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Intimacy in the Occupational Rehabilitation Group for Ultra-Orthodox Women of Low Socioeconomic Status

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This ethnographic study of an occupational rehabilitation group for low socioeconomic status ultra-Orthodox women in the Israeli labor market investigates the expression, and role, of intimacy. The findings demonstrate that intimacy appeared early on, revealing an immediate intersubjective understanding between the women, which manifested in empathy, harmony and advocacy, and shared language. They experienced a cross-cultural encounter with a neoliberal model contradicting their values and culture and used their similarity and applied intimacy to emphasize their shared identity and oppose the neoliberal discourse. We discuss intimacy as a practice of hidden, everyday resistance counteracting intercultural tensions and conflicts.
Keywords: intimacy, self, everyday resistance, ultra-Orthodox women, occupational rehabilitation

INTRODUCTION

Theoretical engagement in the concept of intimacy is broad and complex, with different scholars and currents in psychology, sociology, and philosophy granting it diverse interpretations and meanings over time. Initially studied in developmental psychological contexts, scholars defined intimacy as a developmental task that individuals must achieve within interpersonal relationships (Erikson 1950). Later, the research expanded to social and interpersonal contexts, which defined intimacy as a mutual interpersonal process based on self-disclosure, partner's responsiveness (Reis and Shaver 1988), and constructive contexts. This frames intimacy as shared meaning-making (Weingarten 1991; Young 2009).

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Intimacy takes place in long-term relationships or is limited to time and place and includes verbal aspects, such as sharing feelings and personal content, and non-verbal aspects, such as touch, empathic listening, and direct gazes (Prager 1995, 2000). Other expressions of intimacy are giving, sharing, expressing affection, caring, and providing a sense of attachment, which can be used to create a subjective feeling of closeness and orientation toward one another (Jamieson 2011). The perspective of symbolic interactionism (SI), on which this study is based, refers to intimacy mainly in the context of couple interaction, sexual intimacy, and creating meaning (Jackson et al. 2011). According to SI, creating meaning is possible through social interaction in which people become symbolically interdependent through their common beliefs or values that provide a common interpretation. A couple who shares symbols and rituals and engage in the construction of shared meaning increases their closeness and commitment (Stephen 1984). SI offers a suitable framework for understanding the development of intimacy in relationships due to its assumption that individuals act in accordance with the meanings they ascribe to the persons or objects with which they are interacting; view symbols, such as words, objects, and gestures, as abstract representations; and search for symbolic meaning in every situation (Sandstrom et al. 2013).

In the context of groups, intimacy has been depicted as one of the stages in the development of a group (Bernard et al. 2008) and an important condition for raising the group awareness that enables a group to act and progress optimally (Barker 1991; Bennis and Shepard 1956; Van Swol et al. 2022). This context also views intimacy as an interpersonal developmental need and as a space that provides group members with an internal inquiry about the meaning of close relationships for them (Rosh, Offermann, and Van Diest 2012). There is, however, a lack of empirical research about the emergence of intimacy, its expression, and its contribution to the group process. This article seeks to address this lacuna.

We base this article on ethnography in an occupational rehabilitation group of unemployed or underemployed ultra-Orthodox women of low socioeconomic status (SES) which operated within the framework of a government welfare program in Israel. Required to bear almost exclusively the responsibility of providing for the household, while their husbands devote their time to studying Torah (Kook and Harel-Shalev 2021), these women voluntarily joined a group aimed at helping them integrate into employment or improve its quality.

Due to a lack of empirical research about definitions and expressions of intimacy in group spaces, in particular those that deal with care and well-being among participants from low SES collectivist cultures, this article examines the role of intimacy for ultra-Orthodox women in the group occupational process. It focuses on two main questions: (1) What are the expressions of intimacy in an occupational rehabilitation group for ultra-Orthodox women?; and (2) What is the role of intimacy in the group? The research design includes observations of the group meetings that took place over 6 months and documentation of the group dynamics, group and interpersonal

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gestures, verbal and non-verbal communication of the participants, and overt and covert messages.

This article discusses how intimacy, and its traditional and recognized role as a response to the individual need to clarify the meaning of close relationships for group participants (Garfield 2010), lacks relevance for ultra-Orthodox women who belong to a collectivist culture that fosters an interdependent self (Markus and Kitayama 2012; Zhang and Han 2023). By virtue of belonging to a society characterized by a worldview based on an ontology of communitarianism (George and Muhammed 2023), the women share meanings, symbols, and cultural, social, and class characteristics that produce a sense of belonging and solidarity. Our findings suggest that the concept of intimacy as an experience of immediate intersubjective understanding between ultra-Orthodox women has three manifestations: empathy, harmony and advocacy, and a shared language. Intimacy also plays a role in responding to the collective need to emphasize their common identity and resist the neoliberal discourse proposed by the group facilitators which originates in secular and individualistic societies (Shoshana 2020). We herein challenge the popular conceptualization of intimacy, its familiar expression, and its role and suggest that it not only creates closeness between group participants but is also a practice of hidden, everyday resistance among members of minority groups from collectivist cultures who seek to cope with the supremacy of neoliberal discourse.

INTIMACY

Conceptualization of Intimacy

The concept of intimacy has been defined and studied by many in the fields of psychology, sociology, and philosophy over time, receiving diverse interpretations and meanings. Early scholars emphasized the role of intimacy in the individual's psychological development. They explained intimacy as the ability to commit and belong to a meaningful relationship, to express and experience a deep concern and understanding of others characterized by reciprocity, affection, and trust, and to seek validation for one's beliefs and values. This works in concert to expand one's personality (Erikson 1950; Sullivan 1953).

