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“It’s a Horrible Sin. If They Find Out, I Will Not be Able to Stay”: Orthodox Jewish Gay Men’s Experiences Living in Secrecy

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This qualitative study examined the intersection of sexual orientation and religion in the Jewish Orthodox community by exploring 22 Orthodox Jewish gay men’s experiences living in secrecy. Analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with these men revealed four primary themes: emotional turmoil, ways of coping, impact on family relationships, and importance of the context. Findings from this study describe the daily struggles these men experienced keeping their homosexuality a secret. The findings suggest that in order to design effective interventions with this population, it is crucial to consider the larger community and religious context.

KEYWORDS *homosexuality, ultra-Orthodox Jews, gay men, intersecting identities, secrecy, closeted gay*

INTRODUCTION

All human beings are created in the image of God and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect . . . Embarrassing, harassing or demeaning someone with a homosexual orientation or same sex attraction is a violation of Torah prohibitions that embody the deepest values of Judaism. (Helfgot et al., 2010)

The quotation above, taken from the “Statement on Principles on the Place of Jews With a Homosexual Orientation in Our Community” published

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on July 22, 2010 by a large group of Orthodox rabbis, marks a radical shift in the attitudes of Orthodox Judaism toward gay people and opens for a public debate an issue that has been a taboo for 3,000 years (Beck, 2010). This statement has also become a clear dividing line among those on the most devout end of the Jewish religious spectrum. While the more modern Orthodox groups make attempts to be more inclusive and to grapple with the issue of homosexuality, for the most extreme Orthodox Jews, often called ultra-Orthodox Jews, there is no room for any compromise since the Torah is very clear and immovable in its forbiddance of homosexuality (Beck, 2010). For these extremely devout Jews, homosexuality is a sin that carries a severe punishment. Ultra-Orthodox Jewish gay men who, due to the strict rules against homosexuality, choose to conceal their sexual orientation are the focus of this article. Specifically, the goal of this study was to explore the experiences of living in secrecy for ultra-Orthodox Jewish gay men in the United States.

Theoretical and empirical literature on gay and lesbian people has described secrecy about one's sexual orientation as harmful to the well-being of these individuals. The disclosure of homosexuality is considered an important first step toward healthy sexual identity formation and obtaining better mental health and a more positive sense of wellbeing (McLean, 2007). Yet critics who claim that disclosure is always good and nondisclosure is always bad offer a very simplistic view of a complex issue, which does not consider an individual's community and family context (e.g., McLean, 2007). Additionally, it has recently been recognized that research on gay identity should consider the particular contexts in which these individuals live, since sexual orientation and identity are experienced in relationship to other social identities such as culture, gender, religion, race, and ethnicity (Abes, 2011; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Coyle & Rafalin, 2000; Jones & Abes, 2004). For ultra-Orthodox gay men, the context in which they live is crucial in understanding their experiences as gay men. Thus, the goal of this study was to examine the intersection of sexual identity and religion in a historically underserved group, Orthodox Jewish gay men living in the U.S., in order to better understand their experiences concealing sexual identity within their unique religious, cultural, and social context.

This study is relevant and timely as this topic has been brought to the forefront by many Orthodox groups looking for solutions and by the current debate regarding the efficacy of conversion therapy, which has been frequently used as the preferred solution to homosexuality in the Orthodox community (Beckerman, 2010). Additionally, although there is no official number of Orthodox Jewish gay men living in the U.S., anecdotal reports from activists and informal networks suggest they number in the thousands (Mark, 2008). This is an invisible and understudied population, which has difficulty accessing help due to the strict rules, close-knit nature of the community, and its separatist attitude toward the outside community. Mental

health professionals who are trying to address the needs of this vulnerable population need to better understand the unique social and cultural contexts, as well as the distinct issues that Orthodox Jewish gay men may struggle with on a daily basis. Further, the characteristics of the Jewish Orthodox community in general and the ultra-Orthodox community in particular, which include separation from society at large and a strict adherence to religious practices, exemplify other traditional populations in the U.S. (e.g., Amish and Mennonites), so findings from this study can provide important insights for planning supportive community-based interventions for gay men living in similar social contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Larger Context—The Orthodox Jewish Community in the U.S

Judaism in the United States consists of four main branches: (1) Orthodox, (2) Conservative, (3) Reform, and (4) Reconstructionist. The different branches of Judaism can be differentiated according to their beliefs in the theological status of the Torah and the Jewish scriptures. Orthodox Judaism is characterized by the stricter adherence to the Torah and holds to the doctrine “Torah from Heaven,” a belief that the precepts of the Torah have been divinely revealed and are therefore unchallengeable (Goldberg & Rayner, 1989). Orthodox Judaism is based on the *halacha*, Jewish Law, a list of 613 commandments that specify how Orthodox Jews should live and deal with family, relationship, community, strangers, and business (Mirkin & Okun, 2005).

