy

Puberty and celibacy were two codes that were labeled with the theme of intimacy. All the participants expressed experiencing situations where they were "pushed" to purity in some way. Leslie noted that she was prohibited from dating and attributed her rebellious teenage stage to her family's teachings. Joy noted that her sister

received no sexual education, which had a detrimental impact on her relationship. When asked if they could recall a specific time when the emotional spiritual abuse was most prevalent, five of the participants stated it was around puberty. Trey, along with many other participants, stated that he was not interested in dating or having sexual intercourse with anyone at that time. Interestingly, most participants expressed that they now felt the conversations surrounding celibacy were premature, having had the opportunity to reflect on the situation.

Satanic

The seventh theme contains two codes, hell and demonic, and is appropriately labeled satanic. Anything coded under this theme pertained to the overall theme of Satan and being punished in hell. Seven participants had excerpts from their transcripts under the code "hell." Predictably, in all of the instances of hell being coded, the participants were threatened or told that they would go to hell in some manner. The participants were also told they would go to hell if they did not behave in a specific way.

Four participants identified their actions and behaviors as being labeled as demonic to manipulate and control them under the guise of Christianity. Lola described a situation with her son, who has Autism. Lola stated that her family believed someone had put a "Mal De Ojo" or an evil eye. Lola explained that she was hopeful that a diagnosis would help her family realize that her son did not have an "evil eye." However, Lola's mother still believes something of a satanic nature is plaguing her son. Trey was called demonic by his family for being in the LGBTQIA+ community, while Jake was told he was demonic for smoking as a teenager.

Biblical Literature

Biblical stories, gospel songs, podcasts, and Scriptures are the final theme, which I labeled "Biblical Literature." Many participants expressed that Biblical literature had been used against them to manipulate or control their behavior. Participants recalled being forced to listen to gospel songs or podcasts by their spouse or guardian. Emma expressed concerns regarding Bible stories being utilized to justify harmful behavior toward her children by her ex-husband. Scripture being repeated to participants to manipulate or sway them was also a method employed by Bible literature as a strategy or tactic.

When analyzing the data, I planned to note cases that were negative or discrepant. I did not initially recognize any discrepant cases, as my methodological approach used interviews, which are not necessarily designed to solicit discrepant data. It is also my belief that since the RQ sought to determine the types of strategies and tactics used to commit spiritual abuse, it did not necessarily call attention to contradictory data. However, a few categories were not as prevalent in my participant pool but did not contradict the data or categories. The less common categories were homelessness, memorizing Scripture, deprivation, and misusing Scripture. Although these categories were rare within my participant pool, they should still be considered legitimate tactics within each theme.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

As a qualitative study, I wanted to ensure that this study was trustworthy. In Chapter 3, I reviewed the four issues of trustworthiness and hypothesized how I could

maintain it throughout this study. I will provide evidence to validate the trustworthiness of the study and describe how each issue was addressed throughout.

Credibility

Throughout the data collection phase, I implemented several procedures to help maintain credibility. As discussed in Chapter 3, I planned to use triangulation, member checks, and saturation. Triangulation was exemplified with the use of participants from different regions, backgrounds, and denominations. Likewise, participants raised in the same denomination had varying familial structures, which influenced their experiences. Data source triangulation proved to be effortless with the methodology chosen for this study.

Data saturation was another goal of this qualitative study to enhance trustworthiness. Although eight to 12 participants could be deemed as a large amount for a qualitative study, my goal for data collection was saturation. After conducting interviews with three to five participants, I believe I reached data saturation. I consulted with my committee after seven participants to discuss ending interviews. Because my goal was to have eight to 12 participants, I attempted to recruit one more participant. I was able to schedule two additional interviews following my seventh interview. Following the 9th participant, I decided to end recruiting. As stated in the Data Analysis section, I do not believe that anomalous incidents, in this case, invalidate a category or theme. Emotional spiritual abuse can be presented in distinct ways, given many socioeconomic factors. Data saturation helped to isolate and verify anomalous incidents in this study.

Member checks were the final method that was utilized to ensure the credibility of this research. Based on all the methods that were used to enhance credibility, member checks were the most salient. Member checks allowed the participants to review my interpretations of their interview data, clarify, and add anything that they deemed beneficial to the study. Data checks conducted with the participants after analysis would permit the participants to mitigate any misinterpretations of their experiences and further trust the researcher to publicly and truthfully write about their personal stories.

Transferability

Transferability was the second issue that was addressed in Chapter 3 to ensure the trustworthiness of this research. The two methods that were used to address the issue of transferability were thick descriptions and variation in participants. Thick descriptions were utilized in the data collection and analysis. Clifford Geertz (1973) explains that thick descriptions are a highly detailed account of the interview locale, interviewees, and actions identified (as cited in Stadtlander, 2015, p. 102). Throughout the collection and analysis of the data, I wanted it to be as detailed as possible. I allotted 2 hours for each interview, then another 30–60 minutes for the member checks. When conducting the coding of the interview transcripts, I made sure to use excerpts of each interview in the Text column so the descriptions of each category were comprehensible. Thick descriptions of the participants' experiences were the first method used for transferability.

The second method that I employed to boost transferability was the variation in participants. I recruited nine participants; seven were women, and two were men. The

participants covered several ethnicities, denominations, and regions of the U.S. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert that maximizing the variation of the sample will identify common patterns across diversity and enable readers to apply [this study's] findings to their situation (p. 257). Overall, the implementation of thick descriptions and variation within my sample assisted in supporting the transferability of this research study.

