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Experiences of the Marital Relationship among Orthodox Jewish Gay Men in Mixed-Orientation Marriages

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This qualitative study describes the marital relationship experiences of Orthodox Jewish gay men in mixed-orientation marriages. In-depth interviews were conducted with 21 men from the northeastern part of North America about their experiences of being gay in their Orthodox religious communities. Spontaneous accounts of their experiences within the marital relationship were reported by all participants. A content analysis revealed four primary themes: reasons for getting married, the role of the Orthodox community in sustaining the marriage, quality of the marital relationship, and the impact of homosexuality on the marital relationship. Findings suggest that religion and the Orthodox community play a major role in gay Orthodox Jewish men’s decision to marry and in sustaining the marriage. In addition, findings suggest that the marital relationship is experienced as a task-centered teamwork and not as a source of support and intimacy. Finally, although rarely discussed in the relationship, their sexual orientation greatly influences these men’s attitudes, behaviors, and feelings toward their wives.

KEYWORDS Orthodox Jews, mixed-orientation marriages, religion, marital relationship

INTRODUCTION

The literature suggests various reasons to explain why gay men choose to enter mixed-orientation marriages including societal expectations, family pressure, and a desire for family and children (Alessi, 2008; Higgins, 2002, Address correspondence to Karni Kissil, PhD, LMFT, 900 E. Indiantown Rd., Suite 310, Jupiter, FL 33477, USA. E-mail: kkissil@comcast.net

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The sociopolitical context in which gay men live and grow up is also a possible explanation through its link to internalized homophobia (Higgins, 2004; Russell & Bohan, 2006). There is a scarcity of research exploring the marital experiences of gay men in mixed-orientation marriages (Hernandez, Schwenke, & Wilson, 2011) with anecdotal evidence suggesting that these marriages are fraught with conflict and tend to end in divorce (Isay, 1998). Furthermore, even though scholars and researchers emphasize the importance of contextual variables in mixed-orientation marriages and especially in the motivations for entering such relationships (e.g., Alessi, 2008), there is a dearth of research looking at these marriages in various contexts. One of the overlooked contexts is insular religious communities. The current study aimed to look at the intersection of sexual orientation and religion in one insular religious community, the Orthodox Jewish community, by exploring the experiences of the marital relationship among Orthodox Jewish gay men in mixed-orientation marriages.

**Gay Men in Mixed-Orientation Marriages**

Accurate data about the incidence of mixed-orientation marriages among gay men are hard to determine (Alessi, 2008). One available study suggests that at least 2 million gay men, lesbian, women and bisexual men and women in the United States are or have been in mixed-orientation marriages (Buxton, 1994, 2001). This estimate is conservative and limited to those individuals who sexually identify themselves and who have disclosed their sexual identity to their spouse. It excludes those individuals who may endorse same-sex attraction but who are unaware that their attraction warrants identification or who reject such labeling. The actual incidence of mixed-orientation marriage is likely higher as same-gender sexual experimentation and relationships have increased (Hernandez & Wilson, 2007; Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005).

There is not a single theory that accounts for why gay men marry heterosexual spouses (Higgins, 2002, 2004). The literature suggests various reasons such as societal expectations and heterosexual socialization, intense family pressure, religious beliefs, hope to cure same-sex attraction, lack of relevant life experiences that can help resolve sexual identity confusion, increase in social status, or a strong desire for family and children (Alessi, 2008; Higgins, 2002, 2004; Pearcey, 2005).

Ortiz and Scott (1994) divided the various motivations of gay men to marry heterosexual women into two categories: “marriage as a solution” and “sex-role conservatism.” “Marriage as a solution” involves conscious motivations including attempt to hide, deny, cure and overcompensate for the feared same-sex desire. “Sex-role conservatism” refers to marrying out of a sense of obligation related to the way these men were socialized to heterosexuality. This second group is often unaware of any same-sex desires at the time of marriage (Ortiz & Scott, 1994).
The contextual environment in which gay men live is a possible contributor to their decision to marry. Societal attitudes toward same-sex relationships, religious intolerance, the importance of the community for the individual, and the level of cultural flexibility (how much the community tolerates straying from the accepted values) may all play a part in how gay men feel about themselves and their choice to marry women. Thus, using a sociocultural theoretical perspective can help to frame our understanding of ultra-Orthodox gay men’s experiences. According to Crain (2000), sociocultural theory focuses on the values, beliefs, customs, and skills and how they are transmitted within the social group of a specific culture. In addition, sociocultural theory postulates that social interaction contributes to the culture in that individuals will acquire ways of thinking and behaving that make up the culture by interacting with a more knowledgeable person (Vygotsky, 1986). Hence, in the ultra-Orthodox community rabbis may represent more knowledgeable individuals who serve to teach and to guide their people within the culture of the community. Understanding the sociocultural context and the importance of the context for these ultra-Orthodox Jewish gay men’s lives is essential in understanding their experiences.

