Sexual grooming processes carried out by offending rabbis toward religious men and their families

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research regarding sexual grooming in cases of sexual abuse by religious authorities (SARA) is limited, despite the assumption that many SARA cases go unreported. To the best of our knowledge there is no research regarding sexual grooming committed by rabbis who sexually abused Israeli Jewish religious men.

Objective: The present study examined how Israeli religious SARA victims and their family members experienced sexual grooming carried out by offending rabbis.

Methods: Based on a constructivist-phenomenological paradigm, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 formerly and/or currently still religious men who had been sexually abused by rabbis in their adolescence, and 14 of their family members.

Results: In comparison to the Sexual Grooming Model (SGM), findings showcased that unlike other kinds of sex offenders, offending rabbis incorporated religious elements throughout the grooming process. Additionally, offending rabbis used different grooming tactics than did Catholic priests (e.g., offering joint religious studies with victims' family members; using religion to justify sexual discourse and contact).

Conclusions: The findings expand the SGM, enable a more complex understanding of the grooming processes in SARA, and emphasize the importance of further research focused on increasing the ability to use the SGM for detecting and preventing grooming behaviors.

1. Introduction

1.1. Sexual abuse by religious authorities

Sexual abuse by religious authorities (SARA; e.g., Stevens et al., 2019) is a widespread phenomenon (The John Jay College research team, 2004). Most data regarding SARA focus on cases from the Catholic Church in the U.S. (Terry, 2015) and in other countries (e.g., Dressing et al., 2021). It should be assumed, however, that SARA exists in other religious groups as well (McGraw et al., 2019). There are very few empirical studies addressing SARA carried out by rabbis in Jewish communities (e.g., Krinkin et al., 2022; Lusky-Weisrose et al., 2022), and many researchers have indicated the need for more research regarding SARA in a variety of religious contexts (e.g., Rashid & Barron, 2019).

The term sexual grooming was coined during the 1980s (Lanning, 2018) and refers to the manipulative tactics that a person who seeks to commit sexual abuse might use to lure victims into the abusive situation, to obtain their cooperation during present and future

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abuse events, and to reduce the likelihood of exposure of the abuse by others or by the victims themselves (McAlinden, 2006; Plummer, 2018). Sexual grooming is estimated to occur in about half of sexual child abuse cases (Canter et al., 1998), and it is a significant component in them (Williams, 2015). However, researchers have indicated a lack of empirical research regarding sexual grooming (Winters, Kaylor, & Jeglic, 2022). Most of the few existing empirical studies are based on an analysis of various documents (e.g., analysis of correspondence related to lawsuits) (Spraitz & Bowen, 2021), and to date only a few qualitative studies that include interviews with victims have been identified (e.g., Williams, 2015). In addition, despite researchers' agreement that in most cases the abusive cleric also enacts grooming behaviors toward victims' family members (Plummer, 2018), we found no empirical qualitative studies investigating family members of SARA victims about their grooming process experience. As such, in the current study qualitative interviews were conducted for the first time (to the best of our knowledge) with both male SARA victims and their family members.

Although differences between sexual abuse committed by different offenders and offending clergy have been found (e.g., McGraw et al., 2019; Stevens et al., 2019), research regarding sexual grooming processes in SARA cases is scarce (Spraitz et al., 2018) and has mostly focused on samples from the Catholic Church. Research about grooming among non-Catholic religious authority figures is almost non-existent and is mainly based on case studies (e.g., in the Protestant denomination or in cults such as "the Children of God") (Raine & Kent, 2019). Despite the fact that significant differences have been found between religions (e.g., Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015), such as differences regarding the nature and frequency of the relationship between religious Jewish men and a rabbinical figure compared to that between Christian men and their priest (Lazar & Bjorck, 2008, 2016). It would be reasonable to assume that the frequent and almost daily relationship with the rabbi may influence grooming processes toward religious Jewish victims and their families. Due to such differences, there is a need to examine grooming processes in different cultures and religions (e.g., Spraitz & Bowen, 2019; Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022). The current study seeks to fill these gaps by examining, for the first time, sexual grooming processes in SARA cases within the Jewish religious context.

1.2. Sexual grooming

Several decades ago, researchers changed the commonly held understanding that most of sexual offenders were strangers to the victims and showed that the vast majority of sexual offenders were in fact not strangers to them (Snyder, 2000). Rather, they could be, for example, a family member (Finkelhor & Shattuck, 2012), a doctor (Mulvihill, 2022), or an employer (Sojo et al., 2016). In some cases, the acquaintance between offender and victim occurs as a result of a sexual grooming process (Winters et al., 2020; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). Many researchers have addressed the question of how to define sexual grooming. Winters, Kaylor, and Jeglic (2022) reviewed 13 different definitions and suggested defining it as follows:

> Sexual grooming is the deceptive process used by sexual abusers to facilitate sexual contact with a minor while simultaneously avoiding detection. Prior to the commission of the sexual abuse, the would-be sexual abuser may select a victim, gain access to and isolate the minor, develop trust with the minor and often their guardians, community, and youth-serving institutions, and desensitize the minor to sexual content and physical contact. Post-abuse, the offender may use maintenance strategies on the victim to facilitate future sexual abuse and/or to prevent disclosure.

> (p. 933)

The Sexual Grooming Model (SGM; Winters et al., 2020; Winters & Jeglic, 2017) identifies five stages and over forty tactics that assemble the complex process of sexual grooming carried out in the lead-up to as well as during the sexual abuse. Sexual grooming stages among offending priests have been found to be similar to those of other sexual offenders as detailed in the SGM, with the exception of several differences in the first and fifth stages (Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022). The five steps will be detailed here to illustrate the differences and similarities between offending priests and other types of offenders.

1. **Victim selection.** In non-religious abuse cases, perpetrators' selection of potential victims has been found to be related to victims' perceived vulnerability as a result of family circumstances (e.g., single family household/lack of parental supervision) or emotional/psychological factors (e.g., lack of self-confidence/low-self-esteem/lonely) (Winters & Jeglic, 2017; Winters et al., 2020). In a large study regarding abusive priests no specific characteristics of the chosen victims were found. However, it was found that most victims did not come from single-parent families, were not fostered, and did not suffer from a lack of parental supervision (Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022). In addition, no studies examining priests' use of identifying psychological vulnerabilities for the purpose of selecting a potential victim were found.

2. **Gaining access and isolation.** Abusive priests gain access to potential victims through a variety of tactics similar to those of different types of abusers, for example by working in youth organizations (Winters & Jeglic, 2017). Moreover, a review of 10,667 archival files concerning accusations of sexual abuse by clergy revealed that over two-thirds of offending clergy first contacted the victims at church or at church-organized events (Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022). Another tactic that was found to be common to both abusive priests and to other abusers was getting close to and socializing with the victim's family and manipulating them in order to gain access to the victim (Spraitz et al., 2018; Spraitz & Bowen, 2019). After gaining access to potential victims, the abuser uses different ways to isolate them from their family and friends. Tactics such as inviting victims to go on joint trips or to spend the night at the abuser's house have been found to be used (Burmeister & Spraitz, 2018).