Intimacy has also been defined as a process of interpersonal interaction based on the verbal or non-verbal self-disclosure of emotions and personal information to a partner and their responsiveness (Reis and Shaver 1988). Partner responsiveness that provides recognition and validation creates a feeling of being understood and appreciated and increases psychological and physical (e.g., touch, use of pet names, and speech intonation) closeness and intimacy (Reis, Clark, and Holmes 2004). Many studies have validated this interpersonal interaction model, emphasizing self-disclosure and appropriate responsiveness toward it as necessary elements in intimate interactions (Laurenceau et al. 2004; Tan, Overall, and Taylor 2012).

One of the most prominent definitions of intimacy was proposed by Karen Prager (1995, 2000), who sought to distinguish between intimate relationships that

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exist over time and those that occur for a limited time and in a specific place. According to Prager, intimate relationships consist of verbal, intimate behavior, such as sharing personal content or feelings of vulnerability, pain, shame, and embarrassment. They also consist of non-verbal intimate behavior, such as touch, high mutual emotional involvement, and responsiveness to the other person, and can be expressed in direct gazes and empathic listening to the other's needs in a way that expresses understanding of their emotional experience. The overall intimate experience thus refers to perceptions and emotions during and after the intimate interaction, such as security, trust, closeness, care, pleasure, affection, and mutual understanding (Prager and Robert 2004).

Jamieson (2011) offered another conceptualization termed "practices of intimacy." These are practices that create and sustain a sense of a closeness and special quality of a relationship between people. They are not only self-disclosure but a broad repertoire of practices that exist in interpersonal interactions, such as giving, sharing, expressing affection, caring, and feeling connected. While these components do not exclusively relate to intimacy, each has the potential to produce intimacy alongside additional conditions (Jamieson 2011). This conceptualization's emphasis on what individuals actually do in terms of showing care or affection allows for exploration of the varied ways in which intimacy can be expressed and enacted.

The SI perspective, which focuses on the construction of meaning through social interaction (Charmaz, Harris, and Irvine 2019; Sandstrom et al. 2013), refers to intimacy as a quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality in social interactions during which people develop moral sense and try to understand the needs of others (Charon 2007; Jamieson 2011). In a study that used SI to learn about the symbolic meaning of shopping experiences, Griffith (2003) found expressions of intimacy between parents, children, spouses, and friends, such as strong social bonds, laughter, and sharing personal information via the enjoyable experience. This reinforces Weingarten's (1991) perspective on intimacy that returns power and control to the individual by seeing their ability to act and turn a non-intimate interaction into an intimate one. Weingarten suggested that intimacy is a product of dialog and intersubjective meaning-making: a quality created within a specific interaction when people share or co-create meaning and are able to coordinate their actions to reflect mutual meaning-making. Meaning can be expressed by writing, speech, gestures, or symbols.

Intimacy in the Group

Although most of the research on intimacy deals with the interpersonal process between two individuals (Prager 2000), there is also some engagement with intimacy in the group context. Indeed, many early theories and models dealing with group development emphasized interpersonal intimacy as a necessary condition for raising group awareness, which enables the group to act optimally and promotes the group process (e.g., Barker 1991; Bennis and Shepard 1956). However, the definitions of

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intimacy in a group refer to it as an interpersonal trait, and there is no definition of intimacy at the group level and for the group as a whole; the literature is mostly concerned with the interpersonal level and the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral self-development of the individual (Rosh, Offermann, and Van Diest 2012).

In their model, MacKenzie and Livesley (1984) describe intimacy as one of the stages in the development of a group. Accordingly, after a group passes the stage of the initial meeting (engagement), it begins to differentiate itself and its participants (differentiation), marking the differences between the participants and each one's singularity (individuation separation). Only at the end of this process can intimacy develop in a group. Intimacy is, they claimed, aimed at an in-depth internal investigation that is possible in a certain group climate in which the members are engaged in the meaning of a close relationship for them and the way in which they act within it. In other words, also in the context of the group's development, the engagement with intimacy is at the interpersonal level of the participants and their self-development and not at the level of the group process or the group as a whole.

"Intimate behavior" is another conceptualization that refers to verbal interpersonal behaviors that include the ability to deal with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the self and of the other group members and contribute to the results of therapeutic groups (Shadish 1984). These behaviors include sharing positive and negative emotions and encouraging the other members of the group to give feedback, refer to and share their emotions, and talk about the relationships between the group members. By developing the ability to behave intimately, group participants learn about themselves, others, and their interpersonal relationships. Miles, Paquin, and Kivlighan (2011) examined intimate behaviors in groups for interpersonal growth and groups for recovery from trauma. They found a clear relationship between the number of expressions of intimate behaviors by the group participants and the progress of the group process; as time passed, the participants felt more comfortable displaying vulnerability and expressed more intimate behaviors.

Amidon and Kavanaugh (1979) related the verbal aspect of intimacy to an interaction between group participants that is expressed in thoughts and feelings referring to the group's "here and now" and in declarations referring to the entire group or directly addressing one of the participants. They claimed that intimacy and closeness are the main issues concerning the group participants. The level of intimacy between participants thus depends on their desire to feel close to the other members of the group through self-disclosure and exchange feedback with each other. Group participants have also been found to act according to the norms of the group which shape their behavior and their interpersonal interactions (Yalom and Leszcz 2020). There is not, however, sufficient empirical research on this aspect.