For example, Higgins (2004) suggests that religious fundamentalism may partially explain why some gay men marry heterosexual women through its association with internalized homophobia. In his study comparing gay men who were previously married to those who never married, he found that previously married rated the religious beliefs of their childhood families as more fundamentalist than those who were never married. He also found that gay men who were previously married retrospectively reported higher degrees of internalized homophobia at the time of marriage compared with the current attitudes toward same-sex attraction reported by gay men who never married. Russell and Bohan (2006) also highlighted the association between the context and internalized homophobia, emphasizing that the focus should not be on homophobia as a psychological problem but rather as a result of growing up under homosexually oppressive social and political contexts. They described internalized homophobia as

Not a trait resident in the individual, [not] one that simply reflects or reiterates the introjection of internal judgment…rather it finds its very existence in the interaction between the LGBT person and his/her social environment…. The phenomenon is grounded not in the interior experience but an intersection between interiority and social and political contexts…. (p. 346)

There is scarce information about the prevalence of mixed-orientation marriages. Even less data are available on the quality and outcome of these marriages. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most mixed-orientation marriages end in divorce (Isay, 1998). However, very few studies have investigated the experiences of gay men who choose to stay in such marriages.
Available evidence suggests that gay men who marry heterosexual women struggle with various issues. For example, in a recent review of the literature on mixed-orientation marriages (Hernandez, Schwenke, & Wilson, 2011) the authors concluded that mixed-orientation marriages are fraught with complexity. In their analysis of qualitative, quantitative, and case studies they found that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people who are married to heterosexual spouses struggle with an ongoing tension; tension among societal expectations, love for their spouse, and same-sex attraction; fear of losing one’s family; developing a stable sense of self while compartmentalizing feelings and behaviors; and dealing with ambiguity about their sexual identity across contexts.

Even though scholars and researchers emphasize the importance of contextual variables in mixed-orientation marriages and especially in the motivations for entering such relationships (e.g., Alessi, 2008), there is a dearth of research looking at these marriages in various contexts. One of the overlooked contexts is insular religious communities such as the Orthodox Jewish community. One exception is a study conducted by Hernandez and Wilson (2007) exploring the experiences of Seventh-day Adventists in mixed-orientation marriages. However, their study focused on the experiences of the heterosexual women who were married to gay men. In addition, all the participants in the study were no longer married to their gay husbands. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the experiences of Jewish Orthodox gay men who are currently married to heterosexual women. In order to understand better the intersection between sexual orientation and cultural, religious, and social contexts for these men, we first have to briefly describe the characteristics of the Orthodox Jewish community in the United States.

The Orthodox Jewish Community in North America

Judaism in North America is comprised 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 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, relationships, community, strangers, and business (Mirkin & Okun, 2005).

Orthodox Judaism encompasses a range of both ultra-Orthodox and modern Orthodox Jews who show similarities as well as significant differences. The ultra-Orthodox group includes the Hassidim, a community
that is characterized by strict obedience to Jewish law through the rabbis’ interpretations. The ultra-Orthodox group also includes 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 and most of them live in the northeastern part of the United States. About 40% (150,000) of Canadian Jews identify as Orthodox (Israel, n.d.). 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 United States and Canada who are gay is approximately 13,000. In addition, we can estimate that up to 71,500 Orthodox Jews in the United States and Canada have experienced some same-sex sexual attraction. 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 being gay). In addition, 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 Jewish Orthodox community. There is no information available regarding how many of these men are heterosexually married.