3. **Trust development.** In order to gain the trust and obedience of potential victims, priests, like other abusers, use tactics of giving compliments and offering expressions of love, as well as bestowing upon victims preferential treatment and gifts such as money,

sweets, and valuable objects. Also, in some cases, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and access to pornographic materials are provided, as well as payment of speeding tickets (Burmeister & Spraitz, 2018; Mignon et al., 2017). Also, in order to build trust with the families of potential victims, abusers try to contact parents and siblings and befriend them. They visit their homes frequently and even become housemates, thereby causing family members to perceive the priest as a benevolent figure in the life of the potential victim (Spraitz et al., 2018), resulting in reduced the supervision on their actions and the likelihood that the abusive actions will be revealed (Burmeister & Spraitz, 2018).

It should be emphasized that the religious and social status of the cleric gives him power and control over his congregants, both young and old (Raine & Kent, 2019). The priest, who is perceived as God's representative, is admired, and congregants feel honored by the fact that he pays attention to and invests time in them (Mcgraw et al., 2019; Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022). Parents with a child in a close relationship with the cleric feel honored and encourage their child to persevere and invest in this relationship. Sometimes the parents themselves turn to the priest with a request to get assistance and guidance with their child (Raine & Kent, 2019). As a result, abusive priests have less difficulty than other abusers in their attempts to prove to the victims and their families that they are trustworthy (Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022).

4. **Desensitizing the potential victim to sexual content and physical contact.** At this stage, the abuser integrates sexual discourse into the relationship, may expose the victim to pornography or create situations of physical contact in the form of tickling, hugging, or touching that is perceived as accidental, all with the purpose of normalizing the sexual content and contact and getting the victim accustomed to it. Gradually the abuser increases and worsens the sexual content and physical contact. This stage has been found to be similar among abusive priests and other abusers (Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022).
5. **Post-abuse maintenance behaviors.** After the sexual abuse occurs, the abuser performs a variety of tactics aimed at allowing the continuation of the abuse and the prevention of its disclosure. Among the tactics identified were casting responsibility for the sexual acts on the victim and making statements expressing love for the victim, as well as the use of threats of punishment or promises of reward in exchange for the victim's silence. However, among abusive priests, there was not much use of threatening tactics toward the victims (Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022). It is possible that the control priests have over their congregants as a result of their religious and social status makes the need for threats superfluous (Spraitz et al., 2018; Spraitz & Bowen, 2019). Priests mainly tend to use tactics of blaming the victim (Burmeister & Spraitz, 2018) and religious manipulation (Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022), such as quoting religious texts in order to legitimize their actions or claiming that the sexual interaction is part of the religious education process or personal development of the victim (Raine & Kent, 2019).

Most research regarding sexual grooming focuses on theoretical writing, and researchers have indicated a paucity of empirical research in this field (Winters, Kaylor, & Jeglic, 2022). In addition, the few empirical studies that do exist are based on an analysis of personnel files of accused priests or an analysis of correspondence related to lawsuits regarding this issue (e.g., Spraitz & Bowen, 2021; Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022). Also, despite researchers' agreement that in most cases the abusive cleric also enacts grooming behaviors toward victims' family members (Plummer, 2018), we found no studies in which the grooming process experiences of family members of SARA victims were examined. In the current study we sought to fill these gaps and examine these grooming processes for the first time through interviews both with religious Israeli men who were sexually abused by rabbis during their adolescence, as well as with parents, siblings, and spouses of religious male SARA victims.

1.3. Research context: religious Jewish society in Israel

This study focused on Jewish Israeli religious men who were sexually abused by a rabbi, as well as their family members. About 30 % of the Jewish population in Israel are religious and are either from the National-religious sector or from the Ultraorthodox sector (Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Despite significant differences between these two groups, there are nevertheless several meaningful similarities between them. Among other things, both groups tend to live in separate residential areas in communities with social codes, and they send their children to specific religious schools that educate them in accordance with their religious worldview. A rabbinical authority figure is frequently present in their lives (Lazar & Bjorck, 2008, 2016). These groups are characterized by conservatism and feel a degree of obligation to observe religious practices, commandments, and rituals (Efrati, 2019).

Several studies on sexually abused male victims from the Israeli Ultraorthodox sector were found (e.g., Lusky-Weisrose, 2021). However, as far as we know, only one study included sexually abused men from the national-religious sector (Krinkin et al., 2022), and we uncovered no empirical research regarding any religious Israeli family members of sexual abuse victims. As stated, these two populations were included in the current study. The frequent and almost daily contact that Jewish men have with their rabbis, as previously mentioned, distinguishes them from Christian congregants (Lazar & Bjorck, 2008, 2016) and might be an element that affects the grooming processes toward victims and their families in the religious Jewish community. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to examine the experiences of formerly and/or currently still religious Israeli male victims of SARA and their families regarding the grooming processes carried out by the offending rabbi. The main research questions that guided this study were: How do participants perceive the formation of the relationship with the abusive rabbi? What grooming elements were included throughout the abusive relationship?

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

A criterion-based purposeful sampling approach (Creswell, 1998) was used to recruit participants to the study. The goal was to obtain information-rich cases that would maximally serve the study's purpose (Patton, 1990). Inclusion criteria were: 1) men who had been sexually abused by male religious authority during their adolescence, 2) the sexual abuse included at a minimum the abusive rabbi touching the victim's private parts or making the victim touch the rabbi's private parts, 3) men who at the time of the abuse were part of Israel's Jewish religious population, and, 4) parents, siblings, and spouses of men who met criteria 1, 2 and 3, but not necessarily of the men who participated in this study. Participant recruitment was carried out in several ways. First, a call for participation was published via social media networks. Second, rabbis and therapists who were known in their public activity to be engaged in helping sexually abused religious men were approached. Finally, snowball sampling was used; that is, participants were asked to refer other potential participants to the study.

Recruitment proved to be extremely difficult given the great concern on the part of the victims and their family members regarding being exposed, as well as their fear of the emotional consequences that would result from participating in this study. The recruitment process lasted about six months. Overall, 35 men who were abused by rabbis, and over 30 of their family members were approached with a request to participate in this study. Finally, 16 victims and 14 family members who met the study criteria were identified.

2.1.1. Victims

Sixteen of the participants were abused by various rabbis during a time period, overall, of more than three decades. The age of these participants at the time of the interviews ranged from 27 to 53; the age at which the onset of the abuse began ranged from 13 to 19; and the duration of the abuse ranged from one abusive interaction to a sexually abusive relationship spanning more than a decade and including dozens of sexual interactions. As mentioned, all male victims participating in this study were religious at the time of the abuse, but at the time of the interviews they defined themselves as follows: 10 of the 16 participants defined themselves as religious; four defined themselves as secular; and two had challenges defining themselves. Ten of the participants were married to women and had children; three were divorced; and three participants were single.