Unlike intimacy between two individuals who get to know each other through the disclosure of information and emotions, intimacy in a group does not determine that all group members will necessarily get to know each other or spend time together. Intimacy in a group can be enabled through common practices, such as a similar style of clothing or a shared language that creates a sense of shared identity and

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group connection and establishes a sense of unity among group members (Nguyen and Strohl 2019). Sparks (2021) conducted a study about emotional intimacy among nine African American women undergraduates in Michigan, aged 22–35, who participated in an eight-week online support group entitled Sister Space. The study, which took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrated how being in a group with other Black women with a shared identity created feelings of comfort and emotional intimacy between the women. This, in turn, allowed them to share their experiences of intergenerational familial patterns and motherhood and to cope with the difficulties of their white academic institution (Sparks 2021).

Scholars of group cohesion, a highly studied concept, discuss group intimacy extensively (Forsyth 2021); indeed, when intimacy develops it can deepen group cohesion (Rosh, Offermann, and Van Diest 2012). However, there is scant literature about the emergence of intimacy, its expression, and its contribution to the group process — a lacuna which the present study seeks to address.

ULTRA-ORTHODOX WOMEN IN THE ISRAELI LABOR MARKET

In recent decades, ultra-Orthodox society in Israel has undergone significant changes that are reshaping the identity and role of ultra-Orthodox women (Ringel 2007). Culturally, women's first obligation is to take care of the home and children, since most men in ultra-Orthodox society devote their time to studying Torah (Kook and Harel-Shalev 2021). However, they are also required to bear the responsibility of providing for the household and thus leave the private domestic sphere and enter public, secular, professional, and academic spheres (Geiger and Alt 2014).

The unique sociocultural characteristics of ultra-Orthodox society significantly affect women's ability to optimally integrate into the employment market, forcing them to cope with significant value conflicts and tensions (Neria-Ben Shahar 2009). The requirement for them to go out and make a living alongside the limitations set by the religious authority, which allows them to work only in an environment that respects its laws, constitutes a barrier because this is not possible in many workplaces (Kalekin-Fishman and Schneider 2019). When ultra-Orthodox women choose to work in a mixed environment, they are required to manage value tension and develop coping strategies.

In their study of ultra-Orthodox women employed in the high-tech market, Wasserman and Frenkel (2020) demonstrated how they cope with supervision and control mechanisms which include a set of expectations for appropriate behaviors. Toward their employers, the women exhibit diligence, loyalty, and hard work that compensates for the fact that they work fewer hours and do not participate in company activities that contradict their lifestyles; toward the religious authority, they show obedience and comply with its strict religious rules, thus calming concerns about their encounter with secular society.

Another conflict lies in the clash between the values of ultra-Orthodox society and the values of the modern labor market. Ultra-Orthodox society is characterized

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by a traditional and collective culture that sees the family unit as a supreme social value (Caplan 2003; Cohen and Hill 2007) and views women going to work to provide for the family as the realization of a spiritual value enabling men's devotion to Torah studies (Blumen 2002; Neria-Ben Shahar 2009). These values conflict with the characteristics of the modern secular labor market that ultra-Orthodox society opposes: values of individuality, satisfying the individual's personal needs and desires and developing autonomy, and generating profit and raising the individual's standard of living through obtaining money and material luxuries (Stadler 2002). Raz and Tzruya (2018) presented these tensions faced by ultra-Orthodox women employed in high-tech organizations who chose to work in a segregated environment with lower wages. Despite the relatively low financial reward, the women receive the support of the community and religious authority for their choice of an environment adapted to them, culturally and religiously, and are able to balance the needs of the home and the family and fulfill their role as mothers. The women participants emphasized that, for them, work is not a career or an end in itself but a means of supporting their family and allowing their husbands to study Torah.

These unique characteristics and barriers result in low-wage work and high poverty rates in ultra-Orthodox society (Malach, Cohen, and Zicherman 2016). The Israeli government, therefore, set a government objective to increase the rate of ultra-Orthodox women's participation in quality employment and budgeted for customized programs to provide them with training, counseling, and guidance (Goldfarb and Neuman 2020). While the rate of ultra-Orthodox women's participation in employment at the end of 2021 equaled, for the first time, the rate of non-Orthodox Jewish women's participation (CBS 2022), the quality of their employment in terms of hourly wages and job scope remained low (Kasir-Kaliner 2018).

METHOD

This ethnographic study is derived from a longitudinal investigation of an occupational rehabilitation group for low SES ultra-Orthodox women administered as part of a government welfare program operated by a non-profit organization in Israel. The research design included observations of the group meetings, which took place over 6 months, and documentation of the group dynamics, group and interpersonal gestures, verbal and non-verbal communication of the participants, and overt and covert messages. In order to explore nuances of meanings and processes and develop an explanatory theory for better understanding of those processes, we used the constructivist approach based on grounded theory (Charmaz 2014) which enables inductive analysis.

Participants

The study participants included 17 women, aged 21–53, of low SES (in terms of income, education, and living below the poverty line), who defined

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themselves as ultra-Orthodox mothers living in the periphery of Israel. Three of the women were permanently unemployed and 14 were underemployed, namely, employed in part-time jobs, full-time jobs with low wages, or jobs requiring lower qualifications and skills than their own. All the participants live in the same ultra-Orthodox city but belong to different ultra-Orthodox communities; thus, while there was early familiarity between a few of them, there were no friendships or deep acquaintances.