Dependability

The third issue of trustworthiness is dependability. Along with triangulation and member checks, the dependability of a study can be maintained by using audit trails. From the beginning of the study, the researcher documented everything in a journal. In the data collection and analysis phase of this study, I continued to document the dates that I met with participants, the dates I received consent forms, and much more. During my review of the transcripts, I began to write down potential codes that I heard in each interview so that no data would be forgotten. The use of an audit trail for the collection and analysis was beneficial when recounting the steps that were taken in this study and could allow someone to recreate this study accurately.

Confirmability

The final issue of trustworthiness covers the degree to which the findings are the primary focus, and the biases of the researcher do not play a role (Stadtlander, 2015, p. 102). To maximize the confirmability, I used the audit trail to track all my assertions from the interviews, transcriptions, and interpretations. Member checks also verified that my conclusions were not based on my personal bias. In Chapter 3, I noted that the use of my journal would aid in linking my assertions to the conclusions made in the analysis.

Ultimately, the four issues of trustworthiness that I planned to address in Chapter 3 were credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Throughout the data collection and analysis, I utilized the established protocol for maintaining trustworthiness. Triangulation, member checks, data source variation, audit trails, and the use of journaling to mitigate researcher bias were all the methods that I used to preserve trustworthiness. Taking advantage of the multiple methods sustained the trustworthiness of the data and analysis within this study.

Results

This research study sought to describe the phenomenon of emotional spiritual abuse that victims experience within Christian families. The researcher desired to answer two questions through the analysis. What strategies or tactics may be used to perpetrate emotional spiritual abuse in families under the guise of Christianity? The analysis of the data found eight themes that contained 37 categories. The eight themes and 37 categories can be found in Table 1.

The second RQ addressed what spiritual abuse strategies or tactics, if any, are the most prevalent in Christian families. Based on the data that was analyzed from the participant interviews, the most prevalent strategies were traumatic stressors, intimacy, and activities. Specifically, the categories of guilt or shame, celibacy, and prayer were the most prevalent among the participants. Table 2 depicts the top 10 codes or categories based on the number of participants who reported experiencing them.

Table 2

Top 10 Codes/Categories

Code/Category	No. of participants ($N = 9$)	Theme
Guilt/shame	9	Traumatic stressors
Celibacy	9	Intimacy
Prayer	8	Activities
Hell	7	Satanic
Anger	7	Traumatic stressors
Fear	6	Traumatic stressors
Prolonged Relationships	6	Familial/relational
Scripture	6	Biblical literature
Isolation	6	Traumatic stressors
Pastors' children	6	Familial/relational

As explained in the Data Analysis section, each theme contained several categories that were revealed in the analysis. Table 3 depicts the response percentages for each theme and details the number of participant responses for each category. The response percentages were calculated by the total number of participant responses (added from each category within the theme), divided by the theme response potential (the number of participants multiplied by the number of categories in each theme). Although this was not a quantitative study, the second RQ centered on which strategies and tactics were the most prevalent. Table 3 shows that the top three themes were intimacy (78%), traumatic stressors (69%), and satanic (61%). This data may support further quantitative analysis by other researchers.

Table 3

Prevalence of Themes in Participant Responses

Code (No. of participants)	Total No. of participant responses/No. of potential theme responses	%	Theme

Fear (6), anger (7), anxiety (5), guilt/shame (9), isolation (6), worry (4)	37/54	69	Traumatic stressors
Submission to clergy (4), reporting victim to pastor/clergy (4), become a pastor, pastors' wife, or missionary (5), directed sermons (5)	18/36	50	Clerical
Other religions (5), gender (4), LGBTQIA+ (5), other Christian churches (4), homeless/unhoused (1), racial (4)	23/54	43	Prejudicial
Retreats/camps (5), fasting (3), prayer (8), tithes and offerings (3), memorizing Scripture (2), deprivation (2), misusing Scripture (2), toxic positivity (3)	28/72	39	Activities
Fear of sharing with believers (4), prolonged relationships (6), forced forgiveness (5), generational (5), mental illness (3), pastor's children/living with pastor (6)	29/54	54	Familial/relational
Celibacy (9), puberty (5)	14/18	78	Intimacy
Hell (7), demonic (4)	11/18	61	Satanic
Bible stories (5), Gospel songs/podcasts (3), Scripture (6)	14/27	52	Biblical literature

Though I did not identify any discrepant cases, I did notice that some categories were less likely to be used as strategies or tactics to commit emotional spiritual abuse. Those categories were prejudicial and activities, which had total response percentages under 50%. As stated, the lack of likelihood of these strategies being used against victims does not excuse the effects these few experiences had on participants. An example of this can be witnessed in the gravity of Lola's experience at a Catholic retreat. Emotional or

psychological abuse can have varying outcomes for victims, and it will always be difficult to quantify those effects fully.

Summary

I intended to determine which strategies and tactics were used to perpetrate emotional spiritual abuse in families under the guise of Christianity. Secondarily, this study wanted to understand which strategies and tactics, if any, were the most prevalent in Christian families. After the screening, interviewing, and confirming results of the data analysis, I discovered 37 categories relating to the strategies and tactics that are used to commit emotional spiritual abuse. The 37 categories were grouped into eight final themes: traumatic stressors, clerical, prejudicial, activities, familial/relational, intimacy, satanic, and Biblical literature. The strategies and tactics that appear to be most prevalent were intimacy, traumatic stressors, and the satanic theme, based on the response percentages. The top three categories, based on the data, were celibacy, guilt or shame, and prayer.