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 will 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 the 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 concept of cultural trauma is important in understanding the ultra-Orthodox community’s stance vis-à-vis society at large. Cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion (Eyerman, 2001). The trauma need not necessarily be felt by everyone in a community or experienced by any or
The trauma is not an institution or a current experience, but a collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounds the identity formation of a people (Alexander, 2004). The ultra-Orthodox community is mostly comprised of Jews whose forbearers came to the United States from Eastern Europe and Russia, and who have suffered various degrees of persecution in their countries of origin as well as Jews who survived the Holocaust. These experiences of systematic and institutionalized marginalization, oppression, and religious persecution are transmitted to the next generations in the shape of cultural values and attitudes, as well as clear rules of engagement with the outside world, encouraging isolation from the larger society, strong community cohesion and self-reliance, and mistrust of “others” (non-Orthodox Jews).

The emphasis in the Orthodox Jewish community is on group identity, solidarity, and on taking care of one another, 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, maintaining the community regarding both its members and its values is emphasized. This is framed as important for the survival of the community. 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 which 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; they are only willing to accept the literal interpretation.
Being gay within the Orthodox community is challenging. Orthodox Jewish gay men 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). Furthermore, 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. In addition, they tend to avoid seeking help from within their communities because of the difficulty maintaining anonymity.

AIM OF STUDY

There is a scarcity of research that seeks to understand the experiences of Orthodox Jewish gay men who marry heterosexual women, partially because of the difficulty gaining access to this population and the negative attitudes toward homosexuality in this community. Thus, the primary aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of Orthodox Jewish gay men in mixed-orientation marriages regarding their experiences in the marital relationship within the Orthodox Jewish community. Given the paucity of research on the topic and the need to obtain in-depth understanding, we conducted qualitative exploratory research to gain preliminary understanding into the phenomenon at hand.

METHOD

Participants

Twenty-one Jewish Orthodox 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). Participants live in the northeastern part of North America. Their ages ranged from 18 to 48 years old. The inclusion criteria were being a Jewish Orthodox man,
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18 years old or older, and self-identifies as gay. All participants were married and 19 reported having children. Participants were all employed: nine held high-ranking leadership positions within their communities (e.g., rabbi), seven had white-collar professions (e.g., accountant), three were yeshiva (an Orthodox Jewish college or seminary) students, and two held blue-collar professions. Regarding their religious affiliation, participants reported belonging to one of the three following groups: six were Hasidim, eight were Lithuanians, and the rest were Sepharadim. All three groups are considered ultra-Orthodox 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 an aggregated form to maintain the participants’ confidentiality.

Procedure

The study was approved by the institutional review board of the institute where the second author works. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling approach. The second author, who was familiar with the ultra-Orthodox community, met the first participant at a large Jewish social event. Each participant connected the researcher with other potential participants by giving the researcher’s contact information to other people. The researcher was contacted by ultra-Orthodox gay men who asked about the study and expressed interest in participating. The interviews took place in the location chosen by the participants and were between one and a half and three hours in length. Participants were asked a broad and open question about their life as gays in the Orthodox community. The researcher followed the participant 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 second 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 first author is Jewish as well, she was less knowledgeable and comfortable with the rules of the Orthodox community. Since the subject discussed was so sensitive, the authors decided that it would be best if only the second author conducted the interviews, as her familiarity with the Orthodox world would help her create a safe environment for the interviewees. We think of the second author as having a position of an insider and an outsider vis-à-vis the participants; fully understanding their religious and cultural context as an insider, yet being an outsider since she is not a member of their community. We believe that she was perceived as someone who can truly understand their struggles but who does not pose any threat because she does not belong to their community (minimal risk for their sexual orientation to be revealed).

Prior to starting the study we also discussed the possible implications of having a female interviewer talking with ultra-Orthodox gay men about
such a sensitive and taboo topic. Although using a female interviewer may have prevented the men from talking about some issues (e.g., sexual behaviors), we believe that using a female was a better decision than using a male interviewer. First, all the men participating in the study had reached out to the researcher and asked to be interviewed, knowing that she was a woman. Second, it is possible that the men preferred talking to a woman knowing that they will likely never see her again and they were not at risk of running into her at the synagogue or the yeshiva. Third, as members of the Orthodox community who believe in traditional gender roles, we believe that the participants expected a woman to be more sensitive, empathetic, and supportive of their circumstances than a man. Following this reasoning, we decided to continue with the plan to use a female interviewer and were willing to accept the possibility that some topics will not come up. Since this was the first study with a population that is so hard to access, we believe that having access and getting an initial snapshot of their experiences (as much as they were willing to disclose) is better than not having access at all. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and all identifying information (such as names, ages, geographic locations) were removed.