2.1.2. Family members

The 14 family members who participated in this study included seven sisters, four brothers, two mothers, and one wife. Among the 11 brothers and sisters, seven were older than the abused brother, and four were younger than him. The age of these participants at the time of the interview ranged from 29 to 75. All 14 participants were religious at the time of the abuse, and at the time of the interviews one participant defined himself as secular. Three of the family members participated in this study without their abused family member participating.

2.2. Ethical approval

The study was approved by the ethics committee of Bar-Ilan University (Confirmation number: 32104). Each participant was presented with an explanation about the study, its goals, its potential benefits, and implications, as well as the researchers' contact information. No incentives were given to the participants. The researcher strived for full transparency regarding his own professional and religious identity, mentioning to participants that he was an academic, a social worker, and a religious male. The voluntary nature of the study was made clear to the participants. Given the highly sensitive nature of the study, all participants were presented with a list of telephone numbers of designated treatment centers that were prepared in advance to receive calls from the study participants. In studies that include several family members or spouses, extra caution must be taken in order to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). Therefore, it was made clear to all participants that no information from their interviews would be passed on to family members who participated in the research and vice versa. All participants gave their consent to the researchers' use of the interview materials, and any identifying details about participants, offending rabbis, or place or time of the abuse were disguised.

2.2.1. Data collection

All in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out by the first author. The interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants and were approximately 90 min in duration. The interviews included several topics, among them the victim's and family members' relationship with the offending rabbi, the abuse-exposing process, and the consequences of the abuse for the mental health and religiosity of the victims/family members. The current research focused on understanding the grooming processes carried out by the abusive rabbis toward the victims and toward their families. Questions such as the following were asked: Can you describe your acquaintance with the rabbi? What was he for you, your family, and for your friends? Did and how did the rabbi explain his physical actions?

2.2.2. Data analysis

Content analysis was performed using the constructivist-dialectical analysis method. According to the dialectical point of view, observing a higher level of abstraction allows for an understanding of seemingly contradictory processes appearing in the text and enables the organization of these processes into models and the creation of new theories. The process stems from active reflection (Ben-

Ari & Enosh, 2019; Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2016) and a "sense of differentness" (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011; Enosh et al., 2008), and includes an active awareness of contrasts and contradictions, inconsistencies, and incongruities. The analysis method consists of several stages (Enosh, 2019), and nine stages of data analysis were carried out in this research (for review see Krinkin et al., 2022).

Trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was established using an audit trail and two types of triangulations (Creswell & Miller, 2000). First, triangulation across data sources was used, collecting information from individuals who had been SARA victims at different ages and had been abused by different rabbis, as well as collecting information from different family members. This diversity increased the credibility level of the research. In addition, we used investigator triangulation. A religious researcher studying social processes in religious communities is in a complex situation that affects both his religiosity and his identity as a researcher. On the one hand, he has a number of advantages over those who come from outside this world (such as understanding nuances and unique terminology, access to participants, etc.). On the other hand, he may run into difficulties when he encounters content that constitutes a challenge to his religious worldview. In addition, he may have difficulty presenting findings that represent his community or faith in an unfavorable manner (Gemara, 2020). Due to the need to reduce bias, researchers suggest holding an "insider-outsider" discourse between an "internal" researcher who belongs to the culture being studied and an "external" researcher to the culture. This discourse will cause an increase of the research credibility level (Berger, 2015).

The first researcher in this study is a religious man and the second researcher is a secular woman who together analyzed the data. They maintained an ongoing dialogue throughout the analysis process with regard to possible interpretation and biases, and they reached common agreements regarding the meanings of the data. In addition, throughout the writing process, additional researchers and research students were involved. They provided additional opinions regarding the data analyzing process. This group of researchers who carried out the triangulation process, included men and women, religious and secular, thus enabling both a reduction of various interpretation biases and a reduction of reactivity. Also, member checking was used, by using open-ended questions, and asking for clarifications as well as examples when necessary.

Participants made various statements regarding the interviewer's religiosity; some claimed that due to his religiosity he would be able to understand them, and some claimed that his religiosity would make it difficult for him to understand their experience. The group of additional researchers who were used for investigator triangulation included religious and secular women and men. The use of this diverse group of individuals allowed the uncovering and reduction of reactivity, which was caused by the fact that the interviewer was a religious male.

3. Findings

The findings from this study were formulated into four themes: the status and role of the abusing rabbi; victim selection and isolation; desensitizing processes; and post-abuse maintenance behaviors.

3.1. The status and role of the abusing rabbi

Almost all research participants, both victims and family members – described the abusing rabbis as charismatic figures and as having a high social status in the communities in which they served. Some of the participants emphasized that their admiration, and that of those around them, toward the rabbi stemmed from the religious qualities attributed to the rabbi, as described by Roni who was sexually abused by his rabbi at the age of 18:

> He was our idol, we admired and respected him very much… when we danced everyone wanted to hold his hand in the circle of dancers and those who succeeded got so excited… he was the Torah itself as far as we were concerned.

Tomer, who began being abused at the age of 17, said that his mother also had a similar attitude toward the rabbi: "I remember my mother saying that he is the Messiah." Indeed, most victims said that among their close family the rabbi was seen as an admired and benevolent figure, as described by Eric who began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 13: "He was the important neighbor. You saw him walking on Shabbat surrounded by yeshiva boys he hosted in his home, and you saw the great respect my father had for him. He would do whatever he told him to."

The rabbis' social and religious status was not, however, just a passive platform that made it easier for them to carry out various grooming tactics. The current study findings show that the rabbis employed two active tactics in order to increase the community's – and within it, the victims', and their family members' – admiration for and trust in them. First, many victims said that the rabbis created an inconsistent and confusing experience, ranging between closeness and distance, with their students and community members. Some of the rabbis created an atmosphere in which it was difficult to contact and receive attention from them, causing many people to stand in line to meet them, as David, who began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 16, described: "It was very difficult to reach him, really not easy. Not every time I wanted to talk to him was it possible. I had to make an effort." On the other hand, David said there were times when the rabbi suddenly initiated contact and would call him out of the blue. Another facet of this tactic was expressed in the words of Eitan, whose rabbi began abusing him at the age of 17: "When we would come to shake his hand there were times when he would look you in the eye, and then there were times when he didn't look at you at all. He was playing with us because he knew everyone wanted him to look at them."