In summation, the RQs were scrupulously answered by conducting interviews with each participant and using inductive coding to analyze the text to generate codes or categories, then themes. The categories are all specific strategies and tactics that could be used to commit emotional spiritual abuse. The eight themes describe groups of categories that provide a broader designation of the strategies and tactics used. Chapter 5 will detail my interpretation of the findings, review the limitations of the study, and make recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the phenomena of emotional spiritual abuse that victims experience within Christian families. I used the descriptive phenomenological methodological approach to answer the two RQ's regarding the strategies and tactics used against emotional spiritual abuse victims. The data used to answer the RQ's were collected from nine participants using a semi-structured interview format. In the interview, I utilized open-ended questions and allowed the participants to answer in a narrative format to elicit the most information. The interview questions focused on the participants' personal experiences with emotional spiritual abuse. I also focused on the emotional spiritual abuse from those within the first three ecological systems of the participants' lives. According to Bronfenbrenner's 1979 theory of a child's development, the systems are known as the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem (Ecological systems theory, 2020), which are said to have the most impact on the child.

Through the analysis, I identified 37 categories that were used as strategies and tactics to commit emotional spiritual abuse. The 37 categories were subsequently organized by likeness, which created eight themes through which emotional abuse is perpetrated. The eight themes were traumatic stressors, clerical, prejudicial, activities, familial/relational, intimacy, satanic, and Biblical literature. Obtaining the data from the victims' perspective to identify the types of strategies and tactics that were used against them was a research gap that was identified in Chapter 2.

In this chapter, I will review my interpretations of the results and findings from the data analysis. After the interpretation of the findings, I will discuss the limitations that were encountered while conducting this study. The limitations that were faced can be compared to those projected in Chapter 1. Recommendations regarding future research will then be detailed, followed by the implications this study has for positive social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

This section will inspect the data that was collected and the findings from this study. As there was not much research on the victims' experience, I will explain how the findings validate, refute, or broaden the literature discussed in Chapter 2. I will also explain my interpretations of the themes and how they relate to the theoretical framework used to execute this study.

Traumatic Stressors

Traumatic stressors was a theme that was identified in the data analysis. The traumatic stressors theme contains six categories: fear, anger, anxiety, guilt or shame, isolation, and worry. Traumatic stressors relate to the categories that can be considered negative emotions that could indicate or lead to more serious mental health concerns. Schiffman (2019) found that victims of religious trauma had PTSD-like symptoms, including feelings of inadequacy and anxiety.

The theme of traumatic stressors combines the negative feelings that the participants experienced during instances of emotional spiritual abuse. In the examples given by participants, traumatic stressors were used as a strategy to make the participants

feel inferior to their perpetrators. By denigrating the participants' emotional fortitude, many expressed being left with negative feelings such as isolation, fear, and worry. As in many forms of emotional or psychological abuse, the perpetrators' ability to gain control of the victims' minds contributed to further abuse.

Finally, traumatic stressors relate to the concept of emotional triangles within the FST. The concept of emotional triangles says that bringing in A third party helps to relieve tension between two individuals. Many of the experiences that the participants recalled involved only themselves and the people who perpetrated emotional spiritual abuse against them. Without a third party to help resolve or mitigate the tension on the victim, negative emotions will persist and eventually develop into traumatic stressors for the participants.

Clerical

The clerical theme contains codes or categories in which the clergy members play a significant role in the emotional spiritual abuse of the participants. This theme contains four categories, which include submission to clergy reporting the victim to the pastor becoming a pastor, pastor's wife, or missionary, and directed sermons. These four categories rely heavily upon clergy members who maintain positions of authority within the Christian church structure, regardless of denomination.

According to Bronfenbrenner's EST, the religious structure is a part of the mesosystem, which is the second closest level in a child's development. The mesosystem has a direct impact on the individual as it describes how their microsystems interact. Often, members of the clergy are held in high esteem in the church structure and amongst

the congregates. An example of a mesosystem interaction is the relationship between the victims' caregiver and the clergy member. The impact on the victim would be heightened if the clergy member and caregiver roles intersect.

One pattern that I recognized within the data is the link between the pastor's children and the clerical strategy being used to perpetrate emotional spiritual abuse. Six participants in this study were identified as pastors' children or lived with the pastor. Each of the six participants had at least one of the four categories, with the majority of the six participants experiencing three or four clerical categories. Participants who experienced emotional spiritual abuse through the clerical strategy are not always children of pastors or clergy members. However, there appears to be a potential correlation between the clerical theme and the category of children of pastors or clergy members. The clerical theme depicts how power and influence can be used to manipulate and control someone under the guise of spirituality.

Prejudicial

According to the participants, experiencing emotional spiritual abuse under the prejudicial theme was not perpetrated as directly as other themes. The categories within the prejudicial theme include the categories: racial, gender, other religions, other Christian denominations, and LGBTQIA+. Based on the data collected, prejudice against LGBTQIA+ and other religions was the most prevalent experience among the participants. Prejudice within any one individual could be attributed to unconscious biases learned throughout their lives.