Orthodox Judaism encompasses a range of both ultra-Orthodox and modern Orthodox Jews who reveal similarities as well as profound differences. The former group includes the Hassidim, a community that demands strict obedience to Jewish law through the rabbis’ interpretations, and the non-Hassidic ultra-Orthodox Jews, organized around the scholarly study of sacred texts whose interpretations are also governed by rabbis (Mirkin & Okun, 2005; Shai, 2002). These two primary ultra-Orthodox subgroups are very heterogeneous and include many subdivisions. Modern Orthodoxy is less strict and allows for some interaction with the secular community, as well as questioning of the rabbis’ interpretations. Still, this group firmly adheres to Jewish law (Shai, 2002).

The 2000 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations (United Jewish Communities, 2003) reported that approximately 10% (500,000) of American Jews identify as Orthodox. Most live in the Northeastern part of the U.S. A recent survey reports that an estimated 2.2% of the general U.S. population is gay, and 11% of the general U.S. population acknowledges at least some same-sex sexual attraction (Gates, 2011). Thus, we can conservatively estimate that the number of

Jewish Orthodox men living in the U.S. who are gay is approximately 10,000. Additionally, we can estimate that up to 55,000 of Orthodox Jews in the U.S. have experienced some same-sex sexual attraction and have therefore likely wrestled with the tension between same sex desires and their Jewish identity. These numbers should be treated with caution as they may be an underestimation since people often do not feel comfortable reporting a stigmatized identity (such as homosexuality). Additionally, we are extrapolating between two very different populations, and the characteristics of the large U.S. population may not be similar to those of the Orthodox community.

Growing up as an Orthodox Jewish man is a unique cultural experience. Unlike the mainstream U.S. culture, which encourages personal freedom, the Orthodox Jewish world defers to rabbinical authority and significantly limits personal autonomy (Mark, 2008). There is enormous respect and preference for this way of life passed down from previous generations. Fearful of any assimilation of modern and/or secular values, members of this community are wary of any innovations that might significantly change the status quo. In order to prevent exposure to the secular society and to preserve the religious community, most Orthodox groups isolate themselves as much as possible from larger U.S. society. This isolation is evident in several domains of community life, including housing and educational institutions, as well as separate social and cultural centers (Heilman, 1992; Marty & Appleby, 1993).

The emphasis in the Orthodox Jewish community is on group identity and solidarity, rather than on individual ideologies and desires. Thus, Orthodox Jews tend to experience themselves at odds with contemporary U.S. culture, which values self-determination and individualism. Anonymity is rare and undesirable for a practicing Jew. On the contrary, there is collective and communal intimacy. This is true even in communities that exist in large urban areas because of the interconnectedness that exists among a relatively small group of community members (Mark, 2008).

Rather than pursue individual happiness, maintenance of the community regarding its members and its values is emphasized. Expectations regarding life trajectories are clearly spelled out (e.g., marriage and procreation; Coyle & Rafalin, 2000), including the expectation of bringing *nachus* to one's parents (roughly translated as becoming a source of pride and joy to parents).

Attitudes Toward Homosexuality in the Orthodox Jewish Community

For Orthodox Jews who follow the text as it is written, which does not allow for any contextual considerations, the Torah clearly prohibits any sexual activity between two men and, by extension, homosexuality. For example, Leviticus 18:22 says, "You shall not lie with a man as one lies with a woman, it is an abomination." It continues with, "A man who lies with a man as one lies with a woman, they have both done an abomination;

they shall be put to death, their blood is upon themselves" (Leviticus 20:13). In recent years, other interpretations have been made that represent these and other injunctions in the Talmud (a literature amplifying Jewish law) as irrelevant to the modern construction of gay sexuality (Greenberg, 2004; Mariner, 1995). While some modern Orthodox groups argue for more contextualized and culturally relevant interpretations regarding homosexuality, for the ultra-Orthodox communities this particular issue is off-limits, and they are only willing to accept the literal interpretation.

Being gay within the Orthodox community is challenging. Orthodox Jewish gays live in a community with Old World traditions, in which deference to the older generation is more important than being autonomous. If being a source of *nachus* is an explicit expectation, then becoming a source of disappointment and shame to one's parents is a particularly heavy burden. Often, a son who comes out is shunned by the Orthodox community, and his parents sit shiva for him (the Jewish mourning ritual on the death of a family member; Mark, 2008). Further, Orthodox Jewish gay men know that if they come out, their sexuality may reflect negatively on their family. For example, an openly gay individual may tarnish a sibling's potential for an arranged marriage (Mark, 2008). The enormous pressure to conform and to avoid shaming the family or losing the only world they know significantly adds to the difficulties facing Orthodox gay men as they try to accept themselves in this religious community. In the process of coming to terms with their sexual orientations, many gay men in the general population struggle with isolation from family and friends. This process is much harder for Orthodox Jewish gay men because they are raised to remain separate from the secular world and, therefore, have more difficulty seeking out secular supports and resources. Additionally, they tend to avoid seeking help from within their communities because of the difficulty maintaining anonymity. Understandably, many Orthodox Jewish gay men choose to conceal their sexual orientation. The next section presents available theoretical and empirical literature about secrecy in general, followed by a discussion about the specific case of secrecy and sexual orientation.

