



'I Didn't Know How to Be with My Husband': State-Religion Struggles over Sex Education in Israel and England

LEA TARAGIN-ZELLER 

Woolf Institute and Reproductive Sociology Research Group (ReproSoc), Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge

BEN KASSTAN 

Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex
ben.kasstan@mail.huji.ac.il

[Correction added on December 11, 2020, after first online publication: The co-author email id has been added.]

Sex education presents a major dilemma for state-minority relations, reflecting a conflict between basic rights to education and religious freedom. In this comparative ethnography of informal sex education among ultra-Orthodox Jews (Haredim) in Israel and England, we frame the critical difference between "age-appropriate" and "life-stage" (marriage and childbirth) models of sex education. Conceptualizing these competing approaches as disputes over "knowledge responsibility," we call for more context-specific understandings of how educational responsibilities are envisioned in increasingly diverse populations. [Gender, Judaism, religion, sex education, state]

I see the Haredi community as a victim to a shady deal that was made on its back since the establishment of the [Israeli] state. Education is under state responsibility.

Ilan Gilon, Israeli Member of Knesset, 2018.¹

State interference in religious education is "possibly the most serious" issue facing Jews in the UK since the expulsion ordered by Edward I over 700 years ago.

Rabbi Zimmerman, Chief Rabbi of Haredi Jews in Gateshead, England, 2018.²

These two statements reflect a current controversy in Israel and the UK regarding the right to autonomy over education among Haredi Jews, who constitute self-protective religious minorities otherwise known as "ultra-Orthodox."³ Education is a contested domain between religious minorities and the state in Israel and England, but current controversies have been amplified surrounding relationships and sex education (henceforth RSE). In our comparative ethnography among Haredim in both Israel and the UK, we found competing conceptualizations of "knowledge responsibility" regarding RSE between state policy makers and religious activists. Although state policy aims to deliver RSE in age appropriate ways, Haredim instead approach sex education as appropriate solely according to life stages. Although Israel and the UK have distinct political approaches and histories to education, our comparative approach traces the similarities between competing conceptualizations of "knowledge responsibility" between Haredim and state policies across these two settings.

We draw on ethnographic research of Haredi relationships curricula and educators in both Israel and England to ask: What forms of informal education are advanced by Haredi educators in the absence and evasion of educational infrastructures? How do these efforts

Anthropology & Education Quarterly, Vol. 52, Issue 1, pp. 5–20, ISSN 0161-7761, online ISSN 1548-1492.

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DOI: 10.1111/aeq.12358

to bridge knowledge gaps create new forms of knowledge gatekeeping and power? How can ethnographic accounts of bodily and sexual education in religious minority communities contribute to anthropological and education policy debates about state intervention in religious-based curricula?

Background

During the initial stages of the establishment of the Israeli state, a “shady deal,” as Gilon put it (above), set a legal infrastructure of educational autonomy for Haredim, free from supervision and interference from Israel’s Ministry of Education.⁴ Similarly, Haredim in the UK benefit from a particular historical trajectory where education was long delivered in a religious infrastructure before a state responsibility was assumed (see Hills 2015). Having relinquished this “knowledge responsibility,” states now struggle to inculcate norms of “reproductive citizenship” among religious minority groups through relationships and sexuality curricula.⁵

Zimmerman’s claim (above) of “state interference” refers to proposed changes to the teaching of RSE in primary and secondary schools in England, which is a major controversy for particular religious minority groups in the UK at the time of writing (January 2020).⁶ Religious-rights activists argue that the responsibility over relationships and sexuality curricula “falls to parents or legal guardians, and not to schools,” and that Jewish schools claiming to be Orthodox should not adopt educational initiatives that incorporate “approval in any sense whatsoever of lifestyles prohibited in the Hebrew Bible” (Alderman quoted in Rocker 2018b).⁷ These recent contestations between Haredi Jews and the state, in both Israel and the UK, demonstrate how responsibilities pertaining to RSE appear to be in opposition for state and Jewish minorities. The re-envisaging of pedagogical projects around sexuality and gender diversity have exposed the historically fraught balance between freedom of religion and of education, which have been central to the ways that liberal democratic states and religious communities negotiate their relationships.

From the perspective of the state, the primary purpose of RSE is to ensure that citizens “develop positive values and a strong moral framework that will guide their decisions, judgement and behavior. It ensures that pupils are taught about the benefits of loving, healthy relationships and delaying sex” (Department of Health 2013, 13; see also Public Health England 2015). Israel’s Ministry of Education (2018) advances a similar goal to “help children grow up in the healthiest and happiest way, to know the difference between normative and healthy [relationships] and non-normative and violent relationships.”⁸ Moreover, these UK and Israeli frameworks are embedded in global public health frameworks, which view such curricula as enabling the promotion and protection of core sexual and reproductive rights (UNFPA 2018).