The data show that prejudice against other religions was also common among the participants. Many of them detailed the experiences where other religions and other Christian denominations were looked down upon and spoken negatively about. This finding implies that internal prejudices lie within Christians who perpetrate emotional spiritual abuse. Internal prejudice is a pattern of thinking that could be destructive to Christianity as a whole. Indeed, if the person perpetrating emotional spiritual abuse, by means of the prejudicial theme, is also a member of the clergy, the effects could begin to permeate throughout the church and further. Early identification of the prejudicial theme is vital because once prejudices are ingrained into a person, it may take years to identify, address, and resolve.

Activities

The theme identified to include the eight categories was titled “Activities.” This theme contains retreats/camps, tithes and offerings, deprivation, toxic positivity, fasting, memorizing Scripture, misusing Scripture, and prayer. This theme includes any category in which I recognized the participants' engagement. Activities cannot be used as a tactic without the participants' involvement. The most egregious participant experiences were included within the theme I labeled as activities. I noticed a correlation between activities being the least common theme utilized against participants as a means to commit emotional spiritual abuse and it also being the theme that involved the most “engagement” from the participants. My interpretation of this finding is that perpetrators of any form of abuse will likely take the “path of least resistance.” This mechanism of emotional spiritual abuse may be due to a lack of social and verbal skills, resulting in the

perpetrator not being able to emotionally or psychologically manipulate or control someone.

Further, a few categories within the activities theme could lead to physical harm to the victim. Specifically, fasting and deprivation could lead to the physical well-being of a person being at risk. In cases where children are emotionally spiritually abused using the activities strategy, there is no other means of getting sustenance on their own. Such factors could lead to the death of the victim, which could be overlooked as the identification of spiritual abuse is still developing. Implications regarding this development will be discussed in the corresponding section.

Finally, prayer was identified as one of the top ten categories most responded to by the participants of this study. My interpretation of this finding is that although many participants did not agree with the amount of "time" they were made to pray, they now seek comfort in praying. Some participants no longer identified as Christians, but I noted that they all mentioned that they pray, although not to Jesus Christ. The category of prayer, although it was used against many participants, appears to have an element of comfort in it that presents itself to the victims during their healing journeys.

Familial/Relational

The following strategy is called familial or relational. It details how the victims' relationships with their family and other members of society are taken advantage of during emotional spiritual abuse. The six categories included within this tactic are fear of sharing with believers, forced forgiveness, mental illness, prolonged relationships,

generational, and children of pastors. The significance of relationships has been widely studied, and I believe the data analyzed helps to support the literature.

Children of pastors and prolonged relationships were among the top ten categories that the participants of this study responded to. As aforementioned, being the child of a member of the clergy or living with the pastor can put undue stress on someone. The participants of this study explained being held to a higher standard than others within the Christian church. The participants detailed being verbally judged more harshly by their parents and members of the congregation. Guilt/shame was one of the two categories that all nine participants experienced. I believe that amongst those whose parents were pastors, their guilt and shame mainly stemmed from the additional pressure put on them in adolescence.

Another pervasive issue that I recognized was that negative relationships were often prolonged due to the Christian belief that divorce is not permitted. Many participants detailed how they, their parents, or their siblings have been pressured to stay in bad relationships due to Christian beliefs. The participants stated that if they had premarital intercourse with someone, they were made to believe that they needed to marry that person. Further, if the participant was married to someone who displayed toxic traits, they were made to believe that God looked down upon divorce.

Familial or relational tactics can be used as a means of enacting emotional spiritual abuse against victims. This familial or relational strategy can also lead to subsequent traumatic stressors that arise from the six categories. Guilt or shame, isolation, and fear can all be used as secondary strategies by perpetrators. When a

strategy is used secondarily, it is used indirectly through the means of another previously identified category or theme, which will be discussed in the Implications section of this chapter.

Intimacy

The strategy titled intimacy includes only two categories: celibacy and puberty. Although the intimacy theme has the smallest number of categories, it has the highest participant response rate of all of the themes. In fact, celibacy was identified as a category that all nine participants experienced. At the same time, five participants experienced emotional spiritual abuse through the category of puberty.

Participants noted that puberty was the time frame in which emotional spiritual abuse was the most prevalent in their lives. Although the methods by which emotional spiritual abuse was perpetrated varied amongst participants, those who identified puberty as significant noted that their sexual education was discussed at a time when they were not interested in the opposite gender. Additionally, celibacy was obligatory for all participants regardless of gender.

Several participants noted that these expectations surrounding intimacy hindered their ability to form healthy relationships as adults. Other participants identified using intimacy as a form of retaliation against those who committed emotional spiritual abuse against them. As the theme of intimacy was the most prevalent, I believe that the timing of purity culture is essential for positive effects. Otherwise, purity culture could lead to negative views of intimacy. The “right” timing should be researched further to educate Christian parents and caregivers on the factors that could indicate a child is emotionally

adept for that level of discussion. Lastly, the research could identify proper neutral language for such conversations that is less likely to be interpreted as emotionally abusive.

Satanic

Another tactic that is used to commit emotional spiritual abuse is called “Satanic.” The satanic strategy contains only two categories: hell and demonic. Of the eight strategies and tactics that I identified in this study, satanic is one of the most self-explanatory. Further, the category hell was one of the top ten categories based on the participants' transcripts. During the interviews, participants recalled their abusers threatening they would go to hell to get them to behave in a specific manner. The participants also detailed situations in which they did not behave according to the perpetrators' standards, and either themselves or their actions would be called demonic. There was also an intersection between the transcripts of the participants who noted both the satanic strategy and those who identified as LGBTQIA+. All five of those participants contributed to one or more of the categories within the satanic strategy.