The women all participated voluntarily in an occupational rehabilitation group that operated within the framework of a government welfare program. This comprised 20 meetings, taking place once a week, 5 p.m.–8 p.m., and run by a facilitator accompanied by an occupational social worker. Before joining the group, each participant was offered a financial incentive of up to 8000 NIS (around 2100$) which could be used at the end of the group process to either acquire higher education or professional training of her choice (examples include courses in accounting, photography, and cosmetology) or finance child care, thus allowing her to integrate into the workforce. All the women received this benefit on completing the group, and it was the only incentive they received.

Research Tools

Observations

The first author conducted observations of the group meetings between January and June 2019. She documented the course of the meetings in writing, including the facilitation methods, results of the activities and exercises, and participants' personal reflections, reactions, and statements. She recorded the group dynamics and group and interpersonal gestures and referenced participants' verbal communication, non-verbal body language, and overt and covert messages.

Data Analysis

We used the constructivist approach based on grounded theory (Charmaz 2014) as the framework for analyzing and coding the observations. Grounded theory emphasizes the importance of listening to stories, offers an inductive, structured, and developing analysis, and gives renewed importance to the study of people in their natural environment. SI encourages us to understand how people construct and negotiate meanings and actions in their everyday lives (Charmaz 2014). To analyze the observations, we conducted comprehensive and in-depth coding and located common and repeated categories. To increase consistency and minimize introduced-bias, we independently extracted the themes. Each author offered an independent interpretation of the materials, and after a joint discussion, we agreed on the principal themes.

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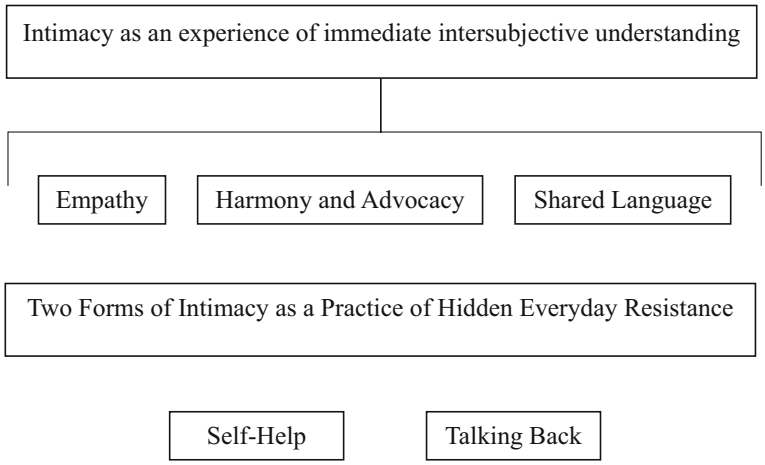

FIGURE 1. Key Research Findings

FINDINGS

The findings suggest the concept of intimacy as an experience of immediate intersubjective understanding between ultra-Orthodox women which has three manifestations: empathy, harmony and advocacy, and a shared language. The findings revealed how the cross-cultural encounter with a neoliberal model that contradicts the women's values and culture prompted them to use the similarity between them and to apply intimacy in order to emphasize their shared identity and oppose the group's neoliberal discourse. This use of intimacy as hidden everyday resistance refers to daily actions that can be used to undermine power in covert and not easily discernible ways (Scott 1990). This was evident in two forms: talking back and self-help. Figure 1 summarizes the main findings of this article.

Intimacy: Experience of Immediate Intersubjective Understanding

The literature about group processes suggests that intimacy is a stage in group development that can only develop after the engagement stage and after the group differentiates itself and its participants, marking the differences between them and their individual uniqueness (MacKenzie and Livesley 1984). In contrast, our observations revealed that already in the engagement phase of the occupational rehabilitation group's development, from the first meeting, expressions of intimacy appeared that continued throughout the group process. Interactions between the ultra-Orthodox women who share meanings, symbols, and cultural, social, and class characteristics demonstrated their intimacy as an experience of immediate intersubjective understanding. They expressed their empathy for each other, their shared language, and the natural harmony between them as women from a collective and traditional culture. These expressions of intimacy were depicted as practices

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they engaged in to create a subjective feeling of closeness and orientation toward one another, but also to express their individuality and shared identity and resist the underlying discourse of change and individualism. The findings suggest that the intimacy between the ultra-Orthodox women in the occupational rehabilitation group was result from immediate intersubjective understanding, which expressed itself in three ways: empathy, harmony and advocacy, and a shared language.

Empathy

The intersubjective understanding between the ultra-Orthodox women was evident from the first meeting, when the participants were asked to choose an animal that represented them as working women. Yaela, a mother of six, openly shared her lack of self-confidence after many years of not working:

> I am a mother of six children, and I'm a doe [her chosen animal]. I want to be a powerful animal, fixed on my objective, but I found myself not working for the last 15 years because of small children. I didn't relate to myself during those years. I lost myself and lost confidence and belief in my abilities. Who says I still can? I don't know if I have the capabilities I once had.

The group participants looked at Yaela empathetically. Beside her sat Ora, also a mother of six who had not worked for many years. She put a hand on Yaela's shoulder and said: "It's really hard, we're all in a similar situation." The women nodded their heads in understanding and agreement: "We're all in the same boat," "The children were young and it's hard; we carry a lot of burdens," "Now that they're older, we will succeed." Their use of the first-person plural, "we," expressed their collective empathy. Yaela was buoyed by the group's attitude: "We haven't even started yet, and I'm already happy to be here with you. You understand me very well." One of the participants went over to hug her.