Yet, religious authorities instead prefer to control and limit adolescent RSE in order to promote a core Haredi philosophy of cisgender, heterosexual sex in marriage, largely aimed at procreation (Raucher 2020; Taragin-Zeller 2017, 2019a, 2019b). These notions are made possible by earlier age at marriage through a formal match-making process (Lehmann and Siebzeiner 2009)⁹ as well as high total fertility rates among Haredi Jews compared with the broader populations in Israel and the UK (Mashiah 2018; Okun 2013; Staetsky and Boyd 2015). Issues around sex and relationships are only addressed at relevant moments in the lifecycle, in accordance with Haredi worldviews inspired by stringent interpretations of *halachah* (Jewish law) (Kasstan 2019; Taragin-Zeller 2019a, 2019b). Educational intervention by the state, thus, is perceived to threaten and disrupt the internal governance of the group. Thus, RSE is situated as an area of knowledge that brings

opposing conceptualizations of bodily governance into contact for Haredi Jews, with internal pedagogical projects instead framed as “culturally sensitive” and appropriate to the Haredi lifecourse.

Haredi Jews are intertwined in a global network, with relations maintained by the circulation of knowledge, transnational marriage, and economic exchange between Israel, North America, and Europe. The global network is also sustained by the fact that all Haredim are eligible for Israeli citizenship and may come and go for family events, pilgrimage, and education without legal impediments. Anthropologists tend to study Haredi groups within their nation-state contexts (e.g. El-Or 1994; Fader 2009; Kasstan 2017; Stadler 2009; Taragin-Zeller 2014), and we instead push for a comparative approach that highlights how the Haredi global network of knowledge responsibility reproduces similar state-religious dilemmas around sex education. In so doing, we chart how ideas of reproduction and education “travel” (cf. Unnithan-Kumar and Khanna 2015) and form the basis of political controversy.

An ethnographic approach to RSE in Israel and England offers a comparative analysis of state-religion relationalities, using a minority in a Jewish majority state and a religious minority in Europe. In both cases, a historical precedent has created an infrastructural vacuum in which state policy struggles to reconcile religious freedom with the state’s responsibility to protect and promote sexual and reproductive knowledge. This, in turn, has directly resulted in inner-communal creativity of female authorities to bridge these knowledge gaps as well as maintain group autonomy. In what follows, we explore the differing ways “knowledge responsibility” is applied, negotiated, and contested amid a particular crisis for religious minority groups in two state contexts. Based on the pedagogical projects of RSE among Haredim in Israel and England, we analyze two competing models of “knowledge responsibility” held by the state(s) and Haredim *vis à vis* the body, reproduction, and sex.

In the Haredi case, “knowledge responsibility” relates to notions of appropriate and relevant *stages* in the normative Jewish woman’s life course, punctuated by key transitional moments of marriage and childbirth, whereas state-based education programs promote *age*-appropriate models of knowledge as a preventive strategy. A comparative Israel-UK approach grasps how knowledge responsibility is assumed and seized by Haredi authorities as a strategy to safeguard processes of social reproduction as part of a broader pursuit of autonomy, with increasingly defended points of crossing with the non-Haredi world. The contests over curricula in Israel and the UK demonstrate how state authorities struggle to protect and advance adolescent rights to sexual and reproductive well-being in faith-based contexts. We also highlight how Haredi minorities have simultaneously sought autonomy from state curricula and have attempted to fill the gaps in reproductive and sexual knowledge at appropriate stages in normative Jewish life. By integrating ethnographic work conducted in Israel and England, we examine the efforts of non-state educators as they attempt to meet the shortfalls of sexual and reproductive knowledge on a communal level but simultaneously create and reify new forms of knowledge gatekeeping and power on the individual level.

Whereas much research has focused on the dilemma of state intervention in religious education through legal frameworks (Barak-Korren 2017) and curricula assessment (Kong 2005; Tan 2010), an ethnographic-based account highlights educational infrastructures and the ways these shape everyday minority-state relations. By situating “knowledge responsibility” over the body at the anthropological intersection of education, religion, and reproduction, we offer an analytical framework of interest in itself but also as a site that reproduces and redefines minority-state relationality.

Religion, Education, and the State

Examining how religious minorities negotiate their boundaries *vis-à-vis* what is cast as the external world has become one of the pillars of the anthropology of religion. Over the past thirty years, scholars have particularly focused on fundamentalist groups and demonstrated how self-protective communities are inclined to reinforce internal taboo systems by tightening restrictions that pertain to modesty, probity, and bodily practices (e.g., Mahmood 2005; Stadler and Taragin-Zeller 2017; Taragin-Zeller 2014, 2015). Building on the seminal work of Mary Douglas (1966), researchers have defined these groups as “enclave cultures” (Almond et al. 2003, 34; Sivan 1995): distinct communities with highly demarcated cultural and moral boundaries as well as strict taboos that partition outsiders from insiders and along rigid lines of gender. Aimed at thwarting the putative efforts of “demonic forces” to corrupt the group (Almond et al. 2003, 34–36), these taboos and barriers segregate the “virtuous” and “morally superior” fundamentalists from the influences of the “depraved,” “polluted,” and “dangerous” host society (Sivan 1995). As Nurit Stadler (2009, 2) puts it, “piety, with its mastering body regime, is the only force capable of changing or restraining the secular and heretical nature of the world and thus perhaps of ensuring its future, if not present, redemption.”