Biblical Literature

The strategy called Biblical literature includes three categories: Bible stories, gospel songs or podcasts, and Scripture. Biblical literature is unique in that it uses media and entertainment to abuse victims. Scripture is considered a form of print media, and in this category, it is used in the correct context, unlike the category “misusing Scripture.” Additionally, I identified Scripture as one of the top ten categories of the 37. Participants detailed that Biblical literature was used as a form of educational correction when their

actions did not align with what their perpetrators believed. Several were made to listen to podcasts, gospel songs, or had Biblical stories and Scripture articulated to them. In turn, the participants would often correct their behavior based on what the presented Biblical literature depicted.

When reviewing transcripts, Biblical literature appeared to lessen the participants' confidence in their decision-making. They seemed to waver and question their own decisions, which planted seeds of trauma within their upbringings. As some participants stood their ground, others internalized not being fully educated with Biblical literature to stand against their abusers. Understanding how the participants coped with emotional spiritual abuse could allow child advocacy workers, investigators, social workers, and policymakers to understand the differing behaviors of abused children. Potentially, children who present as angry or combative and children who are present as withdrawn are both subjected to abuse.

Limitations of the Study

During the study, I wanted to ensure that I limited my biases throughout. To execute this, I researched the different denominations of Christianity and determined what factors made the denominations similar and different. I then selected the larger denominations to make certain that my participant pool would not be too narrow. I believe that this helped me to recruit my participants for the study quickly. If I had narrowed the participant pool to only one denomination, it would have been more difficult to find viable participants.

Another method that I changed from the proposal was the method in which pseudonyms were given to the participants. Initially, I wanted to assign the participants pseudonyms, but at the recommendation of the IRB, I decided to allow each participant to choose their pseudonyms. The changes were easy to implement in the recruitment phase. Asking each participant to choose their pseudonym would reduce the chances of me selecting a pseudonym based on my unconscious biases.

At the start of recruiting, as described above, I noticed several people expressed interest in the study while using deception. I immediately reached out to the IRB to determine the best method to move forward and maintain the trustworthiness of the study. I changed the pre-screening phone call to a pre-screening video, with the camera feature on but not recording. I also asked each participant to present a valid form of identification from the U.S. Prior to conducting the pre-screening, I edited my response email (see Appendix B) to assure participants that no personally identifiable information would be recorded. I found that this more thorough method of pre-screening assisted with the trustworthiness of the study. Further, it allowed trust and rapport to be built between the participants who were selected for this study and me. This rapport ultimately assisted with the participants' willingness to openly share their stories with me during the interview.

Finally, member checks helped to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data that was analyzed from this study. All nine of the participants in this study conducted a member check with me following the data analysis. During the member checks, we discussed the categories found within their transcripts based on my interpretations. Each

participant had an opportunity to refute, concur, and add any categories they felt they had experienced. The participants were then allowed to dictate to me the context for each category they added. None of the participants disagreed with my interpretations, and a few wanted to add things to categories they felt they experienced but forgot to mention during their interview. The methods that I used throughout the data collection and analysis of this study solidified the trustworthiness of the data. The implementation of a more intentional pre-screening process, allowing participants to select their pseudonyms, and conducting member checks with all participants were driving factors in the integrity of this study and the data analysis.

Recommendations

The research matter for this study could continually be improved upon. Four recommendations that I believe would be helpful for future research are expanding the number of participants, conducting a mixed methods study, researching the strategies and tactics of emotional spiritual abuse that are used in other religions outside of Christianity, and researching spiritual abuse within Christianity [not simply the emotional/psychological abuse]. This study is just the start to fully understand what emotional spiritual abuse is and how it can present.

The first recommendation that I would make for future researchers is to conduct a qualitative study with a larger number of participants. My study included a higher number of participants for a qualitative dissertation research study. In qualitative research, data saturation is fundamental, and although my study had saturation, I would have liked to hear about more participants' experiences with emotional spiritual abuse. I

believe that data saturation is essential, but to fully understand the phenomenology of the participants' experiences, the researcher would need to hear about more encounters. The participants of this study came from different areas of the U.S. and grew up practicing under different denominations. The participants had many things in common, but I found that hearing about the most egregious instances of emotional spiritual abuse is where actual phenomenology displayed itself. The only proper way to understand a phenomenon is by hearing more than a handful of stories.

Changing the research methodology is the second recommendation for future researchers who want to recreate this study. During my analysis of this study's data, I easily noticed patterns. I believe that if this study is recreated, it would be beneficial to understand the data statistically. As I had a small number of participants, it was not extremely hard to identify which categories and themes were most responsive based on my findings. However, with a larger number of participants and the potential to identify more themes within the eight strategies and tactics, it would be easy to make errors in data analysis. The use of mixed methods methodology would be perfect to handle a larger data set.

I recommend that future researchers expand this current study outside of Christianity. This study helped to identify eight strategies and tactics that are used to perpetrate emotional spiritual abuse within Christianity. Future research could seek to understand if the same eight strategies are used within other religions? Are there more or fewer? Are there any additional categories that could be added within the 37 identified in this study? I do not believe that emotional spiritual abuse is limited to only Christianity,

but as I discussed in the literature review, there is not much research on the topic. Additionally, the research that does exist on the topic uses different terminology and definitions. Researchers should take language from studies that are already published and expand upon them. This research study is a good base to expand upon for more understanding of emotional spiritual abuse.