Secrecy

Secrecy requires the secret keepers to intentionally and actively engage in strategic behavior that prevents the awareness of the secret by others (Lane & Wegner, 1995). This type of behavior includes both active and inhibitory efforts. Active efforts are directed toward the social environment and can include activities, such as hiding clues that might suggest a secret does exist, or changing the topic of conversation. Inhibitory efforts are internal strategies that can include suppressing secret-related thoughts or feelings and keeping the natural desire to disclose personal information in check (Lane & Wegner, 1995).

There are many reasons for keeping secrets. The most common motivation is protection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Zhang, Merolla, Sun, & Lin, 2012), because secrets keep secret-keepers and their relationships with others from harm. People keep secrets because they are concerned about the social consequences of revealing their secrets (Flett, 2012; Kelly, 2002; Wegner & Lane, 1995), in particular to avoid disapproval from others. Additionally, people tend to keep secrets to avoid hurting others and to circumvent relationship deterioration or termination (thus, indirectly protecting themselves from being hurt; Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000). Empirical evidence supports that the most common reason for keeping secrets is being concerned about the social consequences (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Roesler & Wind, 1994) and the finding that perceived social disapproval significantly predicts secrecy (Major & Gramzow, 1999; Vrij, Paterson, Nunkoosing, Soukara, & Oosterwegel, 2003). Secrecy can also be used for impression management, which refers to the way people control others' perceptions of them by strategically concealing key personal information—for example, a married man who is not disclosing that he is married in order to create the impression that he is available for a serious relationship (Burgoon & Buller, 1994; DePaulo, Ansfield, Kirkendol, & Boden, 2004; Pachankis & Goldfried, 2006; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005; Woods & Harbeck, 1992).

Although keeping secrets can serve some positive functions, evidence suggests that these potential benefits may be received at a considerable price (Lane & Wegner, 1995; Mass, Wismeijer, Van Assen, & Aquarius, 2012; Uysal, Lin, & Knee, 2010). Lane and Wegner (1995) suggested that secrecy can activate a set of cognitive processes that results in an obsessive preoccupation with the secret. Their model suggests that secrecy starts with intentional thought suppression. This suppression of secret-related thoughts then leads to intrusive thoughts about the secret material, and these intrusive thoughts lead to renewed efforts of thought suppression. As a result, thought suppression and intrusive thoughts occur cyclically in response to each other, leading to a negative cycle that can lead to an obsessive and disturbing preoccupation with the secret material (Lane & Wegner, 1995; Mass et al., 2012; Wegner & Lane, 1995).

Most prior research on the consequences of secrecy has associated secrecy with a variety of negative outcomes such as health problems, obsessive thoughts, and emotional distress (Finkenauer, Engels, & Meeus, 2002; Finkenauer & Rime, 1998; Kelly & Achter, 1995; Major & Gramzow, 1999; Masuda, Anderson, Wendell, Chou, Price, & Feinstein, 2011; Wismeijer, 2011). Additionally, secrecy in families has been significantly associated with dissatisfaction with relationships (Golish, 2000; Uysal, Lin, Knee, & Bush, 2012; Vangelisti, 1994). Quinn and Chadoir (2009; see also Chadoir & Quinn, 2010) presented a framework for understanding how living in secrecy affects individuals' psychological well-being and health. They specifically examined

living with a concealed stigmatized identity, such as sexual orientation. Quinn and Chaudoir suggested that the level of psychological distress and health problems for people who are living with a concealed stigmatized identity is related to four components: (1) how much devaluation the person expects to occur if the identity is revealed, (2) how central the concealed identity is to the self, (3) how salient the concealed identity is, and (4) how devalued is the concealable identity in the individual's culture. Although in their study they reported positive associations between anticipated cultural stigma and psychological distress, their participants were psychology students from a large urban university in the U.S., which limits the generalizability of their results to other groups, particularly Orthodox Jews, who are so dissimilar. There are very few studies that have explored the experiences of living with a concealed stigmatized identity, such as homosexuality, in other populations and cultures, such as the Orthodox Jewish community.

Secrecy and Sexual Orientation

Sexual identity and sexual orientation are common secrets individuals tend to keep. Yet most theories of sexual development tend to view disclosure of this secret as an important and necessary first step toward healthy sexual development. The process of coming out, revealing a gay orientation to others, is considered one of the critical events in the development of an integrated and healthy homosexual identity (McLean, 2007). Conversely, not coming out is viewed as having a negative effect on sexual development—something that sacrifices integrity (Vargo, 1998), burdensome and damaging to one's sense of self (Mosher, 2001).