A second tactic identified in participants' words was the rabbi's use of discourse on spiritual and mystical topics that were incomprehensible to the victims, creating a certain aura around him:

> The rabbi would talk about all kinds of spiritual things that need to be done. He would tell me to read all kinds of verses from the Bible and in the meantime he would close his eyes and mumble. It was, Wow! I felt that I was helping the rabbi to do holy and important things, helping him to save people.
>
> (Nathan, began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 14)

The findings show that the status and role of the offending rabbi constitutes a stage that stands on its own in the sexual grooming process. The status and role of the abusing rabbi forms a platform for grooming the victims and their family members, increasing their trust and deepening the relationship with the offending rabbi.

3.1.1. Grooming the victim to develop trust and deepen the relationship

Findings of the current study show that the rabbis' role allows them easy access to potential victims, gives them a physical place to commit the sexual abuse with less fear of its discovery, and facilitates the ability to groom victims and their family members. All 16 abused men participating in this study said that they first met the offending rabbi as part of the rabbi's religious work: either as a rabbi in the yeshiva where they studied or as the rabbi of their neighborhood or community in which they lived. Also, 15 of the victims reported that at least one incident of sexual abuse took place within the walls of the yeshiva or the synagogue where the rabbi had an office.

In addition, all victims said that prior to the sexual abuse, they had been acquainted with the offending rabbi (as a result of his religious role). The duration of the acquaintance and its quality varied from case to case and ranged from shallow and short-term (few weeks) to deep and long-term, lasting up to the time the sexual abuse started. Findings show that only in two cases was the sexual abuse not preceded by the "develop trust and deepen the relationship" stage, and the sexual contact was sudden without any preliminary conversation.

All the other victims described that before the sexual abuse began, as part of the sexual grooming process, the rabbi carried out tactics to help develop trust and deepen the relationship, so as to ensure obedience. Several types of grooming for the purpose of developing trust were found: 1. grooming through religious elements; 2. grooming through offering and providing emotional/mental health assistance; 3. grooming by improving the victim's social status.

3.1.1.1. Grooming through religious element.
Three types of religion-related grooming tactics were found in victims' statements, were unique to offending rabbis, and stemmed from the rabbis' status and religious authority. The first type was strengthening the relationship with the potential victim by offering him the opportunity to study Torah together with the rabbi:

> He offered me to study with him and we would meet every day at five in the morning to study together… it was great… my parents were full of pride that their son was studying with the head of the yeshiva.
>
> (Eitan, abused by his rabbi at the age of 17)

The following victim described a second type of religious grooming whose purpose was to develop trust, which occurred through the creation of shared spiritual experiences:

> He was a very big manipulator… his desire to give us religious and spiritual experiences, I think everything was intentional and it was his way of getting what he wanted from us… he was connected to great and famous rabbis, and he would take us to see them.
>
> (Noam, abused by his rabbi at the age of 17)

These two types of grooming took place among excellent students who wished to develop and progress religiously. The third type of grooming through religious elements, however, was characterized by the offending rabbis' appeal precisely to victims who had low educational achievements and religious difficulties:

> I was a very naughty child and the man, this thing that abused me, recognized it and offered my parents to be my mentor and save me from religious corruption… It was a very deep fear of my parents, because I was a playful and curious child who wanted to know everything… And for them he was a respected Torah figure; he was wow! A person who would influence their son in a good way.
>
> (Itzhak, began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 13)

3.1.1.2. Grooming through offering and providing emotional/mental health assistance.
Findings showed that in some cases the offending rabbis took advantage of opportunities in which the potential victims turned to them for help or sought emotional assistance. In some cases, the rabbis themselves initiated contact with potential victims who were experiencing emotional distress and offered support so as to increase the victim's degree of trust, dependence, and obedience. Different types of requests for help were found in the victims' statements. They ranged from inquiries associated with normal emotional development, to age-appropriate emotional and sexual difficulties, to, finally, acute emotional distress. The following victim's words are an example of inquiries related to normal emotional development:

> I started being a guide in a youth movement. I told myself that I could learn from the rabbi what it means to be an educator who influences many people. In retrospect, I can say that these were also the mechanisms he used to abuse me… He would tell me "I

will train you to be a loving person… You are blocked, open up to me." He would repeat this several times: "If you won't open up you cannot be a good guide". He really understood my mechanism.

<div align="right">(Avi, began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 16)</div>

Several victims turned to the rabbi for assistance in areas related to emotional distress or various age-appropriate sexual struggles, and the rabbis took advantage of these requests in order to groom them. Jacob, first abused by his rabbi at the age of 14, said that he came to consult with his rabbi about struggles with his self-image: "My self-image was beginning to develop, and I was very sensitive, so the fact that such an admired person even looked in my direction was crazy for me… and he took advantage of it." Gabriel, who began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 19, described the rabbi's reaction when he revealed his doubts about his sexual identity:

I started to cry and told him with great difficulty that maybe I was attracted to men. He enveloped me in hugs and told me how much he loved me and how much he cared about me and that he would help me.

At the end of this axis were victims who said that the rabbis were the ones who initiated contact with them, as a result of the victims' mental distress:

I was sexually abused for several years by a classmate, and the rabbi identified it and put a stop to it. He was really a lifeline for me… looking back I see that the relationship with the rabbi was also very destructive for me, because he started abusing me.

<div align="right">(Tomer, began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 17)</div>

3.1.1.3. Grooming by improving the victim's social status. Several participants said that the rabbi created closeness and strengthened the relationship by improving the victims' social status, as Abraham, who was abused by a rabbi at the age of 14, described:

He would praise me for my memory and for the fact that I picked up what he taught faster than anyone else. He emphasized this in front of everyone, and it set me apart from them… The fact that he appreciated me raised my status in the eyes of the other guys.

Eli, who began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 17, stated that the fact that the rabbi asked him to accompany him to various places, and that he was seen together with the rabbi, earned him respect and prestige in the eyes of those around him:

He would send someone to call me from class during a lesson and slowly this improved my social status… People started talking about how I had a close relationship with him, and they wanted to become friends with me because of my relationship with him. I felt good that people were looking at me, talking about me and being jealous.

3.1.2. Grooming family members

Grooming of victims' family members was found to be a central part of the abusers' conduct. More than half of the family members reported that they had met the offending rabbi before finding out about the abuse. The acquaintance with the rabbi ranged from shallow, to attending the rabbi's Torah classes, to being in a close and personal relationship with him:

My husband was very, very close to him. He donated money to him endlessly. He adored him, there is no other word… there was a picture of my husband and him and we hung it in the house. That's to tell you how we worshiped him.

<div align="right">(Goldie, a mother of a victim)</div>

Also, among most of the family members who had never personally met the rabbi there was a feeling of appreciation toward him. As expressed in the words of Tammy, a victim's sister:

I knew that my brother admired him, and my mother also said that she was so amazed by the rabbi's warmth and that he told her that my brother was something special and rare. And I felt happy that there was a great rabbi who was nurturing him.