Data Analysis

Although the study’s broad aim was to explore the experiences of ultra-Orthodox Jewish closeted gay men who live in the Orthodox community and was not aimed at specifically identifying experiences within the marital relationship, reports on this topic were spontaneously made by all the participants. Only the findings related to statements about their experiences in the marital relationship were analyzed and are addressed in this article. For a fuller description of the themes that emerged in the larger study please refer to Itzhaky and Kissil (in press).

Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim by the second author and then checked against the audiotapes for accuracy. In order to accomplish the goal of the larger research project, the researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading the transcribed interviews several times. When it became apparent that the importance of the marital relationship had emerged as a salient topic, a content analysis was conducted focusing on statements related to the marital relationship (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Both authors reviewed the transcripts independently to collect all the statements related to the marital relationship. Each statement was discussed conjointly by these two authors, and only when there was agreement, the statement was included in a chart. Similarly, both authors independently proposed a list of themes to categorize and organize the identified statements. These provisional lists were discussed, integrated, and rearranged, leading to four major themes. Then, the statements were categorized within these themes.
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 de-identified interviews, records of the initial coding and provisional themes 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

Participants in the present study spontaneously made statements referring to their marital relationships when asked about their experiences of being gay in the Orthodox Jewish community. Four primary themes emerged from the analysis of their statements:

1. reasons for getting married,
2. the role of the Orthodox community in sustaining the marriage,
3. quality of the marital relationship, and
4. the impact of homosexuality on the marital relationship.

These themes are described next, with illustrative quotes from the participants, with all identifiers removed in order to preserve anonymity.

Reasons for Getting Married

Participants described several reasons for getting married, with most participants reporting more than one reason. The first and most common reason participants reported for getting married was the belief that the marriage will “cure” their same-sex attraction. In some cases, the participants reported that their rabbis suggested marriage as a cure. As one of the participants stated, “The rabbi told me in a conversation, not about me of course, that a homosexual has to get married. He thinks that this condition [homosexuality] is changeable.” Another participant said the following:

I thought that the marriage will cure me from my dreams and that in the worst-case scenario I will be able to love both a man and a woman. They offered me a few women... at the beginning it was exciting and good. The excitement of the family and community dulled my tendencies. I thought that I got cured, like the rabbi said. Later, when my wife got pregnant I realized that I was not cured and my tendencies remained the same.
Another reason mentioned by most of the participants was that getting married was expected by the community and a milestone that they are required to accomplish. As stated by one of the participants, “I got married because it is obviously what I am expected to do... otherwise they will find out.” Getting married was also a way to hide their sexual orientation and pass as a normative heterosexual man. Failing to do so can result in community suspicion that something is wrong. One of the participants commented, “The family helps me to continue with my life. It helps keep the secret; I look like a normative straight man.” Similarly, another participant said, “I tried to postpone getting married and matchmaking until it was clear that they will start getting suspicious that something is not right with me.”

A final reason for getting married mentioned by participants in the study was that getting married and especially having a family was an important mitzvah (good deed). One of the participants said, “Getting married is obvious and having kids too; you have to do the mitzvah of procreation.”

The Role of the Orthodox Community in Sustaining the Marriage

Participants reported that being married and having a family was a clear social and religious expectation and even a requirement if they wanted to live in the Orthodox community. In their view, being married was not a goal in itself but a mandatory status in order to belong to the community. One of the participants commented, “It was clear that I had to get married and have a family. This is what the community is expecting of me... otherwise they will start checking what is going on with me... You cannot stand out in this community.” Another one stated, “I do not regret getting married... I have a wife and kids and we look normative. We measure up to the standards of the community.”

Even though some of the participants reported being disappointed that the marriage did not “cure” their same-sex attraction, none of them reported considering ending the marriage. They reported having to sustain the marriage in order to maintain the façade of normalcy and for the sake of their children, extended family, and the next generations. One of the participants said the following:

In our world, the religion is a matter of the community no less than a matter of faith. Sometimes even the rabbis have doubts but we have our mitzvahs, rules, prohibitions. There is a very strict structure; if you don’t keep it, you will get expelled. In the Orthodox community everyone is strict about what is allowed and what is not... not following the rules is like an atomic bomb for us, that will impact our lives, the lives of our kids, our parents and the extended family... both me and my wife understand that and keep the structure.
Another participant talked about his fears about the consequences of having his sexual orientation revealed and the personal sacrifice he makes to ensure it does not happen: “Sometimes I wonder what will happen to us as a family if my true identity will be revealed. I am taking every precaution and trying to not find a stable boyfriend and fall in love. I think that if I want to stay in my world and keep my status I will never be able to do that.”