There is empirical evidence supporting the negative effect of nondisclosure of homosexuality. For example, studies with HIV-seropositive gay men found that concealment of their homosexuality is significantly associated with increased physical health risks, depressive symptoms, and strained social relationships (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996; Mass et al., 2012; Ullrich, Lutgendorf, & Stapleton, 2003). Additionally, in a study with lesbians and gay men, participants reported greater psychological wellbeing on days when they disclosed their sexual orientation in comparison to days when they concealed their orientations (Beals, Peplau, & Gable, 2004). In this same study, active suppression of thoughts about sexual orientation significantly predicted lower psychological wellbeing at the end of each day and at a 2-month follow-up (Beals et al., 2004).

Although some researchers have explored the negative effects of living with the secret of homosexuality, this research is limited; first, because of the secrecy it is extremely difficult to access this population, and second, available research does not address the contribution of the multiple contexts (e.g., social, cultural, political) in which the participants live. This qualitative

study was designed to address this gap by exploring the experiences of living with concealed sexual orientation among Orthodox Jewish gay men in the U.S.

AIM OF STUDY

Although many scholars have explored the potential conflicts between gay identity and Jewish identity (e.g., Ariel, 2007; Halbertal & Koren, 2006; Mark, 2008; Schnoor, 2006), there are few empirical studies on this topic. Even less research is available on gay men living in the Orthodox Jewish community, because of the difficulty gaining access to this population. Yet one exception is Coyle and Rafalin's (2000) qualitative study with 21 Jewish gay men in Britain that included four Orthodox men. This qualitative study was designed to close this gap by exploring Jewish Orthodox gay men's experiences living in secrecy. Specifically, the primary aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of Orthodox Jewish gay men regarding their experiences as closeted gay men living in the Orthodox Jewish community.

METHOD

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 Orthodox Jewish gay men to better understand their experiences living with a concealed gay identity in their community. We used a qualitative approach because so little research has been done with this vulnerable population, and we wanted to better understand how they made sense of their concealed sexual identity within their religious community.

Participants

The study was approved by the institutional review board of the institute where the first author works. Twenty-two Orthodox Jewish gay men volunteered for this study. Five additional men initially agreed to participate but ended up not participating (four called to cancel the interview, and one did not show up). The participants live in the northeastern part of North America and ranged in age from 18 to 48 years old. The inclusion criteria were being Orthodox Jewish gay man, 18 years old and older. All participants but one reported being married, and 19 reported having children. Participants were all employed: nine held high-ranking leadership positions within their communities (e.g., rabbi), eight had white-collar professions (e.g., accountant), three were yeshiva students, and two held blue-collar occupations. Regarding their religious affiliation, participants reported belonging to one of the three following groups: seven were Hasidim, eight were Lithuanians,

TABLE 1 Demographic information of the participants

Category	Frequency	Category	Frequency
Age		Profession	
Below 30	10	Leadership	9
Between 31–40	8	White collar	8
Above 40	4	Blue collar	2
		Yeshiva student	3
Marital status		Orthodox affiliation	
Single	1	Hassidim	8
Married without children	2	Lithuanians	7
Married with children	19	Sepharadim	7

and the rest were Sepharadim; all three groups practiced ultra-Orthodoxy and reported strict adherence to religious laws and practices and a high level of isolation from the population at large. The demographic information is presented in [Table 1](#).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling approach. The first author, who is familiar with the U.S. Orthodox community, met the first participant at a large Jewish social event. Each participant helped the researchers contact another potential participant. The interviews took place in the location chosen by the participants and were between 1½ to 3 hours in length. Participants were asked a broad and open question about their life as gay men in the Orthodox community. The researcher followed the participant's lead and interrupted as little as possible to allow the participant to tell his story as he saw fit. All of the interviews were conducted by the first author, who grew up in the Orthodox community and was familiar and comfortable with the rules of engagement and communication within the Orthodox community. Although the second author is Jewish as well, she was less comfortable with the rules of the Orthodox community. Since the subject discussed was so sensitive, the authors decided that it was best if only the first author conducted the interviews, as her familiarity with the Orthodox world would help her create a safe environment for the interviewees. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and all identifying information (such as names, ages, geographic locations) was removed.

Data Analysis

A conventional content analysis method (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used to identify frequent and notable themes. In this type of analysis, researchers allow the codes and themes to emerge from the data, rather than using pre-conceived categories. During the initial stage of open coding, two coders (the

authors) independently analyzed the data by reading each transcribed interview and deriving labels and codes from the interviews. Then each coder organized these codes in a provisional hierarchy of themes and subthemes related to experiences of homosexuality. During the second stage, the coders discussed the subthemes and themes they had independently identified, and by consensus created a master list that included only those that both coders agreed on.