The abusive rabbis actively employed grooming tactics in order to create a personal relationship with the potential victim's family members before and during the abuse, as Moses, a brother of a victim described:

I came to study with my brother in the yeshiva and very quickly got to know the head of the yeshiva and was very impressed by his personality… The connection between me and the rabbi became close, and he would call to invite me to come in for lessons and conversations and I got closer and closer to him. My wife and I were at his house a lot, especially before any significant milestone like weddings or births.

Another aspect of family members' grooming was expressed through the offending rabbi presenting himself as someone who knew how to and could help the potential victim with his various distresses. Debbie, a mother of one of the victims, described the rabbi's words to her and her husband regarding her son: "He told us that our son was emotionally traumatized, and he presented the situation in a way that only he could help and save our son from death." Other types of distress revolved around religious or educational issues:

I suffered in the yeshiva, I couldn't study, and I cried and begged my father to transfer me to a more relaxed yeshiva. He went and talked to the rabbi who told him that he cared about me and that the best thing for me would be to stay in his yeshiva and that if I didn't do so, I wouldn't stay religious. My father heard that, and I stayed in his yeshiva.

<div align="right">(Nathan, began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 14)</div>

Findings showed that some offending rabbis caused the potential victims to trust them and become dependent on them by creating a close and exclusive relationship that seemed to help them religiously, mentally, and socially. In addition, as a result of the rabbis' religious and social status, along with the tactics and manipulation they used toward victims' family members, family members often encouraged the victim to be in contact with the rabbi and were very happy about the relationship. It is reasonable to assume that these elements made it difficult for the victims and their families to recognize that a process of sexual grooming was taking place.

3.2. Victim selection and isolation

Some of the victims and family members included various statements indicating different types of victim vulnerabilities that may have caused the offending rabbis to choose these victims in particular. Ten participants linked the abuse to the fact that the victim faced emotional difficulties of various kinds, as described by Debbie, the mother of one of the victims:

> It is true that my son had an emotional problem, but that's who these abusers pick! There were other children in the yeshiva and he didn't abuse them, he chose the one who needed help… this pedophile chose him. That's why I hate him so much, because of how and to whom he did it, to take a small child like my son, whose ability to emotionally deal with what was bothering him was low and take advantage of it.

Itzhak, who began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 13, said that his academic weakness, caused the offending rabbi to choose him: "I was a problematic child and the rabbi recognized it… he offered that we'll study together twice a week." Didi, a victim's sister, described what it was that made her brother vulnerable and assumed that it was this that may have caused the offending rabbi to choose him: "We were emotionally abused by my mother. She would ignore us and not exchange a word with us for two or three months. It changed my brother completely. He became a different boy." Tomer, who began being abused at the age of 17, associated being chosen by the rabbi with the following difficulty: "I was a child lacking a father figure, and I was looking for warmth and a male parental figure… he recognized it and took advantage of it." An additional aspect of lacking a father figure appeared in the words of the following victim:

> I needed a father figure because my father suffered from depression and later on committed suicide. The head of the yeshiva took advantage of this situation in order to sexually abuse me. He approached me and said that he would be a father to me and anything I needed he would provide. It made me feel very good.
>
> (Beni, began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 15)

Three other victims said that they think that the reason the rabbi had chosen them was that they had revealed (to the rabbi) that they were having difficulties with sexual matters such as masturbation, watching pornography, or being homosexual – matters that are prohibited in Judaism. As David, who began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 16, said:

> I hung around the rabbi's office for a few days until he noticed me and told me to come in. I told him that I was addicted to masturbation… And after that, he started inviting me to his office a lot.

3.2.1. Victims' isolation

Another tactic that arose both in victims' and in family members' statements was the victim's isolation. Several victims said that the rabbis took advantage of opportunities to use their power and to alienate victims from their parents, as described by Eli, who began being abused at the age of 17: "One day he hugged me and told me how much he loved me and that if I had been younger, he would have adopted me." As mentioned, family members also referred to processes in which the rabbi alienated them from the victim:

> The rabbi was the most important figure in my husband's life. I knew him before I knew my husband's parents… When my husband told me that he felt he had nothing to wake up for, I immediately called the rabbi and we drove over to him. He told me that my husband's situation was my fault because I allowed him to feel what he felt and accepted his feeling down, and I didn't demand that he get over himself and move on! He said that from now on my husband would come to talk to him regularly. I felt like the most horrible wife in the world, and I was jealous of him because I wanted to be the significant figure in my husband's life and the cure for all his problems.
>
> (Bela, victim's wife)

Besides taking advantage of the opportunity to strengthen the relationship with the victim, the rabbi creates distance between husband and wife by blaming her for worsening her husband's mental state. In this way he makes it easier for him to control and to continue to sexually abuse the husband. A similar distancing process also appears in the words of Debbie, a mother of a victim who described how the rabbi made her and her husband feel like strangers to their son:

> It was a very difficult time; my son was not in a good mental state. One day the rabbi calls me and my husband to come to a meeting at his office and my son is sitting next to him, as if we are the foreigners. The rabbi tells us that maybe our son will feel better if he moves out of our house.

Another facet unique to this isolation tactic was the rabbi's creation of a split within the family, such as between the parents. As Tomer, who had been abused since the age of 17, described:

> Many years later, my mother told me that at that time she met with the rabbi who told her that there was another student who had sexually exploited me and that he [the rabbi] had stopped it. Then he told her, "But you can't tell your husband anything because he won't understand, and it will only make it worse." How can you tell a woman not to share with her husband what's happening to their child?! … It was because he was sexually abusing me and maybe he was afraid of my father. My mother is naive.

In conclusion, it was found that the tactic of isolating potential victims from their families increased their degree of trust in and need for the abusive rabbis. In parallel, some offending rabbis alienated the victims from their families by explaining that they were the ones most capable of providing any type of assistance needed by the victims. In doing so they implied or claimed that the family members were the ones to blame for the victim's condition.

3.3. Desensitizing process

Another stage in the grooming process emerging from the findings was desensitizing of the potential victims to sexual content or contact. This stage took place in three levels: 1. Desensitization through contact in public settings; 2. Desensitization to discourse on sexual issues; 3. Desensitization to intimate contact.

3.3.1. Desensitization through contact in public settings

Many victims said that the abusing rabbis used physical contact frequently, and they openly hugged and kissed those around them. As Gabriel, who was abused by his rabbi from the age of 19, described:

> He treated every person who approached him in such a loving manner. I have never encountered such a fatherly and caring figure… He did not hide the fact that he hugged almost anyone who approached him. He did it publicly in front of everyone.

This rabbi's conduct, in which his open touching of others was seen as ordinary, commonplace, and accepted, and therefore emptied of any kind of sexual meaning, created an atmosphere that made it difficult for victims to recognize the rabbi's touch as abusive. In some cases, this difficulty continued even after victims heard that the rabbi had been accused of sexual abuse in other cases, as Gabriel described later in the interview:

> When I heard that he was being charged with sexual abuse I said to myself, there is no way there is anything impure in the touch of this nice person; he's so caring and cordial. They probably don't understand his motives.