This description demonstrates familiar verbal expressions of intimacy, such as self-disclosure and the sharing of emotional content, responses expressing support, empathy, and reinforcement, and non-verbal expressions, such as physical contact, nods of agreement, and looks of compassion, empathy, and affection. Another unique form of intimate interaction also emerged as an experience of immediate intersubjective understanding expressed in the empathy between the women. The group's reactions — "It's hard for all of us" and "We're all in the same boat" — and Yaela's statement that she felt understood emphasized the immediate mutual understanding between women who come from a similar cultural and class background and share common characteristics and barriers.

Empathy stemming from intersubjective understanding as an expression of intimacy was also seen in the second meeting which concerned the women's various roles (work, family, parenting, leisure). They were asked to draw a circle and divide it into parts according to their roles and the importance they attached to them. The facilitator mentioned that the goal of the program was integration into full employment and

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asked to see the work part of their lives. The women made statements emphasizing the superiority of their role as mothers and women whose community expects them to prioritize their commitment to home and family over work. As Ruth said: "The children and the home are the most important part … first the home and only then maybe work." Her words were reinforced by another participant: "Yes, we won't leave the house at all costs … Work is not the essence of life." Others nodded their heads in agreement, smiled at each other, reached out to each other, and added statements such as, "This is who we are." We interpreted the women's behavior and the way they united in common agreement and reinforced each other's position as closeness between them.

It was evident that they did not sit in the group as individuals but as a cohesive group sharing a common understanding based on shared norms and values and speaking in the language of "we." This example of intimacy as an intersubjective experience of empathy shows how the ultra-Orthodox women use it as a practice to emphasize their shared identity and resist the discourse of change that challenges the division of roles in their lives.

Harmony and Advocacy

Another expression of the intimacy between the ultra-Orthodox women in the group emerged in the third meeting which concerned change. The participants were asked to describe their desired change and employment situation. Almost all expressed satisfaction with their current situation and desiring only a small change: "Overall I feel good where I am," "I want a little progress," "I want a small change, a job to provide for my family, to meet basic needs," "I try to embrace the situation I'm in." The issue of their commitment to home and family also came up: "I don't aspire to professional heights; I want to take care of the home," "I want a little, not a lot," "I want to leave the house but not at all costs," "The children and home are very important to me; first of all home."

The facilitator noticed that the women, who came by choice to a program aiming to help them make significant occupational change, avoided talking about change and diminished their aspirations. She asked them why they had come to the program if they were satisfied with their situation. The participants began — collectively — to explain their desire for small changes. Shlomit said: "Women are speaking that way because that is what God wanted for us, and it's for our own good so we are reconciled." Talma joined in: "I want to explain our perspective; women speak from a place where everything is good for them and they are satisfied. This is a spiritual perspective." The participants nodded their heads in agreement, looked at each other, placed hands on shoulders, and whispered reinforcing words. Once again, an emotional climate of cohesion and protection was created.

The intimacy depicted here was expressed in a harmony between women who share common cultural characteristics and mobilized to protect one another and provide collective responses to the demand that they undergo change. The harmony

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of explaining themselves collectively not only reemphasized their shared identity and created closeness between them but also acted as a practice of collective self-advocacy that preserves them and their culture and faith. Supporting and helping each other and speaking out are familiar practices of advocacy (Petri, Beadle-Brown, and Bradshaw 2020). For marginalized groups it represents the possibility of "coming to voice" (speaking out) as an act of resistance (Hooks 1989).

Shared Language

Another expression of intimacy as an experience of immediate intersubjective understanding was the shared language which existed between the ultra-Orthodox women before entering the group as members of a collective and traditional culture. In the fourth meeting, when each participant was asked to declare their good qualities in front of the group, they reacted with confusion and resistance: "What do you mean what am I *good* at? It's difficult for me to assert what I'm good at," "It's shameful; I can't say good things about myself," "It's shameful to expose the inside to the outside," "I feel shame and self-criticism. Am I really like this? And to say this in front of others and appear arrogant? It's very difficult."

The women's statements reflect a shared language embodying values of modesty, humility, and reticence from arrogance. They understand each other and their fear of how they look if they praise themselves. Turning to each other and saying, "Don't be shy, we all feel that way," "That's why we're here together," "It's lucky that everyone here understands what I'm talking about," they decided to act as a group and tell each other what good qualities they see in her. This collective action helped them to cope with a demand that clashed with their culture, demonstrating their shared language through the qualities they offered each other — "ascetic," "happy," "efficient," "good," "giving" — which were received with affection, cheering, laughter, applause, and excitement. Their shared language was an expression of their intimacy and served to both create closeness and demonstrate collective resistance to the individualist discourse encouraging them to openly express their qualities and glorify themselves.

Another example of shared language illustrating intimacy as intersubjective understanding occurred during a session with cards that represent internal barriers (pictures of elves) and strengths (pictures of fairies). The facilitator explained: "Working with the cards allows us to externalize our barriers and strengths and to look at them as something separate from ourselves." The women had difficulty choosing cards, laughing among themselves awkwardly. When the facilitator did not respond to their questions and requests for help, they turned to each other for help and closeness began developing between them. They offered each other cards and added to them from their shared religious and cultural language, quoting words of Torah and faith: "You take the strength of compassion — compassion and kindness of the blessed God," "You need this power [the card of the strength to love oneself]. As the Rebbe said, unconditional love," "It's appropriate for you to take the strength

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to listen to the heart; the Rebbe said that the essence of divinity is in the heart." As they offered each other cards of strength, they hugged each other and were moved by gestures of emotional and spiritual giving.