In this study, all the stages of the process were documented, generating an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that is open to scrutiny. This includes the document with the deidentified interviews, records of the initial coding and provisional hierarchies of the two coders, the master list of agreed-upon themes, memos, and meeting agendas. Trustworthiness was enhanced by the use of two independent researchers to analyze the transcripts and by the use of a third researcher, who was not familiar with the study but was familiar with qualitative methodology, to follow the audit trail and review the interviews and final themes for fitness.

RESULTS

Four dominant themes emerged from participants' responses: *Emotional turmoil*, *ways of coping*, *impact on family relationships*, and *importance of the context*. Below we describe findings with illustrative quotes from the interviews. To maintain anonymity of all participants, no identifying information will be provided for each illustrative quote.

Emotional Turmoil

All participants in this study described a range of negative emotions related to realizing they were gay and knowing that homosexuality is considered a sin in their religious community. Participants described tremendous shame, guilt, disgust, and self-hatred. One of the participants said: "I feel defective. I am not a whole human being. I am different than others, something is wrong with me." Another one stated: "Sometimes I feel dirty and I can't tolerate straight people like my kids or parents touching me." A third one related: "I despise myself because of my sins . . . I know that it is forbidden by the Torah and also is immoral."

Participants talked about this emotional struggle as an ongoing continuous process and not as something that was eventually resolved. All participants talked about being preoccupied with these negative thoughts and feelings daily, trying to understand why "this" has happened to them. In the words of one man:

Why me? What if I can't fight the urge? Is God punishing me? . . . I am disgusted with myself . . . I don't understand what I have done that I became such a disgusting person with this horrible sin. It's as if you were punished for something that you didn't do and you have no control over.

Another man said:

I fight the urge . . . every day and all day and I don't know how to stop the thoughts . . . I keep thinking if this is the way I was born or this is a deviant behavior I acquired during my life . . . I keep trying to make up for this horrible sin . . . I am actually waiting to get punished, even to die . . .

Several participants talked about suffering so much that they thought about killing themselves. A few tried to commit suicide. One man said: "I am washing my hands all the time, taking showers and trying to cleanse myself . . . because of my conscience and this sin I tried to kill myself." Another stated: "Slowly slowly I had all the signs that this was it . . . I was a sinner . . . it was horrible . . . I looked for ways to punish myself . . . I ran to the road without checking if a car was coming . . . I took risks . . ."

All participants reported no doubts about the need to hide their homosexuality because it was a quality in them they could not tolerate or accept and therefore believed that nobody else in their religious community would accept. One participant said: "I found out immediately after I got married. My world collapsed. It was clear that I had to keep it a secret. Only God knows . . . it is terrible that one cannot hide things from Him."

Another stated:

When I was an adolescent, I started feeling sexual attraction to boys but I wasn't sure because I didn't have any sexual contact. It was convenient because I didn't have to confront this horrible realization . . . I knew that it was forbidden from the Torah. When I realized later that I couldn't deny this anymore, it was very difficult. I asked myself: "why me? What do I do with this? How can I hide it from the world?"

The need to hide their sexual identities even from people who are close to them added another layer to their negative feelings. As expressed by one participant:

I hate the lie of my life and the fact that I lie not only to my family and my community but also to myself. I have a daily prayer—God let me be an ordinary man, a mentch, a human being, right now I feel like a low life, liar, living in abomination . . .

Thus not only did the participants feel shame and guilt about being gay, they also reported feeling bad about having to live dishonest lives and to lie to their loved ones on a daily basis.

Ways of Coping

Participants in the study reported that once they realized they were gay, they were not able to accept it and worked hard to resist this part of their identity. They talked about how they tried to resist their fate—for example, by denying being gay, getting married, using rituals of cleansing to try to get rid of the homosexuality, seeking counseling, and taking actions to compensate for a possible bad behavior that brought the homosexuality on them. One participant said, “I am fasting and suffering, hoping that it will go away.” Another participant said: “I was very happy when I was offered a shiddach (arranged marriage) . . . I was hoping that now that such a beautiful woman wants me everything will be alright . . .”

A third man reported:

I found out . . . I got terrified . . . I went to a far away country to consult other rabbis. They told me to study the Torah. I spent hours studying the Torah. It didn't help of course. Then I went to a religious psychologist that comforted me and suggested that I get married and not tell anyone if I wanted to stay in the community.

Another participant told the interviewer, “I started protesting to God and crying that it wasn't fair . . . then I decided to accept my situation and deny being gay as much as possible, to get married like everyone else.” None of the men discussed any attempts to try to change the discourse in the community—rather they all talked about internal struggle to change themselves, totally accepting that homosexuality is bad.

Accepting that homosexuality is a sin and being unable to change themselves, the participants talked about taking great efforts to hide their homosexuality. Concealing their sexual orientation was the only thing they could do to survive in the community. In the words of one participant:

. . . no one must know . . . it's a horrible sin . . . I spend a lot of energy hiding this from the community . . . if in the past I had some feminine gestures and I was flirtatious, now I am very aware that I have to be cautious.