Religious schools are a primary strategy to segregate identity, which reinforces gendered taboos, concepts, and practices (Aran 1991; Davidman 2011; Fader 2009; Hakak 2012; Zalcberg-Block 2011). It is for this reason that the regulation of religious schools is among the most prominent challenges liberal states face (Katzir and Perry-Hazan 2018). Policy makers in a range of jurisdictions have struggled to resolve this issue, from secular education in Muslim schools in Singapore (Kong 2005; Tan 2010) to Amish children’s exemption from compulsory schooling in the US. State intervention requires a delicate balance between a child’s right to adequate education versus their right to have education that is compatible with their social and religious worldviews (Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, Article 29(1); UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1999, 6).

Educational autonomy is a product of long, and often conflicting, negotiations between state actors trying to promote standardized education policies and non-state representatives who demand to have their concerns addressed. Although the degree of state intervention in religious education varies between Israel and the UK, the demarcation of communal borders through moral discourse is at the heart of negotiations between religious and state authorities. Thus, these negotiations in themselves serve as a strategy for border making and focus on demarcating and safeguarding the body (at the individual level) and the collective life (cf. Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987).

Historically, the Haredim in both Israel and England have acquired varying levels of autonomy from national curricula and regulation (e.g. Perry-Hazan 2015), while disengaging from topics that pose challenges to their inner-communal worldviews and lifestyles. Haredi female pupils usually study math and science (vernacularly termed the “Wonders of Creation”) up to the age of 15, as women are expected to navigate the non-Haredi world as wives, mothers, and main breadwinners. The Haredi education system raises boys, on the other hand, with the expectation of being Torah scholars, bestowing little, if any, formal science and math education. Although much public scrutiny has focused on the lower levels of secular (*chol*) education in Haredi schooling, one of the topics that is increasingly gaining traction is RSE. On the one hand, the need for separate curricula at Haredi schools is linked to community members’ and religious authorities’ anxieties regarding the proper timing, language, and content of sexual and reproductive knowledge.

These programs are perceived as necessary to promote bodily practices that demarcate Haredim as “God fearing” Jews, such as the centrality of the Jewish heterosexual family and conformity to gender norms and practices. Yet attempts to exclude gender inclusivity from Haredi curricula have been a recent point of public controversy, particularly in the UK, which we discuss later in this paper.

The contest over who controls RSE is, from an emic perspective, built on a reasoned argument. Bodily education regarding reproduction is an essential part of reproducing collective autonomy. As Sarah Franklin put it: “Reproduction is not only about managing or improving reproduction, but is itself a means of producing other things, other relationships, other values, or other identities” (Franklin 2002, 153). For this reason, reproductive health and education constitute a “borderland” where Haredi Jews and the UK state negotiate each other’s positions, bringing multiple modes of bodily governance into contact (Kasstan 2019). We develop the concept of a “borderland” to include sex education, insofar as it raises dilemmas of how to appropriately protect (through knowledge, from knowledge) and when to protect (age or stage in life). Although scholars have focused on state policy regarding reproduction as a unit of analysis (Briggs 2018; Yuval-Davis 1997), we focus on the role non-state actors play in shaping and disrupting religious minority and state relationships through body knowledge and management. We draw on ethnographic research of Haredi relationships curricula and educators in both Israel and England to ask: What creative strategies do Haredi educators employ as they attempt to meet the shortfalls of sexuality and reproductive knowledge among women? To what extent are the beneficiaries of knowledge stratified? How do efforts to bridge knowledge gaps create new forms of knowledge gatekeeping and power? Finally, we ask: How can ethnographic explorations of informal relationships and sexuality education in religious minority communities contribute to anthropological and education policy debates about state intervention in religious-based curricula?

Methods

Our comparative ethnography traces the circulation of knowledge and practices of sex education across the lifecourse among non-state Haredi actors in Israel and England. In order to gain these multiple perspectives, this article draws on interviews, ethnographic field observations, and textual data collected in Israel and England between 2010 and 2016. The Israeli data form part of a five-year ethnographic study (2010–2015) in Haredi neighborhoods in Jerusalem. The UK research was conducted in Manchester between 2013 and 2016. A combination of research methods (including participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and text analysis) were employed in both settings to evaluate how knowledge pertaining to gender, sexuality, and intimacy is transmitted during stages of bodily and social transition, especially for women reaching (expected) marriageable age and the onset of childbearing. Interviews were recorded using a digital audio recording device, when permission was granted, and detailed notes recorded. Recordings from interviews and participant observations in the field were transcribed verbatim and analyzed on both a separate and comparative basis.