Quality of the Marital Relationship

Participants described their marital relationship as functional and collaborative. They talked about working together with their wives to accomplish all the external requirements (clear guidelines that specify how to deal with every aspect of daily life including self, family, relationships, community, strangers, and business) given by the community. They describe relationships that are not characterized by love, affection, passion, and intimacy but rather a teamwork by which each partner is doing his or her part to keep the system working smoothly. One of the participants said the following:

It looks like we are functioning normally; we make sure to measure up to the standards of the community, the kids study in a yeshiva, if everything goes well they will go to a Kollel [an institute for full-time, advanced study of the Talmud and rabbinic literature] when they grow up. We never talked about my intimate life. There is no love between us; our life is organized in an institutionalized way... we have conflicts and tensions sometime. I don’t know if it’s the same for other couples. I have no one to compare to.

Another participant talked about maintaining a facade of normalcy:

We are having a facade of a normal relationship and normal family life... the kids go to school, we work and keep busy with financial and other problems, just like everyone else. I assume our intimate relationship is different than normative couples... the marriage did not change me like I expected.

A third participant also commented about the nature of the relationship: “We did not marry because of physical fitness. We matched in terms of education, family. We have a decent relationship. Our life is very institutionalized—each one has a role and our time frames are very clear.”

Participants talked about their wives in terms of the ways they match the characteristics of a good wife in the Orthodox community. They reported feeling respectful of their wives as mothers and members of the Orthodox community. One of the participants said, “I appreciate and respect my wife. She is a good mother, modest and humble.” Another one stated, “My wife is a good member of the community. She follows all the rules, big and small,
and says the blessings on time. That’s how she raises the kids. She reveres God and protects our structure.”

Participants talked about having some feelings toward their wives, but struggled whether these feelings were love or something else, and none of them talked about feeling attracted to their wives. One of the participants said, “I love my kids and feel a special love for my wife... it is not an erotic love... it is more related to respect and appreciation... not sure if it should be called love....” Another participant said about love: “to tell you that there is love between us? Unfortunately, the marriage did not change me.” A third participant addressed his feelings by saying, “I love her in my own way. I don’t know if the word love is the right fit; maybe respect.” Thus, the marital relationships in their view were characterized by respect, responsibility, teamwork, and shared goals for the future and their children and not by a passionate or loving relationship.

The Impact of Homosexuality on the Marital Relationship

Participants talked about their same-sex attraction as something that is ever-present in their relationship and creates a distance between them and their wives. Most participants reported not sharing their same-sex attraction with their wives and the few that did share with their wives stated that it was never discussed following the disclosure, as if the disclosure never happened. Participants reported being preoccupied wondering whether their wives knew of their “situation” and what would happen if they ever found out. Their sexual orientation seemed to be the “elephant in the room,” absent and present at the same time. One of the participants shared the following:

We didn’t talk about my tendency at the beginning, but when my second daughter was born in a complicated labor and I was afraid I was going to lose my wife, I decided to share a little bit of my world with her... I was also hoping to get cured. When she came back home we had an honest and real conversation for the first time. I told her about my sexual attraction. She preferred to not ask questions and said that she was worried I am “like that” but as long as I keep functioning as a husband and a father she is willing to continue our life together... It is hard to call it “being cured”... a few years have passed... we never talked about it again.

Another participant talked about the possibility of his wife knowing about his sexual orientation:

She doesn’t ask and I don’t tell... she notices that I disappear from the house for a few hours or in the evenings, I think she got used to it... on the other hand a man can fool the whole world but not his wife... he can lie to her some of the time but not all the time.
A third participant shared his thoughts about whether his wife knows:

It is a pretty complicated situation. On the one hand she doesn’t know... maybe it is more comfortable this way... it is better that she doesn’t know... we are both working and we talk about everything except this... I don’t think she understands that I have another life outside of my life with her... and maybe she really doesn’t want to know?