Several participants explained that they got married to hide their homosexuality, knowing that if they remained single, people in the community would become suspicious. As one participant stated:

It was clear to me that I have to get marriage and build a house and a family . . . this is what is expected, otherwise they will start checking what is wrong with me. You can't stand out in this community, you can't be different.

Thus participants reported taking active steps to try to change their sexual orientation and, when realizing that their efforts are futile, refocusing their efforts on hiding their homosexuality.

Impact on Family Relationship

Participants in this study talked about how carrying their secret separates them from their families and how within their families they cannot express their true selves. Many participants talked about their relationship with their fathers and noted fear of their fathers' reactions if they found out or disappointment in their father's reactions for those who did try to reach out to their fathers. One man said, "Realizing I was gay was horrible . . . I wanted to die . . . I was especially afraid of my father finding out." Another shared:

My relationship with my dad was excellent. We had mutual appreciation. He was very proud of my abilities and my quick progress at the Yeshiva. I thought he would help me. I was scared to tell him the truth and told him that I think one of my Yeshiva friends was gay . . . my father started yelling 'No, no, you can't be friends with him anymore. It's a sin. You have to join another study group' . . . my dad was shocked . . . I was terrified and I realized that this was a heavy burden that I will not be able to carry . . . the worst thing of all was that in that moment I lost my dad . . . the support system I trusted all my life.

In addition to fear and disappointment, many participants talked about feeling as though they were the disappointment; they were a source of shame and embarrassment to their fathers. One participant recalled, "when I realized I was gay . . . I was glad my dad passed away . . . I spared him from this horrible thing." Another one said: "My father should have been suspicious but he lives in a total denial . . . but sometimes I think that he is ashamed of me and prefers to not know."

While many of the participants talked about their relationship with their fathers, none of them mentioned their mothers or the relationship with their siblings in regard to their homosexuality.

Participants also talked about their relationships in their current families. They described how being married shields them from outside suspicion regarding their sexual orientation but also about the price they pay for this; knowing that the support and love in their family is conditional. One man said, "the family helps me to keep going with my life . . . it helps me to keep

the secret . . . as if I am a normative straight . . . they don't know the dark side of my life . . .”.

None of the men described their families as a source of support. Rather, many expressed guilt about hiding their homosexuality from their wives or preventing their wives from having the husbands they “deserve.” They also expressed great concern about the negative consequences for their wives and children if their homosexuality was ever revealed to the community. They talked about actively and purposefully keeping their homosexuality a secret in order to protect their wives and children. One participant said: “My wife doesn't know about my real life . . . if she finds out she will leave me . . . it will destroy the family and the kids . . .”

Another man stated:

I have a good wife . . . it is hard for me that I can't share this part of my life with her . . . I know that it is better for her not to know . . . this way she doesn't have to feel guilty, she doesn't have to worry about the future of the kids and our social life in the community. She is well taken care of, we don't have financial problems . . . it's hard enough for me, why make her life impossible?

A third participant explained:

My family members don't know anything . . . I make sure they wouldn't know . . . my adolescent children belong to educational programs in the community . . . if they find out about me, they will not be accepted there, they will not be able to get married . . . my wife doesn't know either and she mustn't find out.

Importance of Context

Participants often talked about the importance of the Orthodox community in their lives, on the one hand acknowledging the strict rules and norms that make being a gay so difficult, but on the other hand emphasizing that this community is what they know, it is familiar and comfortable for them and where they still want to live. Growing up in this religious community and being isolated from the outside world, many of them could not think of any other alternative. They reported relying on the community to provide all their needs. There is no other place to live. One man said:

I am part of this community . . . I was born into it . . . life here is very convenient . . . I am a man of faith and all the social, educational and religious services that I need are here. I don't know any other life. I wish myself that my kids will be able to stay here too . . . but it is hard to be outside the box and in my case outside the closet . . . if they find out, I will not be able to stay.

Because they considered the Orthodox community the only option and because they knew the rules against homosexuality, they felt tremendous pressure to hide. Some of them recalled childhood memories of the way other gay members of the community were treated, which intensified the need to stay closeted. One man recalled:

I remember as a child how one of the community members was shunned because he was gay . . . he was kicked out in disgrace, excommunicated . . . his kids could not stay either because they were “contaminated” with his sin . . .

Another explained:

In this community you have to fit the norms . . . even the clothes are the same . . . like uniforms . . . even though the Orthodox are not all the same if they find out that you are different and even worse, *a homosexual*, which is a sin that should be punished by stoning, you will not be able to belong to any Orthodox community, nor your family and kids . . . but this is my community . . . this is where my parents and family live . . . this is where my kids will get married and live next to me . . . the future is predictable and familiar . . . I can't get caught.