Haredi Jews

Haredim account for roughly 12 percent of Israel’s population (ICBS 2017) and constituted, at most, 16 percent of the UK’s Jewish population (approx 275,000) at the time of the 2011 census (Staetsky and Boyd 2015). Haredim live in accordance with the teachings derived from the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) as well as a voluminous body of

rabbinic literature, commentary, and rulings. Haredi Jews can be distinguished from Progressive, Conservative, Orthodox, and Israeli Religious Zionist Jewish streams by their self-protective stance and avoidance of secular education and professional training. In practice, the Haredi sector consists of multiple groups, each with their own religious leaders (rabbis), teachings, and observances. This population can be loosely divided into Lithuanian *yeshiva*-based (Torah learning) communities, Hasidic dynasties, and Sephardi Haredim (who trace their origins to the Iberian peninsula, North Africa, and the Middle East). Differences aside, all the sector's members are easily identified by their more or less uniform dress code: black hats and dark suits for men; and similarly colored ankle-length skirts, long sleeves, and head coverings for women.

Jerusalem, Israel

Jerusalem, the largest city in Israel, with over 900,000 residents, has a Jewish majority population, 35 percent of which are Haredi (Cahaner et al. 2017; ICBS 2017). During 2010, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted at a Bais Yaakov seminary in Jerusalem, the flagship of Haredi female education. Following that, fifty interviews were conducted in Ivrit (Modern Hebrew) with a range of emerging adults, Haredi men and women, as well as a variety of bridal counsellors, rabbinic experts, gynecologists, and sex therapists who tailor their services to the Haredi community. Participation observation was also conducted in three courses for bridal instructors focused on disseminating knowledge about Jewish laws and traditions pertaining to family life and over twenty family education classes oriented for Haredim; as well as analysis of handbooks, manuals, pamphlets, and newspaper articles to scrutinize expectations surrounding the "ideal" Jewish family, fertility, and reproduction.

Manchester, England

Although 30,000 Jews live in Manchester, the region has among the fastest growing Jewish populations in the UK and Europe for two key reasons: higher total fertility rates among Haredi women as well as considerable inward migration due to a lower cost of living relative to London (Liphshiz 2016; Staetsky and Boyd 2015). Twelve months of ethnographic research (2013–2014) were conducted in Manchester to evaluate perceptions of maternity care and infant health among Haredi Jewish families. Forty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with Haredi parents, doulas, midwives, allied healthcare professionals, and rabbinical authorities. This paper focuses on a subset of data from a network of Haredi Jewish doulas, who provide the full continuum of antenatal, birth, and postpartum support to local Jewish women, a service they provide at no financial cost. Participant observation was conducted in closed family and social settings, to gain insights into processes of social reproduction. The Manchester study also involved textual analysis of Haredi literature pertaining to maternity care and family health, which was both produced locally and imported from Haredi neighborhoods in the United States.

Participants provided verbal consent, in line with the research guidelines outlined by the Association of Social Anthropologists (2011). Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Boards of Durham University (UK), and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel).

Education in Infrastructure Vacuums: Bridal Classes

On a cold Wednesday morning in February 2011, I walked into the Bais Yaakov seminary in Jerusalem and took my usual place at the back of the classroom. I was chatting

with Rivky, noticing that she had started to put make-up on (a sign that she was starting to look for a *shidduch*)¹⁰, when Mrs. Cohen came up to me and whispered in my ear, "You should go to the *callot* class this week." "What *callot* class?" I asked, "You just got engaged, did you not? It is time for you to join them." I mumbled something under my breath as I quickly followed the directions Mrs. Cohen briefly gave me. I wandered through a part of the seminary building to which I had never been. As I climbed down the stairs and entered the basement, I wondered, "What could they possibly be learning in this class?" I had already spent half a year of fieldwork in a regular classroom learning about the importance and challenges of building a Jewish home. I entered the small room and joined a group of eight girls; the teacher Mrs. Schwartz, sat with them. I noticed the change immediately. She was not standing across from them, she was sitting amid them. "Welcome!" She called as she waved me into the room, "*Mazal tov! Mazal Tov!* So happy you can join us now!" For the next hour she outlined the practical aspects of homemaking while giving everyday examples of how to make dinner when you have nothing left in the fridge. It was as practical as you could get. At the end of the lecture, she asked if I was intending to progress to the one-to-one series of *callah* classes that she offers privately at her home. "Isn't that just what we did?" I wondered. She answered with a flushed face, "You know, the private classes!" (LTZ field notes, February 2011).

This vignette describes how Haredi girls are gradually introduced to this body of religious knowledge regarding sexuality and sexual conduct in religious school settings. Although gendered theologies of marriage and family life are discussed in weekly classes on "The Jewish Home," it is only upon engagement that young women are invited to hold a practical group conversation about homemaking (as outlined above). But this is not the end of the bridal preparation. Mrs. Cohen offered an invitation, albeit in hushed tones, into a private one-on-one world of marital intimacy.

This secrecy was typical, not only for a researcher but the broader way sexuality is addressed. Israel and England are typical of the global Haredi praxis through which sexuality is mediated carefully, addressed in hushed tones, and only formally broached as part of formal marriage preparation. Although informal chats about forbidden subjects likely exist, systematic sex education is openly addressed in one-on-one *callah* courses, literally bride classes. This creates a situation in which, even though marriage is heavily discussed throughout their life, there is an astute curiosity and urgency to learn the biological and emotional details of family life within a few months, the typical engagement time in the Haredi community.