The final recommendation that I would make to future researchers who would like to expand upon this study is to research other forms of spiritual abuse within Christianity. This study only sought to understand the emotional and psychological abuse that occurs under the guise of Christianity. However, spiritual abuse does include sexual, financial, and physical abuse. A study on spiritual abuse within Christianity, outside of only emotional and psychological, could provide further insight into other strategies and tactics used. Are emotional spiritual abuse tactics the same as the tactics used for other forms of spiritual abuse? Future research will help to answer questions that are seemingly simple, but still unknown based on literature.

The recommendations that I made will not only expand the literature field of emotional spiritual abuse within Christianity but the entire concept of spiritual abuse within other religions. Additionally, the recommendations can expand the literature to include other forms of spiritual abuse within all religions. Likewise, having solid statistics on a larger pool of participants would provide further backing to help implement change within our society.

Implications

Walden University holds social change in high regard. Walden aims to empower change-makers, build community, and elevate social change outcomes (Walden University, 2025). The findings of this study may promote social change by providing insight on a victim-centered approach when working with individuals who have experienced emotional spiritual abuse. The strategies and tactics that were discovered in this study will first be of benefit to those who may be experiencing emotional spiritual abuse. Access to proper information to identify spiritual abuse is minimal, based on my literature review. This study provides that knowledge to victims to help them understand what they are experiencing. Identification could relate to a bystander or third-party situation as well. When a person can correctly identify emotional spiritual abuse, it may be easier for them to step in and stop the abuse or for them to articulate those experiences in a formal report should they choose to make one.

This study can also affect positive social change within family structures. Often, negative traits are passed down through generations and can cause intrafamilial trauma if never corrected. The strategies and tactics provide families with data from real experiences that detail how emotional spiritual abuse can inadvertently be perpetrated because it is a family tradition to speak a certain way. Parents can protect the ecological systems that have the most effect on a child's development to ensure negativity is not being spread emotionally or psychologically.

Independently, knowledge is power for victims, families, and potentially someone who is a bystander to emotional spiritual abuse. Providing names for the different

strategies, tactics, and categories will empower victims. Knowledge will also become a powerful tool for bystanders and families to help protect children from emotional spiritual abuse. Prevention is also vital for the future generations of children.

Organizationally, this research will assist churches and those responsible for handling cases of abuse by educating them on the differing experiences of victims. Many people may believe that spiritual abuse presents in one manner or within one specific denomination. However, this study supports the idea that spiritual abuse is not only physical but emotional and psychological as well. The participants of this study depict how differently spiritual abuse can present and how group thinking allows it to continue and spread through families, churches, denominations, and religions.

Churches can use this study as a step in fostering a culture that does not condone the strategies and tactics used to manipulate or control individuals under the guise of Christianity. The pastoral staff and members of the clergy should understand the categories that pertain to them and avoid using them as mechanisms for abuse. Professionals with jobs that permit them to handle abuse victims can use this study to implement social change as well. Some careers that stand out are child advocacy, child protective services, cops, investigators, social workers, teachers, and pediatricians. All the individuals mentioned above should familiarize themselves with the signs that emotional spiritual abuse could be a primary or secondary factor in a situation where abuse is present.

A great example of using this study for positive social change would be: In an abuse case where fasting leading to starvation were identified as the mechanisms of death

for a child. A knowledgeable professional could help to recognize that although homicide was the manner of death, starvation due to spiritual abuse would be the mechanism of death. This additional factor may not be the primary factor, but just as alcohol plays a role in abuse, and is noted on medical examination reports, so should spiritual abuse. I would recommend professionals seek to identify instances of spiritual abuse within their current abuse cases. This additional factor could be mentioned in court cases and potentially lead to better justice and resources for victims.

Having an additional understanding of the strategies and tactics used to commit emotional spiritual abuse can help churches and professionals. These professionals are often the people who help enact new policies. The policies would have research to support them and could potentially lead to further societal benefit by creating harsher punishments for offenders who commit emotional spiritual abuse. The more data there is to exemplify the detrimental effects that emotional or psychological abuse has on those who experience it, the better chance of positive social change for victims.

Conducting this research study showed me the effects that it had on the participants. I could hear their voices tremble when they recounted their experiences during the interviews. I saw the excitement in their faces during member checks when they realized that I was able to capture their stories within the data analysis. Having spoken to multiple victims in my job as a special victim's investigator, I believe that empirically, this research has shown me that emotional and psychological abuse affects victims just as physical abuse does.

I noticed intersections between categories and themes throughout this study. Only 37 of the 71 categories could be considered strategies or tactics. However, the other data is not useless, and I believe it speaks to more questions that this research did not intend to answer. I hope to one day speak about these findings in my future research. Overall, I believe that this research will assist Walden in their mission to enact social change by supporting proper identification, educating victims, professionals, families, and religious organizations. This research is foundational in opening the door for new victim-centered policies. Society will benefit from understanding the different strategies and tactics used to commit emotional spiritual abuse under the guise of Christianity.