Participants wanted to stay in their community and felt that this is their only home. They were also highly dependent on the community for most of their needs. They knew the possible grave consequences for homosexuality and could not afford to lose the only home they had ever known; therefore, they were willing to make every effort to make sure their sexual orientation remains concealed.

DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study was to explore the lived experiences of closeted gay men living in ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in North America. Findings from this study provide support for existing theoretical models of secrecy and the importance of attending to the larger community and religious contexts to more fully understand their experiences of living in secrecy.

As suggested by previous studies with the general population, one of the main reasons individuals tend to keep secrets is to avoid negative social consequences (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Roesler & Wind, 1994). Similarly in our study, all participants reported choosing to keep their homosexuality a secret to avoid negative consequences for themselves and for their families. Yet for these participants, social consequences could not be separated from

other consequences, such as financial difficulties and family problems, since the Orthodox community is a self-sustained system that provides all of its members' needs. For these participants, the risk they were working so hard to avoid was losing everything they had. They feared being excommunicated in disgrace, which for them would mean losing the only life they knew. Further, knowing that the negative consequences would be experienced by their entire family (including siblings and children) made them more determined to keep their homosexuality a secret to protect their loved ones' futures in the religious community.

Previous studies reported that keeping secrets comes at a high cost (Finkenauer, Engels & Meeus, 2002; Finkenauer & Rime, 1998; Masuda, Anderson, Wendell, Chou, Price, & Feinstein, 2011; Uysal, Lin, & Knee, 2010; Wismeijer, 2011). The men in our study described years of emotional struggles, constantly thinking about their homosexuality, looking for ways to make their homosexuality go away, making intense efforts to hide it from the world, and struggling with devastating feelings of guilt, self-hate, fear of being caught, tremendous shame, and even suicidality. The need to hide their homosexuality added another layer to the emotional struggle with feelings of shame about constantly lying to their family, friends, and community. The inner conflict between their religious identity and homosexual identity was so strong that they often doubted their religious identity, believing that since they could not be both Orthodox and gay, and they could not get rid of their gayness, then perhaps they were not truly Orthodox Jews. Many reported contemplating suicide, even though in Judaism this is considered a sin.

None of the men talked about resolving their internal struggles with being gay and being an Orthodox Jew. During the time of the interview, they were all still experiencing emotional turmoil, even though for some it has been years since they realized they were gay. While most models of sexual identity development usually describe several stages that include emotional turmoil and a stage of resolution that leads to coming out, for these men, the turmoil has been a constant in their lives. They described years of struggle, and none of them ever considered coming out in the community or to their families. That was not an option unless they were willing to leave their Orthodox communities, which they clearly did not want to do because leaving meant losing their way of life and their families.

Considering their conflicting identities (sexual orientation vs. religion), for these men the identity of an ultra-Orthodox Jew was the most important one, their "master" identity. This was the core of their self-definition. Although they acknowledged their sexual orientation, being gay was an identity they were trying to reject because it threatened their core identity. They could not perceive any acceptable way of reconciling these conflicting identities, so instead they focused on trying to eliminate and later conceal their homosexuality.

One of the costs associated with keeping secrets is dissatisfaction with relationships (Golish, 2000; Uysal, Lin, Knee, & Bush, 2012; Vangelisti, 1994). Similarly for the men in our study, family relationships were not a source of support or a safe haven where they could be themselves but rather a source of additional emotional burden. Participants reported feeling concerned about the possible problems for their wives and children if their homosexuality was ever revealed. They felt tremendous guilt about not being the husbands their wives deserved and not loving them as they deserved to be loved. They also felt guilty about lying to their wives about who they were.

Participants did not experience their family of origin, parents, and siblings as being there for them. Those participants who talked about their parents expressed disappointment, fear of disapproval, and a fear that their family will not stand up for them if they come out. They believed that their family would shun them to protect other family members. As a result, they felt isolated and alone in their despair, without any family support.

In their framework for understanding how living in secrecy affects people's psychological wellbeing and health, Quinn and Chaudoir (2009) suggested that two of the main factors affecting psychological distress are the extent of devaluation the person anticipates if their secret identity is revealed and how devalued the concealed identity is in the individual's culture. Our study supports Quinn and Chaudoir's model. Participants in our study described that both of these factors are significant. These men reported expecting the worst consequences if their secret was revealed, a secret that in their culture is highly devalued and is considered a sin punishable by death.