The one-on-one *callah* classes range in length and price (typically four to ten hourly meetings at around 100₪ per class or £20), brides are taught the laws of "*taharat hamishpacha*" (family purity) and offered basic sex education. The laws of family purity are an elaborate menstruation defilement and purification system, which organizes marital sexuality through a recurring cycle of purity and impurity (Avishai 2008; Hartman and Marmon 2004).¹¹ In accordance with these laws, married women self-regulate their bodies as bleeding, spotting, or other irregularities demarcate a woman as a *niddah*, a time in which sexual intercourse and any other physical contact is prohibited between a married couple until immersion in a *mikvah* (ritual bath), which too is conducted in utmost secrecy. The concealment of this system, as one of the bridal teachers, Ruchi explained: "Is so special, it is the only part of Jewish law that any woman feels like a *ba'alat teshuva* (returnee).¹² Whereas all other areas of Jewish law are practiced since you are born, this is the only thing you really have no idea about until you get engaged" (June 2015, interview).

Over the past fifty years, the transmission of purity laws has transformed in two key ways. Previously, women were taught the laws of purity by their mother or another elder woman in basic yet practical sessions without formal learning of textual sources. Nowadays, the transmission of knowledge has developed into a “pseudo-profession, as premarital counselors are not paid, there is no standardized training, testing or formal requirements to which counsellors are bound” (Marmon-Grumet 2017, 39). To a similar extent, *callah* classes vary in their quality, quantity, and philosophy (which was dependent on the particular teacher). The quality depends on the *callah* teacher and on her particular choices regarding what knowledge she sees vital for transmission. Although most of the *callah* classes focus on knowledge transmission of the laws of purity, there are also an array of topics that may be covered, from emotional to psychological and sexual education. In addition, although most bridal teachers will suggest a gynecologist visit to make sure the bride-to-be’s cycle does not coincide with the wedding, most bridal teachers use the topic of *chuppah niddah* to promote procreation, which they are expected to realize quickly, within a year of marriage.¹³

Callah classes thus serve as a site for knowledge transmission, which simultaneously reifies secrecy and taboo notions of sexuality and thus enforces structures of power and gatekeeping. Furthermore, the landscape of sexuality and reproduction is located in an educational “gray zone.” On the one hand, the transition from family based education to transmission by “pseudo-professional” bridal teachers (who may or may not have formal training as educators) reflects an inner-communal striving to take this topic seriously. But, on the other hand, as these learning sessions are conducted outside of the regular classroom setting, there is no official regulation, and they are funded privately, which has an effect on the depth and quality of teaching.

Women in this study perceived these classes as simple introductions to bodily education but then searched for secondary avenues to learn more about sexuality, marital relations, and the realities of reproductive lives. Over the last thirty years there has been a rapid growth in marriage guidebooks, which can be purchased in Haredi bookstores (Engelberg and Novis-Deutsch 2012), demonstrating how knowledge practices circulate across the global Haredi network. Yet, this approach also reflects how women have to invest effort to bridge the knowledge gaps caused by an educational vacuum.

There was, however, another way women found to access more information and ask further questions: by becoming a bridal teacher. This strategy became clear at the end of one of the bridal counsellors training courses we participated in. After a year-long course, Chava, one of the course participants, shared the following with other course participants:

I want you to know that I didn’t come to this course to become a bridal counselor. After three months of marriage, I would never imagined that I would have enough experience to teach others, it is just that I got married and felt so lost... I didn’t understand the *niddah* laws, and I... *I didn’t know how to be with my husband...* I didn’t know where I could learn more, so I decided to join this course. She pauses, tears come down her eyes. I don’t know how to thank you... this course has saved my marriage! (June 2013, fieldnote, emphasis added)

Without the enabling knowledge to fulfil the normative role and expectations of a Haredi Jewish wife, Chava struggled to navigate complex *niddah* laws and a new marital relationship. Joining the bridal counsellors course to access this knowledge (to train herself, not to train as an educator) reflects a strategy to subvert knowledge gate keeping and circumvent the infrastructural vacuums left by the absence of state curricula. Although this privileged strategy was shared by other women in our study, bridging knowledge gaps this way was limited to those with the spare time and financial resources to do so.

Reproducing “Knowledge Responsibility” and Autonomy: Maternity Care

Childbirth and maternity reflect the next area in the Haredi lifecycle where knowledge gaps are overtly clear. According to Haredi worldviews, maternity-related knowledge is transmitted at the appropriate stage, typically when a woman is engaged or already married. In Haredi neighborhoods, the responsibility for women’s reproductive education passes to approved (female) authorities outside the formal education system. Mrs. Yacoub is a classic example. She has been practicing as a doula in Manchester for over twenty years and supports women with the full continuum of antenatal, birth, and postpartum care at no cost. She described the issues with reproductive knowledge as being highly tessellated and stratified, with *frum* women in higher income families being “confident in what they want and they know where to look for it and they know how to deal with the health service.” This stratified transmission of bodily knowledge applies particularly to reproduction, with Mrs. Fischer, a trained midwife, describing how “I’m very open with my girls when it comes to their own body awareness and life questions, whereas other mums would say, ‘they [children] asked the question how did the baby come in?’” (March 2015, interview).