This episode demonstrated how the ultra-Orthodox women engaged in a practice of intimacy based on intersubjective understanding and used their shared language to give new interpretation and meaning to the metaphorical work with the cards. This activity aimed to help the participants develop self-reflexivity which, according to SI, is necessary for developing one's self-concept (Sandstrom et al. 2013). The women used the metaphorical work differently: they created an intimate interaction with each other and attached religious and spiritual words and expressions from their culture to the cards, thus helping them to construct and emphasize their collective and cultural identity.

Intimacy as a Practice of Hidden Everyday Resistance

The literature suggests that group intimacy plays a role in the individual's emotional and psychological development needs, clarifying their understanding of close relationships (Garfield 2010; MacKenzie and Livesley 1984). Our findings demonstrated that the intimacy between the ultra-Orthodox women played another role that does not concern their individual psychological emotional development. The women belong to a collective society which emphasizes a self that is connected to the community — the so-called interdependent self (Cohen and Hill 2007) — and places collectivist rather than individual development at the center. They expressed difficulty engaging in the independent work required of them in the group, such as stating their positive qualities, choosing cards, and talking about change in their lives, and sought to act as a collective as much as possible. This shows that using intimacy as a response to individual developmental needs was not relevant for them; rather, as seen in the previous section, intimacy was their response to a collective need.

In this group occupational process, the women encountered a different culture with a set of concepts, values, and norms that are distant and contrary to those they are familiar with. The characteristics of the modern secular labor market represented in the group process are those that ultra-Orthodox society opposes, such as individuality, autonomy, and satisfying the individual's personal needs and desires (Stadler 2002). As ultra-Orthodox women, they believe that there is a divine reason for their situation and therefore do not aspire to major professional change. They prioritize the values of home and family over work and feel uncomfortable glorifying themselves and talking about their good traits as it contradicts the value of humility. The group work model, on the other hand, is a Western neoliberal model that seeks to motivate them to change through the discourse and practices of individualism, reflexive self-work, and a focus on the self.

Within this cross-cultural meeting, the ultra-Orthodox women used the practice of intimacy to emphasize their common identity and to covertly oppose the discourse and values applied in the group which contradicted their values and culture. This use

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of intimacy as hidden everyday resistance refers to people's daily actions to undermine power in covert and not easily discernible ways (Scott 1990, 2012) and was evident in two forms: "talking back" and self-help.

Talking Back

One of the ways in which the women used intimacy as a practice of resistance is what Hooks (1989) called "talking back" (Biana 2020). This is an act of resistance by marginalized people that manifests in speaking as an equal to an authority figure, daring to express disagreement, or even having an opinion. Juhulia (2004) added that it is also a way in which people or groups react in subtle and indirect ways to the cultural stigmas attributed to them, distinguish themselves from others, and indicate that the stigmas are not applicable to them.

As discussed earlier, when the ultra-Orthodox women were asked to describe the desired change and outcome for them in terms of employment, they responded in a way that surprised the facilitator: "Overall, I feel good where I am," "I want a little progress," "I want a small change." They seemed to be saying that even though they belong to a different cultural group, are unemployed, and came to a group aiming to help them, they are not needy or in distress, as might be assumed, but satisfied with their situation. When the facilitator confronted them and asked why they had joined the group if they were not looking for change, they collectively explained their spiritual-religious view and the reason for their sense of satisfaction: "It's a spiritual and religious view," "Because that's what God wanted for us."

The women "talked back" in order to present an alternative narrative to that attributed to them. They are no longer a group of low SES women who have come to a group looking to promote change among them; they are ultra-Orthodox women whose faith enables them to be grateful — "to embrace the situation" — and to believe that there is a good reason for their situation — "This is how God wanted it for us." They thereby create a distinction between themselves and the stigma attributed to low SES people who are in distress and waiting to be saved. This practice of "talking back," which relies on the intersubjective understanding between the women and an intimate experience of empathy, was an attempt to defend their cultural identity. The facilitator responded by saying: "I want to hear about changes you've made in your lives that are not related to religion." The women laughed, looked at each other in wonder, and said as a group: "But this is who we are."

The facilitator did not identify this rhetoric of "talking back" in which the ultra-Orthodox women used the intimacy of harmony and advocacy to make a categorical distinction between themselves and other stigmatized welfare users as an act of resistance against the cultural clash. The laughter between them, the looks of wonder, their statements and whispers to each other were not seen, addressed, or recognized and reflected a mutual understanding between them. The manner in

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which the facilitator confronted them by asking to hear about changes unrelated to religion shows that their "talk back" was viewed as a natural fear of change and not as resistance to an intercultural and discursive clash (Shoshana 2014).

This finding echoes Turtiainen and Hiitola's (2018) study showing how immigrant parents in Finland reacted to the stigma attached to their parenting when confronting professionals specializing in family welfare services who advised them on parenting and family issues arising from their migration. The lack of understanding of the diversity and circumstances of the immigrants' lives limited the professionals' ability to view the situation of the immigrant parents broadly. By "talking back," the parents normalized their behavior and parenting norms as common in all families. This strategy of explanation and normalization is reminiscent of the way the ultra-Orthodox women explained themselves and their desire for a small change to the facilitator. They tried to show that this was not about a lack of ambition or minimization of their desires, as the facilitator thought, but about something natural and normal in their culture.