Conclusion

Emotional and psychological abuse under the guise of Christianity is a phenomenon that has not been well studied. This research sought to understand the phenomenon of emotional spiritual abuse from the victims' perspective. Nine voluntary participants shared their experiences to help the researcher identify the strategies and tactics used to perpetrate emotional spiritual abuse. The victims represented the United States of America and five large denominations within Christianity. The analysis produced thirty-seven categories that were grouped into eight larger themes of clearly distinguished strategies and tactics used against victims. With knowledge of how emotional spiritual abuse is perpetrated against victims, the field of forensic psychology can now begin to analyze more aspects of spiritual abuse.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyers

Approved Physical Flyer

Interview study seeks those who experienced emotional spiritual abuse in Christian families

There is a new study about strategies and tactics of emotional spiritual abuse used on some people who were raised in a Christian household. The results of this study could help policymakers, law enforcement personnel, and victim advocates better understand and help future victims. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences.

For this study, *emotional spiritual abuse* is defined as using a system of religious attitudes, beliefs, or practices to commit non-physical abuse, including verbal threats, insults, degradation, humiliation, instilling fear, or lowering the self-esteem of the victim. *Family* is defined as immediate members, members that you have a close relationship with, members that you have lived with or have had immediate proximity to, including unrelated caregivers and adopted parental figures.

About the study:

- A 1-2 hour Zoom interview that will be audio recorded (no video recording)
- You will receive a $20 Amazon E-gift card after the study for your time
- To protect your privacy, the participants select a pseudonym, and the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

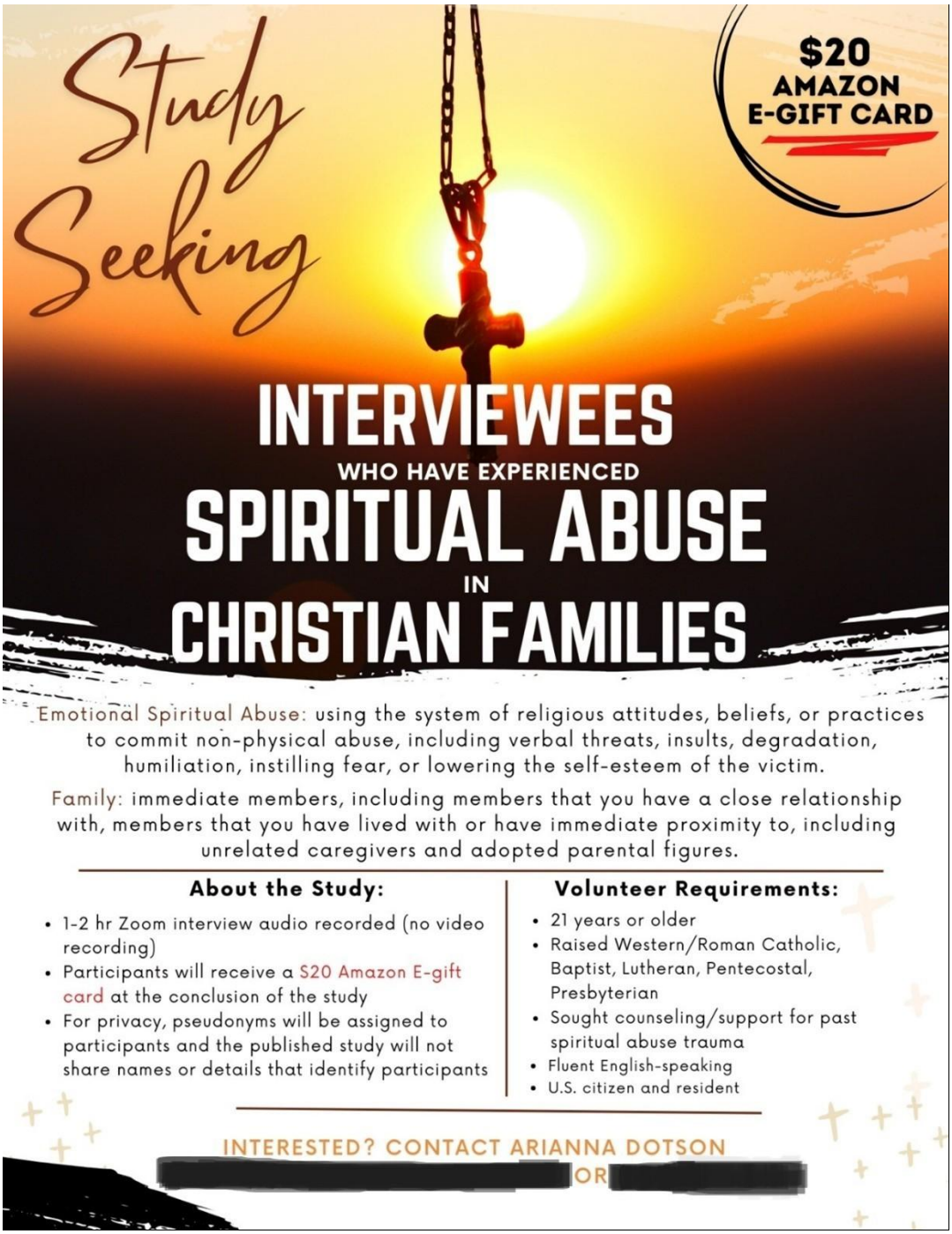
Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 21 years old or older
- Raised as one of the five listed denominations of Christianity: Western/Roman Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Presbyterian
- Sought counseling/support for past spiritual abuse trauma
- Fluent English-speaking
- U.S. citizen and resident

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Arianna Dotson, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during January/February 2024.