Avenues for accessing health information are, however, restricted for many Haredi and Hassidish Jews due to a cautious or selective use of the Internet, and also a general issue of disengagement or mistrust of information from the NHS. Mrs. Yacoub takes on the responsibility to promote reproductive knowledge among pregnant women from these particular socio-religious circles:

There is a lot of ignorance on the part of the [*frum* Jewish] women because they don’t know. They’re not knowledgeable. They don’t access television. They don’t access the Internet. They don’t access newspapers. Where do they get their information from? Basically what the hospital gives them and most of that—some of them read it—some of them just put it in the bin. So they are very, very naive. I would say they are ignorant about their own health, and their own body, and it’s my job to really educate them how to look after themselves. (July 2015, interview)

What is important about Mrs. Yacoub’s claim is how she frames herself as being *responsible* for making bodily and reproductive knowledge available to Haredi Jewish women, who are otherwise represented as “ignorant” and lacking agency—and thus in need of guidance at a life stage that is perceived to be appropriate. Although Mrs. Yacoub provides maternity and postpartum care at no cost to women, it is important to situate her role in the political engagement with healthcare among a protective minority group: Her intervention helps to make sensitive, perhaps contested, areas of healthcare and knowledge available to women while bolstering group autonomy over health interventions and notions of “authoritative knowledge” (Jordan 1997) that might conflict with the *halachic* positions of religious authorities.

Mrs. Yacoub’s role as a doula also involves signposting women to relevant (intragroup) services for postpartum care, such as Haredi peer-led support groups for post-natal depression, or, more routinely, supporting women with obtaining rabbinical dispensation for birth spacing technologies (see: Kasstan 2019; Taragin-Zeller 2017). As she put it, “so my job is really *protection*, giving information, advocating for her with other people” (emphasis added; July 2015, interview). Thus, non-state actors gatekeep sensitive areas of healthcare that promote individual welfare (such as access to birth spacing) while also maintaining group autonomy and reinforcing the silences of reproductive education at formative, earlier stages.

There are, however, discrepancies between what religious authorities and *frum* Jews consider to be appropriate and accessible sources of knowledge. Although the former are seen as imposing restrictions around information, the latter are concerned about preparing young people for the reproductive realities and pressures they might face. In the words of Batsheva, a convert to Haredi Judaism living in Manchester:

There is a lot of stuff that goes on here that cause health issues—like drugs and not safe sex—that parents don't know about [...] there's a lot of secrecy. From the modern Orthodox to the right, there's a lot of secrecy [...] They're in denial of a lot of issues. There's an inability to admit that whatever is going on in general society must be going on here. (June 2015, interview)

Having joined Haredi Judaism, Batsheva makes visible the gaps around sexual and reproductive health education, and the implications of a social “denial,” which she claimed are prevalent in the non-Haredi world. Thus a consequence of the Haredi model of “knowledge responsibility,” which focuses exclusively on sex education as part of marriage preparation, overlooks Haredi youths engaging in premarital sex.

The care work of postpartum doulas demonstrates how core issues of consent in sexual relationships extended to marriage. Mrs. Fogel works in Manchester's Haredi settlement as a postpartum doula, and although addressing the restrictive avenues of reproductive education was not a formal part of her role, she was nonetheless concerned by the potential for women to encounter nonconsensual acts and abuse in marital relations:

They haven't really had the talk with their mum's or they haven't watched TV. You know, things like that. I mean, I'm all for experimentation—everybody should do what they feel comfortable with—but if one party is not comfortable with it or puts up with it because she thinks she has to, because that's her duty as a wife, that's not okay. So if you have to tell a twenty-year old woman that, “no he can't do that to you if you don't like it,” *it's really sad in a way*, she thinks that's what it's like for everybody. (July 2015, interview, emphasis added)

In a context where sexual intercourse is conceptualized as part of marital “duty,” Mrs. Fogel signals her discomfort with the education processes that withhold knowledge from Haredi Jewish women. Although non-state actors attempt to meet the shortfalls of what is deemed inappropriate to learn at a responsive—rather than preventive—stage, the appropriate “life stage” (marriage) is not the optimal time to intervene.

Discussion

Educational autonomy has emerged as a major dilemma for state-faith relations in liberal democracies, reflecting a conflict between basic education policies and rights to religious freedom. The issue of universal sex education in Israel and England has intensified and strained relations around secular education, reflecting new frontiers for the negotiations of group boundaries, rights, and responsibilities. The comparative approach we take in this paper presents two competing models of “knowledge responsibility” held by the state(s) and Haredim vis-à-vis sex education. In the Haredi case, “knowledge responsibility” is assumed by religious authorities and transmitted at appropriate and relevant *stages* in the normative Jewish woman's lifecourse, punctuated by key transitional moments of marriage and childbirth. On the other hand, state-based education programs promote *age*-appropriate models of knowledge as a preventive strategy and as part of a responsibility to deliver a comprehensive curricula that crafts ideal “reproductive citizens.” The state notions of age appropriateness are in direct opposition, as premarital sex

is forbidden in Haredi worldviews. In the Haredi perspective, knowledge transmission pertaining to sexuality that is not yet relevant (or deemed irrelevant by religious authorities) is harmful to both individuals and the collective (cf. Scheper-Huges and Lock 1987) if occurring before the ordained stage in the life course.