3.3.2. Desensitization to discourse on sexual issues

The findings showed that most of the abusive rabbis initiated sexuality-related discourse on various occasions, both in front of large audiences and in personal conversations. In order to justify this sexual discourse, they used religious content such as the prohibition of masturbation and watching pornography, the meaning of the marital relationship, and preparation for marriage and parenting:

> Moti. He [the rabbi] said: "If you have an evil inclination and you are about to sin in matters of modesty or masturbation, pick up the phone and I will get you out of it."

> Interviewer. Did he say it in front of the whole class?

> Moti. Yes, in front of the whole class. This is an important point. He created situations that made us dependent on him by bringing himself into everyone's most personal and intimate areas. He would have conversations with people about what they were thinking about when they masturbated. And he would ask how many times a day? … It was hard for people to talk about these things, but he knew how to make people reveal themselves to him, and he made them think, Wow, what a great man he is.
>
> (Moti, began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 13)

Some victims said that during personal, sexuality-related conversations, there was an escalation in content. As Noam, abused at age 17, stated:

> The rabbi started by asking me why I didn't want to have a girlfriend. Could I think of the pros and cons to having a girlfriend? And then it moved on to questions that dealt with intimate matters like masturbation and all that stuff.

According to Noam, although the rabbi's questions caused him embarrassment, he did not feel they were offensive or sexual; he felt their purpose was to calm him down and create a more relaxed atmosphere during the meeting. These grooming processes of desensitizing sexuality increased and continued to the phase of physical contact.

3.3.3. Desensitization to intimate contact

The offending rabbis used different kinds of explanations in order to create situations in which they could integrate physical contact into the relationship with the victim and gradually make the physical contact more intimate and sexual. Three types of explanations emerged from the findings: explanations focusing on religion, explanations focusing on the needs of the offending rabbi, and explanations focusing on the victims and their needs.

The aspect most unique was reflected through the explanations focusing on religion. Several victims described that the rabbis claimed that the physical contact was needed for their spiritual development or for general mystical needs, as described by Nathan,

who began being abused at the age of 14:

> He said that he could see in the spiritual world that something terrible was about to happen and told me to take my shirt off and to rub oil on myself while reciting verses… After a few times he said that he should rub the oil on me himself.

Another religious way to justify the intimate contact with the victim was the rabbi's use of claims concerning the obligation to observe Jewish law (i.e., "halacha"):

> The abuse started from a religious place. The rabbi told me that according to halacha he could not let me participate in the religious acts he was doing without determining that I was considered an adult which meant that I had at least two pubic hairs… I felt that he was all about the facts, and that all he was interested in was the halachic obligation.
>
> <div align="right">(Itzhak, began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 13)</div>

Avi, who began being abused at age 16, represents the group of participants who said the rabbis desensitized touch by focusing on their own (i.e., the rabbis') needs, which the religious victims were only too happy to fulfill:

> He said that the doctors told him that because he has heart disease he should go for walks in the evening and asked if I would like to accompany him. I said to myself that this was about the greatest honor in the world, that the rabbi would physically lean on me during these walks. Then little by little he ended up taking me to more and more desolate places, like buildings under construction, and that's where the sexual abuse started.

The largest group of participants claimed that the rabbis focused on explanations regarding the victims and their needs in order to desensitize the victims to the intimate contact about to take place. Some of the participants said that when they came to the rabbi with a medical concern, he took advantage of the situation and offered to examine them physically:

> I told the rabbi that I was afraid something was wrong with my genitals, and he lingered on this issue and asked: "What exactly bothers you about them?" I told him that something about the way my genitals looked bothered me… so he said, "Do you want me to examine you? I studied the subject, and if you want, I can examine you." I was so scared that something was wrong with me, I told him yes, and took off my pants and underwear.
>
> <div align="right">(David, began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 16)</div>

Beni, who was abused by his rabbi from the age of 15, said that the rabbi himself raised the health concern and indicated the need for a physical examination:

> I started having epileptic seizures and the rabbi asked me if I knew how children were born. I told him I knew a little but not exactly. Then he told me that because I had epilepsy, I might have trouble having children and he wanted to check to see that everything was fine with me.

Another way of desensitizing victims was through convincing them that physical contact would help them with their emotional distress, whether it was the need to receive hugs due to the lack of a benevolent parental figure or to their difficulties with body image:

> One topic I talked about a lot with the rabbi was my body image. I told him how ashamed I was to take my shirt off at the beach… One time he invited me to come to a private pool and said: "It's fine, you can go in without clothes, feel at ease, the goal is for you to feel relaxed and free." I felt embarrassed, but he convinced me that this was part of my coping.
>
> <div align="right">(Gabriel, began being abused by his rabbi at the age of 19)</div>

3.4. Post-abuse maintenance behaviors

Several victims referred to the variety of tactics used by the rabbis to ensure that victims would not reveal the sexual abuse and thus allow its continuation. The first tactic was the use of statements suggesting that if anyone were to find out about the sexual interaction, their relationship would end. This statement made many victims fearful, given the significance of the rabbi in their lives. As Moti, who began being abused at the age of 13, said:

> He told me, "You shouldn't talk about our relationship. What we have between us no one will understand. What we have between us is special." And I understood the hidden message: that if I were to tell, we wouldn't be able to continue meeting like this.

The second silencing tactic used by the rabbis was blaming the victims and holding them responsible for the sexual incidents that occurred. In addition, they threatened to expose their (the victims') behavior. As expressed in the words of Itzhak, first abused at age 13:

> He said that it only happened to him when he was with me and that he didn't know what it was in me that made him commit these sexual acts… I felt that I was the culprit and that he was doing me a favor by not telling everyone about me… One day he wanted me to perform a sexual act that disgusted me, and I asked him whether it was possible to do something else. He said, "Do your friends know what you do to me? How you seduce me?" I said, "Absolutely not!" And he said, "So I will tell them."

The third tactic emerged from the words of Eli, first abused by his rabbi at age 17:

> The first time we got into bed together he made me swear I would never tell anyone. Years later when I wanted to talk about what happened, I went to another rabbi who allowed me to break the oath. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to tell.

Breaking an oath in Judaism is severely prohibited. This tactic used by the abusive rabbi is preventing Eli from revealing the abuse due to the fear of the religious consequences of breaking the oath. Later in the interview, Eli noted that the rabbi used additional religion-related elements such as quoting religious texts in order to normalize and legitimize his sexual actions and allow their continuation.