Self-Help

The literature of everyday resistance identifies another form of resistance, which the ultra-Orthodox women used as a practice of resistance; unplanned self-help (Scott 1985, 2012). The women struggled when asked to assert a good trait they possessed. The value of humility prevented them from attributing good qualities to themselves and declaring them in front of the group ("It's shameful"; "It's arrogant"). They also struggled to do the metaphorical work with the cards and to individually and reflectively choose cards depicting their internal barriers and strengths. When the women turned to the facilitator for help, she declined, smiling, and explained that this was personal, independent work. Amid this intercultural conflict, the women started acting as a group and helping each other choose cards while adding words and phrases from their cultural world and selecting good qualities that reflected their values ("ascetic," "happy," "efficient," "good," "giving").

This form of self-help created intimacy between the women and served as a practice of resistance by changing their status in the room: from a position where they, as participants, received instructions to act individually, to one where they took control and acted in a manner appropriate to their culture, namely, collectively. They thus shifted from passive participants to active agents determining what is done. The facilitator did not attach importance to this and allowed this spontaneous organization to take place.

The ultra-Orthodox women appeared satisfied and even empowered by the way they acted. The utterance, "That's better, right?" by one of the women received smiles and agreement from the others, who seemed to express a sense of relief and satisfaction at their ability to act and influence the course of the exercise for themselves.

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DISCUSSION

In this ethnographic examination of an occupational rehabilitation group for low SES ultra-Orthodox women that operated as part of a government welfare program to integrate them into employment, intimacy played a central role. We applied an SI approach to follow the expression and the role of intimacy for the ultra-Orthodox women in the group process. The findings inductively identified the intimacy in the group as an experience of immediate intersubjective understanding between the ultra-Orthodox women with three manifestations: empathy, harmony and advocacy, and shared language. The women used these manifestations of intimacy to emphasize their common self-concept and oppose the neoliberal discourse proposed by the group facilitators.

The literature on group processes suggests that intimacy in a group's development is possible only after the stage of engagement and after the participants have marked their distinctness, differentiation, and singularity (MacKenzie and Livesley 1984). However, our findings revealed that the intimacy among the ultra-Orthodox women who share common meanings, symbols, and cultural, social, and class characteristics appeared at a very early stage. The expressions of intimacy included empathy, harmony and advocacy, and the use of a shared language as ultra-Orthodox women from a collective and traditional culture. These findings suggest a conceptualization of intimacy as an experience of immediate intersubjective understanding. This definition extends previous definitions of intimacy, such as Weingarten's (1991) reference to intimacy as intersubjective meaning-making and a product of dialog. Weingarten saw intimacy as a quality created within a specific interaction when people share or co-create a common meaning, synchronize their actions, and express it through writing, discourse, gestures, or symbols. Our findings demonstrated this form of creating meaning through the use of shared language. One example was when, for reasons of modesty and humility — central values in their culture — the ultra-Orthodox women struggled to declare their good qualities to the group and decided spontaneously to act as a group and each express the good qualities they see in each other. This collective action allowed them to express their values through the use of a shared language in their depiction of the qualities they offered each other, evoking affection, encouragement, and excitement. This illustrates the centrality of shared culture and symbols (mainly language) in the creation of shared meaning and shows how they allow individuals from minority groups to exercise their agency creatively and use it to transform a non-intimate situation into an intimate one through which to express their selfhood (McNay 2003).

Other expressions of intimacy as an experience of immediate intersubjective understanding were empathy, harmony, and advocacy. The ultra-Orthodox women "came to voice" (Hooks 1989), as they spoke in the language of "we" ("we are all in a similar situation"; "we are all in the same boat"), responded with collective understanding and empathy, and mobilized harmoniously to protect and defend each other and their culture and faith in the face of the demand that they undergo

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change ("Women speak here from the place that is good for us because that is what God wanted for us; this is a spiritual perspective"). These expressions of empathy and harmony and advocacy echo Solomon's (2003) findings in her study of a vocational training group for low SES women, most from African American and Latino cultural groups. Solomon described the association of the women and their defense of one another in the group as "sistering," which was used as a way to oppose the white, middle-class facilitator and others who do not understand their world.

The expression of intimacy among ultra-Orthodox women raises questions about the familiar conceptualizations of intimacy which originate in Western traditions and discourses that foster individualism and autonomous subjectivity (Jamieson 2011). In Western psychological literature, intimacy is centrally related to the self-disclosure of feelings, thoughts, and personal experiences to another individual (Tan, Overall, and Taylor 2012). While these definitions of intimacy and self-disclosure have received empirical support in individualistic Western cultures (Laurenceau et al. 2004), the findings are inconsistent in collectivist cultures. A study found that, unlike Americans who express intimacy through non-sexual physical contact, the Japanese define and express intimacy through appreciation and understanding (Seki, Matsumoto, and Imahori 2002). Another study comparing Canadians of Chinese descent to Canadians of European descent found that both groups conceptualize intimacy similarly as self-disclosure that includes open communication, sharing, and authenticity (Marshall 2008). However, there are very few empirical studies about expressions of intimacy in group spaces, particularly about the care and well-being of participants from low SES collectivist cultures.

The present study sought to trace the role of intimacy for ultra-Orthodox women in the group occupational process. The literature implies that group intimacy plays a role in the individual's emotional and psychological development, clarifying the meaning of close relationships to them (MacKenzie and Livesley 1984). As members of a collectivist society that cultivates an interdependent self (Markus and Kitayama 2012) and is characterized by communitarianism (George and Muhammed 2023), the women are not engaged in their individual uniqueness and feel affinity and solidarity by belonging to that cultural group. Therefore, the common role of intimacy as a response to the need to clarify the meaning of close relationships for the individuals in a group (Garfield 2010) is less relevant for them.