The informal pedagogical projects observed among Haredim in Israel and the UK (presented above) are therefore best framed as reactive to a void in state responsibility over RSE rather than constituting a preventive approach that is embedded in a rights-based global public health framework. Yet, not all Haredi parents support the “knowledge responsibility” presided over by religious authorities, who instead view curricula in the general population as having benefit for Haredi Jewish adolescents. Whereas Haredi religious rights activists claim that RSE is the prerogative of the family domain, in reality, the responsibility for transmitting women’s body knowledge pertaining to marital relations and childbearing is passed to female pseudo-professionals. In a vacuum of formal RSE, Haredi female authorities struggle to mend the gaps in knowledge by creating one-on-one female knowledge transmission settings at relevant moments in the Haredi lifecycle. Although communal efforts have been put into the professionalization of female authorities to mend knowledge gaps for Haredi women, bodily education for Haredi men is scarce. Men, if they desire, may contact their local rabbi for premarital sessions, but these are even shorter and less widespread than the female sessions.

These sessions do reflect an aspiration to take sex education more seriously and meet educational shortfalls, yet they also replicate stratified and gatekeeping models of knowledge transmission. With “knowledge responsibility” passed from the state domain to the religious minority, autonomy and protection over social reproduction is maintained at the collective level, and access to bodily knowledge is stratified at the individual level, which curtails reproductive decision making after marriage and women’s ability to navigate family making pressures (Taragin-Zeller 2019a, 2019b). Stratified knowledge maintains unequal access to the enabling conditions of sexual and reproductive protection for women and men.

Recent controversies have highlighted issues of child sexual abuse and intimate partner violence, and the stigma of marital breakdown, among Haredim in Israel, England, the United States, and Australia, signaling the importance of promoting adolescent sexual and reproductive rights as part of a preventive pedagogical strategy in the global Haredi knowledge network. Drawing on similarities with media coverage of the Catholic church, Ayala Fader (2012) demonstrates how reports about Haredi sexual abuse scandals in US general media “made cracks in the communal wall of silence that rabbinic leadership worked to maintain as the sex abuse allegations came out.” To paraphrase Batsheva (introduced above), self-protective religious minorities are not “immune” from sexual pressures and there is an internal demand for religious authorities and educators to address these issues in educational curricula.

Even though Haredi gatekeepers attempt to address relationships and sexual intercourse in premarital counselling, LGBTQ education is even more fraught to include in school curricula, as Haredi religious authorities are vehemently opposed to non-heterosexual relationships. Building on our distinctions between age appropriate and stage appropriate, LGBTQ education does not filter in at any stage in the contemporary Haredi normative life and thus are never viewed as “stage appropriate.” Thus, the controversy around introducing LGBTQ inclusion in religious contexts is much deeper than a contest over knowledge content. It is viewed as being in direct contestation with attempts to reproduce the Haredi lifeworld, which is underpinned by an internal infrastructure of

education. It is for this reason that our conceptualization of age-stage appropriate education is useful to highlight how LGBTQ inclusion is one of the biggest obstacles to Haredi models of RSE, as well as state equality laws. Further studies are needed to explore what educational policies and/or communal efforts may help overcome these obstacles, which at the time of writing this paper are more thorny to resolve.

The comparative approach we have taken situates Haredi minorities in an intertwined network, where the circulation of knowledge, practices, and taboos are continuous across states. Highlighting the common structural inner logics, however, should be considered against the context-specific nuances in Israel and England. Although state-religion disputes over secular education in Israel are far from new, sex education in England is a contemporary and heated debate due to a shifting policy landscape. Further comparative research between Haredi centers in Israel, the US, and Europe will continue to yield new responses to the unresolved education and rights-based challenges that we have outlined.

Education, like healthcare, constitutes a borderland where states and minority groups negotiate each other's rights and responsibilities around bodily governance (Kasstan 2019). Within this domain, we argue that "knowledge responsibility" is central to understanding contemporary minority-state pursuits over protection. The issue of sex education reflects, as Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp put it (1991, 331), how the "'the politics of reproduction' cannot and should not be extracted from the examination of politics in general." Thus, we situate contests over RSE at the anthropological intersection of education, religion, and reproduction, and as a site that reproduces and relocates minority-state relationality.

The "age-stage" analysis offered in this paper shows how anthropology can offer nuanced tools to engage religious minorities and policy makers over sensitive, yet crucial, areas of education. We have shown that the issue of "knowledge responsibility" between states and religious minorities centers on competing claims to protection, which raises implications beyond the case at hand. Anthropology, as a discipline, lends itself well to bottom-up and comparative studies that take a broad look at both informal and formal education, and how responsibilities and rights are approached in increasingly diverse populations. Secular education and RSE pose major challenges for minority-state relations beyond the case at hand, and we call for more anthropological investment in understanding the inner logics behind each approach in order to foster ways to overcome a seemingly irreconcilable obstacle.