It should be noted that many participants did not directly mention specific tactics used by the rabbis (i.e., to allow the sexual abuse to continue and/or to prevent its exposure). That said, the analysis of the findings revealed that many previously mentioned aspects, such as the social and religious status of the rabbi, making the victim feel special, and promising to help victims with various matters, greatly influenced the fact that the victims chose not to disclose their sexual abuse by the rabbi. As expressed in the words of Tomer, who was quoted above saying: "I remember my mother saying that he is the Messiah". Later in the interview, he stated that due to the high social and religious status the rabbi had, it was impossible to acknowledge that the rabbi was sexually abusing him and to reveal the abuse.

4. Discussion

This article examined sexual grooming practices committed by abusive rabbis toward formerly and/or currently still religious male victims and family members of religious male SARA victims. Four themes regarding sexual grooming committed by rabbis were discussed in the Findings section. Throughout this discussion chapter the findings from these themes will be compared to the SGM and to other findings concerning grooming of abusive priests.

The findings of this study showed that the offending rabbis used tactics that correspond with and can be classified in accordance with the five stages of the SGM (Winters et al., 2020; Winters & Jeglic, 2017). As such, this novel study – being the first qualitative study in which grooming processes among Israeli religious Jewish male SARA victims and their family members were examined – reaffirms the SGM. In addition, the current research expands the SGM beyond the Catholic population to the unexplored population of Jews and offending rabbis. This discussion will address several sub-topics: structure and processes; a proposed preliminary stage; and a comparison of grooming tactics.

4.1. Structure and processes

In the conceptualization of the SGM, it was claimed that it was still unknown whether a linear progression existed between the five stages of the model and whether all offenders used all five stages (Winters et al., 2020). The findings of the current study expand the knowledge on this subject and show that the various stages of sexual grooming are not necessarily performed in accordance with the order of their appearance in the model. For example, it was found that in most cases the specific victim was chosen only after the offending rabbi established his social and religious status, a process that belongs to the phase of gaining access as well as tactics of the developing trust phase. Furthermore, movement back and forth and overlap between the stages was found, such as when the rabbis continued to carry out tactics designed to deepen the potential victim's trust while simultaneously using tactics aimed to desensitize victims to sexual content or physical contact. Another example was when elements of grooming the family members continued even after the sexual abuse had started.

Additionally, in a small number of the cases investigated, not all five stages of the model were included – for example, cases in which the rabbis made sudden sexual contact without the preliminary stage of desensitizing the victims to sexual content or physical contact. These findings could potentially be attributed to the fact that due to the high social status and religious authority of the abusive rabbi (e.g., Lazar & Bjorck, 2008, 2016), the potential victims responded quickly to the grooming tactics and as a result, when the rabbi felt certain there would be no resistance to his sexual acts, he allowed himself to "skip" stages in the sexual grooming process. The five stages of the SGM should, as such, be seen as non-linear and as possibly occurring in a different structure or order. Also, in some abuse cases only some grooming steps will be executed.

4.2. A proposed preliminary stage

As appeared in the literature review, studies have indicated that the grooming stages and tactics carried out by Catholic priests largely resemble those of different types of abusers, as described in the SGM (e.g., Spraitz & Bowen, 2019; Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022). The findings of the present study, however, do not fully align with these findings, and differences that distinguish abusive rabbis from Catholic priests and various other abusers were found throughout the grooming process. First, the status and role of the offending rabbis played a large part in the current study findings. As mentioned, two active tactics carried out by the rabbis were found: creating an inconsistent and confusing experience, ranging from closeness to distance with the victims, and pontificating (i.e., initiating a discourse) about hard-to-understand spiritual and mystical topics, which created an aura around the rabbi. This stage, and the tactics accompanying it, have not been mentioned in previous studies and do not appear in the SGM as a stand-alone stage. We suggest seeing this stage as standing on its own and as a platform that facilitates the performance of additional grooming behaviors. There is a need for further research in order to expand the understanding of this stage and to examine these processes among offenders who come from additional positions of authority.

4.3. Comparison of grooming tactics

As mentioned, to the best of our knowledge the current study is the first empirical study on the subject of sexual grooming in which both SARA victims and their family members were interviewed. The research findings showed that many grooming tactics were carried out in similar ways both toward the potential victims and toward their family members. In the comparison to the SGM stages, reference will be made to the tactics directed at both the victims and their family members.

4.4. Victim selection

The findings of the present study expand what is known about the victim selection stage in the context of SARA and confirm what is known from the SGM; namely, psychological vulnerabilities seem to be the main factor in the selection of potential victims by the abusive rabbi. As mentioned, the offending rabbis did not participate in the current study, but approximately 80 % of the participants said that in their opinion the reason why they or their family members were chosen for abuse was due to emotional vulnerability of various kinds: mental health difficulties (e.g., depression, issues of self-worth); dealing with conflicts between sexuality and religion (e. g., masturbation, homosexual attraction); or as a result of a poor relationship with parents or a lack of a father figure.

These findings align with previous research indicating that those contending with mental health difficulties may be at higher risk of experiencing sexual abuse (Olson et al., 2007). Also, due to the fact that homosexuality is forbidden in Judaism and is perceived as a sin (Allen & Golojuch, 2019), it is reasonable to expect that religious adolescents coping with questions regarding their sexual identity are in a vulnerable position and therefore more exposed to being chosen by an offending rabbi. No evidence of selection due to family circumstances (e.g., foster care, single parenting) was found, a finding that is consistent with findings regarding priests' victims (Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022), and which could be attributed to the fact that when the abuser is a respected clergyman, trusted by victims and their families, with free access to many potential victims, he does not need to find such victims.

4.5. Gaining access and isolating the victim

All victims and family members knew the offending rabbi as a result of his religious role in the community. With the exception of one victim, who said the abuse took place in a hotel, the rest of the victims reported at least one offending incident that took place in a religious location: a yeshiva, a synagogue, or a mikveh (ritual immersion bath). These findings, pertaining to the location of the encounter and the location of the abuse, parallel the findings regarding Catholic priests (Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022). The findings indicating that about half of the family members had a personal acquaintance with the offending rabbi are also consistent with the findings about victims' families' relationships with abusive Catholic priests (Spraitz et al., 2018; Spraitz & Bowen, 2019).

Previous studies mainly focused on the ways in which perpetrators create a situation in which they and the victim are alone (e.g., Burmeister & Spraitz, 2018). The findings of the current study expand what is known about the victims' isolation and point to ways in which the offending rabbi isolated victims from their families on an emotional level and thus created a dependency on him. In addition to using tactics such as inviting victims to travel with him, the offending rabbi also distanced victims from their family members by using tactics such as promising the victims that he will provide for their parental needs or by explaining to family members that he (the rabbi) was the sole address for providing emotional, religious, or educational assistance to the victim. In addition, another novel finding of this study was that the rabbi sometimes sowed division between victims' family members (e.g., between parents) and not only between victims and their families. He would do so in order to reduce the chances that the abuse would be revealed.