Some participants talked about wanting to share their other life with their wives so they don’t have to carry the burden alone. However, they reported that their wives did not want to engage in such a conversation. Others reported not wanting to share in order to refrain from burdening their wives, stating that it was hard enough that they had to suffer and that they wanted to spare their wives the pain. One of the participants explained his reasoning for not telling his wife:

I have a good wife. It is hard for me that I can’t share this part of my life with her. I know it is better for her not to know... this way she lives with no regrets and guilt. She doesn’t have to worry about the kids’ future and her social life in the community. She is well off, we have no financial problems. It is hard enough for me; why make her life unbearable too?

Participants also described the ways in which they interact with their wives in order to prevent their wives from asking questions, suspecting anything, or complaining about the limited or absence of intimate relationship. One of the participants said, “She goes to the mikvah [a bath in which certain Jewish ritual purifications are performed] and has expectations that I try to fulfill... I don’t always succeed but I always have excuses and explanations... she doesn’t nag me about it.” Another participant explained how he does not require his wife to provide a detailed account of her whereabouts, expecting to be treated the same way:

My wife doesn’t know and doesn’t want to know. I think that there should be secrets in the family... I don’t want to know everything that is going on with her and I don’t want her to know about me... I also don’t know where she is at any given moment. I don’t ask her where she goes. I don’t want her to ask me.

Another participant explained how he does not push his wife to go to the mikvah and therefore can avoid having a sexual relationship:

I am not strict with her about the mikvah... I asked her when we married if she knew the rules and if she knew how to keep the seven clean days and we are kind of having our intimate relationship around it... when she doesn’t go to the mikvah we don’t have intimate relationship.
One of the participants described how from the start he chose a wife that will allow him to keep a separate life without much conflict. He stated the following:

One of the things I was looking for in a marriage was a compliant wife. . . I don’t care if she is pretty . . . or wealthy . . . . It was important to me that she will not stand in my way and even if she finds out about my limitation it will not turn into a story that will destroy my family and kids. . . I succeeded in that. She is loyal. I think that she understands I have a problem but she doesn’t ask me anything.

Although the participants described several ways they interact with their wives to avoid conflicts related to their lack of intimacy and emotional presence in the relationships, those ways were not always successful. Some of the men talked about their wives being dissatisfied with the relationship. One of the men said, “My wife and kids are far away from my world; she had complaints about our relationship. She claims that I am married to the yeshiva.” Another participant described his wife’s thoughts about their relationship as it relates to his avoidance of intimacy: “I know that I am keeping secrets from my wife. . . she thinks that I am a cold person who doesn’t need sex. She also sees that I study in a yeshiva and assumes that these are my priorities.” A third participant described a difficult dynamic at home with his wife: “I think that she doesn’t love me and stays with me only because of my status in the community and also because divorce doesn’t look good. . . the more sour she is, the more I run away from home.”

Finally, although the participants in general did not talk about their sexual behaviors, within or outside their marriages, at least one of the participants expressed concerns about the possible negative influence of his sexual relationship outside of the marriage on his family. This participant stated the following: “When my wife was pregnant I made sure she took an HIV test. She didn’t understand why and refused. I didn’t know what to do. At the end her OBGYN convinced her.”

DISCUSSION

The goal of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences within the marital relationships of Jewish Orthodox gay men who are in mixed-orientation marriages. The findings of this study suggest that Jewish Orthodox gay men feel compelled to get married not only in spite of being gay, but as a direct result of being gay. They chose to get married as a pragmatic solution that allowed them access to the rights and privileges of the Orthodox community. Participants reported getting married in order to conceal their sexual identity, to get cured of their same-sex attraction, or to fulfill the
community expectation and divert suspicions about their sexual identity. Participants got married to pass as “normative” men.

The reasons mentioned by the participants fall within the categories suggested by Ortiz and Scott (1994). Ortiz and Scott (1994) suggested marriage as a solution as involving conscious motivations including attempt to hide, deny, cure, and overcompensate for the feared sexual orientation. Their second category, sex-role conservatism, refers to marrying out of a sense of obligation related to the way these men were socialized to heterosexuality. It is possible that for the participants of this study, these two categories are intertwined. Because of their intense socialization to heterosexuality, the strong prohibition of sexual activity between men, and the dire consequences for not complying with this prohibition, these men felt as if they had no choice but to marry if they wished to stay within their community.