Lea Taragin-Zeller is a Research Fellow at the Woolf Institute and an affiliated researcher at ReproSoc (Reproductive Sociology Research Group), Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge. (lz378@cam.ac.uk)

Ben Kasstan is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Sociology & Anthropology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and School of Global Studies, University of Sussex (ben.kasstan@mail.huji.ac.il)

Notes

Acknowledgements. This research was funded by the Wellcome Trust (grant code: 101955/Z/13/Z), The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Israeli Democracy Institute. We thank Nurit Stadler and Katie Gaddini as well as the anonymous peer reviewers and the Anthropology and Education Quarterly editorial team for their helpful feedback. Lea Taragin-Zeller thanks her colleagues at the Woolf Institute and the Reproductive Sociology Research Group (ReproSoc) at the University of Cambridge and the Technion, and Ben Kasstan thanks his colleagues at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for their ongoing support.

1. Ilan Gilon is aligned to Israel's left-wing Meretz Party. See Knesset (2018) for full transcript, in Hebrew. The quotation that appears above has been translated from Hebrew to English by the lead author.

2. Quoted in Rocker (2018a).

3. Although the term "ultra-Orthodox" is a common English point of reference, it indicates a gradation of religious observance. We instead use the term "Haredi" (singular) and "Haredim" (plural), more common in the case of Israel, which means "those who tremble in awe of God." Even though Haredi Jews form a diverse population that differ in interpretations of religious authenticity, stringencies (*chumrot*), and practices (*minhagim*), they are nonetheless unified by a commitment to observing *halachah* (the codex of Jewish law) and self-protection from what is positioned as belonging to the external or non-Haredi world (especially non-religious education [*chol*] and employment).

4. Until 2013, almost all Haredi schools in Israel were considered "private" and hence, "unofficial" Israeli schools. The two main education networks: "Independent Education" and "Wellspring of Torah Education" receive full funding from the state, and the other unofficial schools receive 55-75% state funding.

5. Turner (2008: 53) frames "reproductive citizenship" in the context of the state's interest in population and governmentality, particularly the socio-legal conditions that enable people to reproduce (and the positionality of subsequently born children). We broaden the term "reproductive citizenship" to involve education strategies that project normative reproductive practices, among Haredi Jews, and as citizens in the UK and Israel.

6. The UK controversy over RSE has a lengthy background context that is useful to revisit here. The new guidelines are presented as age appropriate with primary schools (age 5–11) having to implement a relationships only curriculum, and secondary schools (age 11–16) offering a comprehensive program of relationships and sex education (House of Commons Library 2019). Faith schools would, as part of the proposed reform, be able to teach RSE in accordance with the tenets of their own faith, thus granting a degree of autonomy over the transmission of reproductive knowledge in education systems. The relationships component of the curriculum (with LGBTQ inclusion) would be compulsory in secondary schools. The revised guidelines will permit parents to withdraw their children aged below sixteen from the sex education component in secondary schools but would bestow a new "right" for children to opt in to the curriculum as they approach sixteen years of age (House of Commons Library 2019). The issue of LGBTQ inclusion within RSE has amplified the controversy for Haredi activists. The Equality Act (United Kingdom Legislation 2010) consolidates anti-discrimination legislation in the UK and protects people from discrimination in wider society and in the workplace. The Equality Act (2010) explicitly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, gender, and sexual orientation (and other protected characteristics). Thus RSE presents a legal dilemma where minority rights to protection are framed as being in conflict. LGBTQ inclusion in publicly funded schools can be inferred as a state strategy to implement the Equality Act. Media coverage of the RSE (and the controversy pertaining to LGBTQ inclusion) note that the revised RSE guidelines, and strategies for faith schools to avoid LGBTQ inclusion, do not supersede the Equality Act (see Rocker 2019).

7. The "lifestyles" in question refers primarily to same-sex relationships but can be broadened to include premarital relationships.

8. See Ministry of Education (2018). Quotation has been translated from Hebrew to English by the lead author.

9. Among Haredim, men are typically expected to marry by age twenty-four, and women aspire to marry before they reach twenty-two (Lehmann and Siebzehner 2009).

10. Within the Haredi community, *shidduch* (literally match) is a system of matchmaking in which individuals are introduced to potential spouses for marriage purposes.

11. Although purity laws have been a locus of struggles throughout generations, they have also served as a creative and concealed type of contraception (of sort). Namely, by pushing off the time of immersion, sexual relations may be pushed off until the fertility window has passed.

12. *Ba'alat teshuva* (returnee, feminine) literally means "master of repentance." This term refers to a worldwide phenomenon in which Jews who grew up among non-observant families choose to lead observant lives as adults.

13. According to Jewish law, if a woman menstruates during the week of the wedding, the couple would not be able to consummate their marriage until immersion in a *mikvah*.

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