4.6. The development of trust

Most of the findings concerning this stage were unique and fundamentally different from what was previously known about the developing trust stage: by offenders in general and by clergy in particular. In the study of Winters, Jeglic, and Terry (2022), it was indicated that in over 50 % of the cases the offender offered the victim various rewards/privileges/gifts, such as a supply of drugs and/ or alcohol, benefits related to sporting events, money, and/or the opportunity to watch pornography or drive a car. In the current study, however, no references to such content were found. Instead, three types of unique grooming tactics, whose aim was to foster the victim's trust in the abuser, were found: grooming via improved social status; grooming via offers and provision of emotional/mental health assistance; and grooming via religious elements.

In addition, the tactics used by the offending rabbis in order to groom the family members were different from those used by Catholic priests. The priests resorted more to the tactic of frequently being hosted at the home of the potential victim's family and trying to become a family member (Burmeister & Spraitz, 2018). However, the offending rabbis mainly resorted to the tactic of offering family members to engage in Jewish religious studies together, inviting family members to consult with them about various matters, or talking with them about concern and/or appreciation for the potential victim.

4.7. Desensitizing potential victims to sexual content and physical contact

The finding about the use of discourse on sexual topics in class or in personal conversations, as well as the finding about the process of escalation of physical contact, is consistent with what is known from previous studies both about the behavior of various types of abusive people (Winters et al., 2020) and of abusive priests (e.g., Spraitz & Bowen, 2019). However, the current study refers for the first time to the explanations given by the offending rabbis during the process of desensitizing the victims to sexual discourse and

contact. Namely, the offending rabbis claimed that physical contact could be brought into the relationship for three reasons: religious reasons, victims' needs, or offending rabbi's needs.

These findings illustrate that the rabbis use religious elements at this stage as well. Specifically, they explain that touch can be used for spiritual development or observance of Jewish law; as a response to victims' physical or religious anxieties (especially around matters related to sexuality); and the victims' sense of religious obligation when offered to help satisfy rabbi's needs. Unlike findings about abusive priests and other abusers (Winters et al., 2020; Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022), no evidence was found regarding abusive rabbis' use of tactics such as exposure to pornography, jokes about sex, or touching as if by accident. Perhaps the widespread use of religious tactics made the use of tactics such as those just mentioned unnecessary.

4.8. Post-abuse maintenance behaviors

In order to continue the abuse and prevent its disclosure, the findings indicated that most of the abusive rabbis used tactics related to victims' fear of losing the relationship with the rabbi, blaming the victim for the sexual acts, and religious manipulations such as the prohibition of violating an oath. These findings are similar to those found among Catholic priests (Winters, Jeglic, & Terry, 2022). Also similar to what was found among priests, the offending rabbis made little use of threatening tactics. The findings of the present study give support to the hypothesis from previous studies (e.g., Spraitz et al., 2018) suggesting that the religious and social status of the abusive clerics gives them control over religious victims, making the need to threaten them superfluous.

Whereas the use of religious elements and manipulation among abusive Catholic priests was found only in the fifth stage of the SGM (Spraitz et al., 2018), the abusive rabbis incorporated religious elements throughout each grooming process stage, both toward the victims and toward their family members. For example, they used religious and mystical elements to increase the degree of admiration toward them and to gain access to potential victims; rabbis offered family members study to together with them; they initiated discourse about sexuality within the context of religious studies; and they provided religious justifications for physical contact.

Significant differences were also found between offending rabbis and priests regarding the seduction tactics used throughout the grooming process. For example, whereas Catholic priests used gift-giving and pornography exposure frequently, offending rabbis more often used tactics of offers to study Judaism or observe religious commandments together, or of emotional and social assistance. These differences may be attributable to the fact that unlike other religions, Judaism is characterized by many practical commandments which are the way to devote to God (Pirutinsky et al., 2019). It is possible that offending rabbis may use potential victims' need for guidance on how to observe these commandments as a way to entice them. McGraw et al. (2019) hypothesized that differences between religions regarding religious belief and practice, as well as differences in attitudes toward sexuality and perceptions of the clergy's role, may be a source of difference between religions when it comes to understanding SARA cases.

4.9. Limitations and future research

The current study had a number of limitations, constituting a call for future research in this field. First, this study included a total of 30 victims and family members who experienced grooming processes from 10 offending rabbis; research on this population should be expanded. Also, there are decade-long gaps between when the grooming processes referred to in this study took place – decades during which there were many transformations in the perceptions of rabbi's role, and to the extent that the religious person is subjected to the authority of the rabbi (Taragin-Zeller, 2021). These changed perceptions may have influenced the grooming processes. In addition, there are segments of Jewish religious society that choose not to be exposed to the Internet or social networks (Campbell, 2011). As such, there are likely some potential participants who did not know about the research (i.e., because publicizing the study was done mainly via social networks) and their voices were therefore not heard. The ability to generalize and represent from this study is also, therefore, limited.

Furthermore, there are large religious differences between the research participants, victims, and family members – differences characterized by, among other things, their perceptions of what is an appropriate relationship with rabbis (Kaplan, 2017). Within the framework of the current study, participants' attitudes toward the rabbis prior to the grooming process were not examined, and the influence of such attitudes on the grooming processes should be examined. Moreover, future research should examine differences in sexual grooming processes among religious subpopulations. Also, apart from victims and their families, the process of sexual grooming includes the offender (Craven et al., 2006) and the religious community (Raine & Kent, 2019), and yet these figures were not included in the current study. As such, further studies focusing on the offending rabbis and the religious community are necessary. Finally, as grooming processes among family members of SARA victims were examined in the current study for the first time, there is a need for further research regarding the emotional and religious consequences of these processes for family members.

4.10. Implications for practice

Researchers assume that many SARA cases are not reported to the authorities due to the sexual grooming processes that preceded them (Spraitz & Bowen, 2021). In addition, there are many elements in the SGM that do not differ from innocent behaviors in the relationship between an adult and an adolescent, or with another adult, and no way to differentiate between them has yet been found (Winters et al., 2020). At the same time, some grooming tactics (such as escalations in sexual conversations or contact) can arouse suspicion when they take place in relationships between clerics and people close to them. Some sexual abuse prevention programs were found to be a multi-level endeavor. Prevention efforts can target and involve children, parents, caregivers, and the community (Winters et al., 2023). Therefore, information about grooming processes should be distributed among relevant parties such as parents,

teachers, and therapists, so that they can be vigilant and help to prevent such situations. Finally, it is the hope of this study's authors that a conversation can begin among policy makers both in and outside of religious communities, therapists, and professionals in the field of education regarding this phenomenon. Awareness must be raised regarding the desired nature as well as the limits of a healthy relationship between rabbis and their congregants.

Declaration of competing interest

None.
The authors declare that the article was not published or submitted for publication in another journal.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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