To confidentially volunteer, contact the researcher:
Arianna Dotson

Approved Digital Flyer



Appendix B: Response Email With Pre-screening Requirements

Dear future participant,

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in my study. I'd like to set up a video chat to properly meet, ensure you meet all the requirements, and discuss the next steps and payment. It should take no more than 5-10 minutes.

To ensure the study's validity, you will need to have your camera on to verify no person is pre-screened multiple times, and some form of U.S. identification.

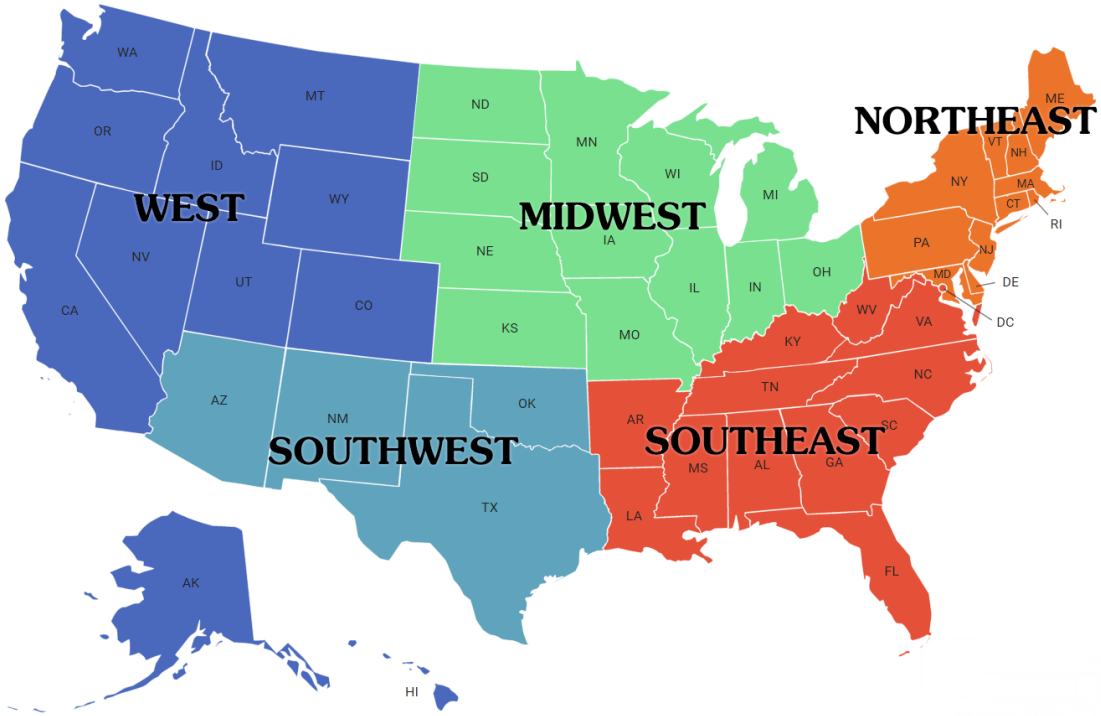
PLEASE NOTE: I will NOT record any of your private information from your ID card.

If you'd like to schedule a time for the pre-screening chat, please respond to this email with your soonest availability.

Thank you,

Arianna Dotson

Appendix C: Map of U.S. Regions



Map of the U.S. with 5 regions, www.fla-shop.com

Appendix D: Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the religious practices of your family when you wre growing up?
2. Were any common Christian beliefs [fasting, abstinence/celibacy, gender/familial roles] used to manipulate or control you?
3. Do you believe that any of those religious practices met the standard of emotional/psychological abuse?
4. Tell me about a situation where Christian beliefs were used to emotionally/psychologically abuse you?
    a. Who committed this act of spiritual abuse against you?
    b. Were any Biblical Scriptures or phrases used to spiritually abuse you?
    c. Can you speak a little about the outcome of the situation?
5. Are you able to recall any other situations where spirituality was used as a guise to emotionally/psychologically abuse you?
    a. Who committed this act of spiritual abuse against you?
    b. Were any Biblical Scriptures or phrases used to spiritually abuse you?
    c. Can you speak a little about the outcome of the situation?
6. Do you believe that any other common Christian beliefs [fasting, abstinence/celibacy, gender/familial roles] used to manipulate/control you?
    a. Which belief was used to control/manipulate you?
    b. How was this control/manipulation perpetrated against you?
7. How often would you say you were spiritually abused growing up?
    a. Was it weekly, monthly, rare?

b. Did it occur during a specific time in your life?

    i. What time period(s)?

c. Was it event based?

    i. What type of event(s)?

8. At what point in your life did you realize what you were experiencing was spiritual abuse?

    a. How did that affect you?

    b. Did you seek therapyor support for your trauma?

9. Do you currently practice any religion?

    a. Yes:

        i. Which religion?

        ii. [Same denomination] What was your thought process in staying in the same denomination that you were raised in?

        iii. [Christianity, but different denomination] What about this new Christian denomination do you prefer over the one that you were raised in?

        iv. [Other] What age did you stop practicing Christianity?

            1. What age did you begin practicing [new religion]?

    b. No:

        i. What age did you divest from Christianity?

        ii. What was your thought process in divesting from Christianity entirely?

iii. Have you ever considered practicing Christianity with healthier boundaries?

iv. Have you ever considered practicing another religion?

10. How do you believe spiritual abuse has impacted your view on Christianity?
11. How do you believe spiritual abuse has impacted your view on religion overall?
12. Is there anything else that you would like to share that you think would be helpful for this study?