Consequently, these findings suggest the importance of the social context in order to more fully understand the lived experiences of Orthodox gay men in their community. The intersection of religion and sexual identity is crucial for understanding their experiences. For these participants, their religious identity shapes every aspect of their lives and takes precedence over any other aspect of their identity. Religion is what ties them to the Orthodox community, which provides their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs (e.g., family, work, education, health services, housing). Because the community is so indispensable, the participants felt completely dependent on their communities and could not find any other option to live their lives more openly. They expressed their wish to stay in their Orthodox Jewish communities, where they know the rules and feel comfortable. This is their home, and this is where they belong. None of them expressed a desire to challenge the community regarding homosexuality, and the only solution they kept trying to achieve was to find a way to not be gay, and when that did not work, to hide their homosexuality.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study. First, our sample included only men who were willing to be interviewed and, therefore, may be biased in terms of their experiences. It is possible that Orthodox gay men who are living in secrecy and who refused to participate in this study were in a different emotional state or have different ways of coping. Second, our sample included only Orthodox gay men who chose to remain in the community and to continue to live in secrecy about their homosexuality. Some Orthodox gay men decide to leave the religious life altogether or to become less Orthodox (Greenberg, 2004). Obviously, those people made different choices about their secrets. Third, only men participated in the study—therefore, the results cannot be generalized to lesbian women, for whom the experience of living in secrecy as a lesbian in the Orthodox community may be different. Finally, our study did not include the experiences of either bisexuals or men who have sex with men (MSM), neither of which typically identifies as gay—therefore, the results cannot be generalized to these groups.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

The finding regarding the participants' attempts to rid themselves of their homosexuality is important when considering how to clinically intervene with this population. While not many participants actively sought out therapy, those who did wanted to change who they were. Participants did not report looking for help to accept their homosexuality or to find ways to integrate their homosexual and religious identities. Participants talked about the sinfulness of homosexuality and the discourse in their communities regarding homosexuality that do not enable any consideration for accepting it. This finding suggests that until the Orthodox discourse about homosexuality changes, therapeutic interventions at the individual level are unlikely to succeed. Further, it is unlikely that Orthodox gay men will seek out therapy that is not oriented toward sexual identity conversion.

Thus, we believe that intervention with this group needs to start at the community-based level, with the rabbinical authority. The rabbis, who are the spiritual leaders of their communities, have significant influence on every aspect of their lives (Gottlieb, 2007; Sheleg, 2000), including their attitudes toward homosexuality and how they cope with it. In our study, participants reported that their rabbis expected them to seek God's help in prayer and to fight being gay by spending more time studying the Torah. Many were encouraged to marry women, with the promise that getting married would solve everything. The message was clear: their homosexuality needed to be eliminated. Obviously, and as the participants in our study painfully learned, these methods did not work. There is ample evidence indicating the

ineffectiveness of conversion therapies (American Psychological Association, 2012). This evidence combined with the suffering described by the men in our study suggests that the way the Orthodox community has handled homosexuality does not support the wellbeing of these gay men.

As described in the introduction to this article, there has been a significant shift in the Orthodox openness and willingness to discuss homosexuality and the suffering of ultra-Orthodox gay men. Although no clear solution for how to reconcile these two conflicting identities was offered, there has been a change in attitudes toward homosexuality and homosexuals, especially among the more modern Orthodox groups (Beck, 2010). We believe that by keeping the conversation in the forefront, this shift can ripple through the entire Orthodox community.

We recommend the development of a community committee, composed of the highest rabbinical authority in the Orthodox community and mental health professionals from within this community. This committee can discuss how to allow gay men to stay in the community without being concerned about excommunication or negative consequences for their families. They can discuss current “middle way” solutions used by others in a similar conflict (for example, gay and celibate; Friedersdorf, 2013, or group therapy, Yarhouse & Beckstead, 2011). It is highly unlikely to expect this committee to condone homosexuality, but rather to take some initial steps that will make the lives of gay men who want to remain in the Orthodox Jewish community more tolerable and less challenging.

This committee would probably be composed of more modern Orthodox Jews. However, we suggest that they make continuous attempts to reach out and invite other rabbis from stricter communities and look for ways to engage them in the conversation. It is important that the committee makes an effort to disseminate its work in a way that reaches the entire Orthodox Jewish community, including ultra-Orthodox groups, even if these groups are only passively involved. By creating an ongoing discussion on this topic, we hope that the discourse around homosexuality will continue to shift, even in the most ultra-Orthodox communities.

CONCLUSIONS

This study is the first qualitative study designed to examine the experiences of Orthodox Jewish gay men who hide their sexuality and believe that they live in sin. Our findings suggest that these men live in continuous turmoil and cannot accept their sexual identity because of the importance of their context (religion and rabbinic authority) in shaping their belief systems and their high dependency on their community for many aspects of their lives. Our findings also suggest that designing appropriate therapeutic interventions will be successful only when the Orthodox community’s discourse about

homosexuality changes so gay men can work toward self-acceptance and integration, instead of toward conversion.

The findings of this study can be helpful for professionals who work with gay men in similar religious communities. The characteristics of the Orthodox community, which include separation from society at large and the central role of rabbis as community leaders, typify traditional populations in general. Therefore, the present study can provide important insights for planning community-based interventions in similar religious contexts.

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