Our findings revealed that the intimacy expressed by the ultra-Orthodox women, through empathy, harmony and advocacy, and a shared language, fulfilled their shared collective needs. They experienced a cross-cultural encounter with a Western neoliberal model of group work based on discourse and the values of change, individualism, reflexive self-work, and placing the self at the center; all of which contradict their values and culture. Within this encounter, the women used the practice of intimacy to create a subjective feeling of closeness and orientation toward one another while also expressing their common identity. They used their similarity to cope with the facilitator's demands and the neoliberal psychological discourse originating in secular and individualistic societies (Shoshana 2017). Through their

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empathy, harmony and advocacy, and shared language, they created and utilized intimacy as an immediate practice even before the establishment of intimacy in the group — which is usually achieved over a number of meetings (Miles, Paquin, and Kivlighan 2011) — in order to cope with the clash between the orders of discourse and practice hidden resistance.

De Certeau argued that groups excluded from the hegemonic group, such as immigrants and ethnic minorities, produce new, invisible forms of resistance (Rovea 2020). Yilmaz (2013) demonstrated this among Turks living as an ethnic minority group in Germany, who employ daily hidden resistance tactics of Turkish lifestyle — such as eating Turkish food, reading Turkish newspapers, watching Turkish TV, and using a new Turkish version of German — to resist the imposed German lifestyle. In our study, the ultra-Orthodox women used intimacy to express their opposition through "talk back" and self-help, both previously recognized as practices of hidden daily resistance (Biana 2020; Hooks 1989; Scott 1985, 2012).

"Talking back" served to make an identity distinction and to present an alternative narrative to the one attributed to them due to their social and cultural affiliation. Confronted with the expectation of aspiring for significant occupational change, the women provided the facilitators with religious explanations for their desire for just small changes. They thus distinguished between themselves and the stigma attributed to low SES people as being in distress and awaiting salvation (Reutter et al. 2009) and expressed satisfaction with their lives.

The second practice of resistance was unplanned self-help (Scott 1985). Faced with the expectation of working independently and individually (e.g., choosing cards and declaring positive traits) alongside the facilitator's refusal to help them when they struggled, the ultra-Orthodox women began to act collectively as a group and help each other using a shared language reflecting their culture and values. This practice of self-help created an intimacy that forged a new order in the group, according to which they determined the form of their participation: from being passive participants receiving instructions on how to act in the group, they became active agents determining what was done in the group and its rules. According to Scott (1990), this form of resistance is spontaneous, disorganized, and hidden so that the dominant group does not recognize it.

The present study suggests the use of intimacy to not only create closeness between group participants but also practice daily hidden resistance as members of minority groups from collectivist cultures seeking to cope with the supremacy of the neoliberal discourse (Shoshana 2017). As low SES marginalized women, they used intimacy as a counter-conduct or a way of "not being governed quite so much" (Foucault 2007). They took the opportunity to "talk back," "come to voice," and send a message to the hegemon who oppress them daily. This outcome of "not being governed so much" is crucial to their self-concept.

We suggest that organizations, government programs, and professionals in the field of care and welfare should be familiar with these expressions of intimacy that rely on both self-disclosure and interpretations taken from the collectivist culture of

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minority groups. They should also recognize the use of intimacy as a practice of hidden everyday resistance, used as a strategy for dealing with intercultural tensions and conflicts. This study makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on the conceptualization of intimacy as a resource for resolving tensions, contradictions, and clashes between orders of discourse. It offers a theoretical framework of intimacy as a strategy or active practice for obtaining a contained space that enables the individual's emotional development and the creation of group dynamics that help preserve the identity and individuality of different cultural minority groups. The study's practical contribution includes the facilitation of group work and processes and the construction of intentional intimacy in a group setting.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESERCH

Despite its important contributions, there are several limitations inherent in this study. First, the study was conducted among a group of ultra-Orthodox women who belong to a collectivist culture with specific characteristics. We suggest that future research examines the concept of intimacy and its expression among groups from both other collectivistic cultures and different individualistic cultures.

Second, this study explored intimacy among participants in an occupational rehabilitation group. We recommend future examinations of intimacy in different types of support groups (e.g., empowerment groups, groups for coping with illness, parent groups, children's groups, and adolescent groups). It is also important to examine intimacy and its expression in group therapies. A comparison between therapeutic groups and non-therapeutic groups could expand our understanding of definitions of intimacy, practices of intimacy, and group members' different uses of intimacy as part of group dynamics and in their relationships with facilitators and therapists. Such comparisons can, in addition, teach us about different expressions of intimacy and, especially, verbal expressions versus non-verbal expressions such as body gestures.

Third, this study focused on intimacy as a way of reinforcing the women's shared identity and opposing the occupational group's neoliberal discourse. Future studies should examine the role of intimacy as a therapeutic factor (Yalom and Leszcz 2020) in different types of groups, focusing on the group dynamics and interactions and identifying more manifestations of intimacy and its role in the group process. They might also explore gender differences in the manifestations of intimacy in women's and men's groups (Lafontaine et al. 2018).

Finally, this study relied on observations to identify intimacy in the group process. Despite our important findings, we recommend that future studies conduct in-depth, one-on-one interviews with members of various support and therapy groups in which they can ask more directly about their subjective definitions of intimacy.

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