Interestingly, some of the men reported getting married following the advice of their rabbi, believing that marriage is the cure to same-sex attraction. These participants reported being disappointed when they realized that the marriage did not change them. Still, none of these participants reported going back to the rabbis to let him know that their suggested solution did not work. It is possible that rabbis in the ultra-Orthodox community continue to encourage gay men to marry partially because they do not receive feedback regarding the failure of this solution.

Sociocultural theory emphasizes the importance of the context in understanding human development (Crain, 2000; Vygotsky, 1986). Supporting sociocultural theory, for the participants in our study the community plays a significant role not only in the decision to marry, but also in maintaining the marriage. It appears that the participants have a dual relationship with the community; on the one hand the community provides for all their needs, including career, education, housing, etc. This is the only place they feel they belong and at home and they express a strong desire to continue living in the community, not only for themselves but also for their children and grandchildren. On the other hand, the community is perceived as a constant threat to self and family. If their true identity is revealed, the consequences will be severe. The supportive environment will quickly purge them out of the community, and their extended family and children will suffer for generations. It appears that the participants go through life with a sense of pending doom, a conditional sense of safety, having to be cautious, and being aware that one mistake can cost them everything they have. In a culture that encourages protecting community values over individual happiness, these men had to sacrifice their personal wishes and desires in order to protect themselves, their families, and by extension the ultra-Orthodox community.

In their review of the literature on gay men in mixed-orientation marriages, Hernandez and colleagues (2011) concluded that these marriages are fraught with complexity and tension. Similarly, the study participants’ reports
of the quality of the marital relationship suggest that none of them is joyously married. Most participants reported perceiving the marriage as a teamwork, as a functional and pragmatic arrangement designated to achieve specific goals (such as raising the next generation). Most of them did not report great intimacy or closeness with their wives; rather the relationship appeared to be similar to that of roommates with parallel lives. Some of the participants reported making attempts to increase closeness by disclosing their same-sex attraction to their wives. Those attempts did not succeed, as the wives preferred to act as if the conversation never took place. In addition, the findings about the marital relationship suggest that these relationships are not a source of safety and support for the participants. Most of them reported having to be cautious at home, not wanting to draw suspicion and working hard to hide their true identity from their wives and kids and to compensate for the lack of intimacy.

Although the participants struggled within the marital relationship, none of them reported ever considering a divorce. Even the participants who reported being disappointed when realizing that the marriage did not cure them did not report any thoughts about ending the relationship. This finding is different from the anecdotal evidence in the literature suggesting that most mixed-orientation marriages end in divorce (Isay, 1998). It is also different from the findings of Hernandez and Wilson (2007), who explored the experiences of Seventh-day Adventist women in mixed-orientation marriages. All the women in that study divorced their gay husbands. However, the termination of the marital relationship happened after their husbands came out as gay men. None of the participants in our study came out, and by not doing so perhaps allowed the wives to stay in the relationship.

It is possible that for these gay men remaining in the marriage was a better choice because the cost of leaving was too high and involved negative consequences not only for themselves but for their wives, their children, and their extended family. This issue once again highlights the importance of considering the sociocultural context in which people live in order to understand their experiences. The ultra-Orthodox community, which strongly discourages divorce, no doubt plays a significant role in ultra-Orthodox gay men’s decision to stay in the marriage.

Our findings suggest that these men’s sexual orientation occupies a big space in the marital relationship. It is the “elephant in the room.” Even if it is not discussed, it is there. The participants in this study constantly think about their same-sex attraction; figuring out ways to avoid intimacy with their wives, wondering whether their wives know, considering if they should or should not tell their wives, as well as how to compensate for not being sexually and sometimes emotionally present in the relationship. Thus, even though they make a conscious decision to stay in the marriage, their struggle with their same-sex attraction is not resolved and continues to occupy their inner lives.
Implications

Our findings have implications in regards to the Orthodox Jewish community. It appears that for the participants in our study, marriage is perceived as a solution that allows them to continue living in the community and benefiting from everything the community provides. However, they pay an emotional price for hiding their same-sex attraction, living in constant fear of the negative consequences they may endure if their sexual orientation is ever revealed. As a result, they do not share their inner world with anyone and do not feel closeness and intimacy with their wives. They live in two parallel worlds; as “normative” ultra-Orthodox married men, and as hidden gay men. Navigating and making sense of these contradicting worlds is an on-going struggle (Itzhaky & Kissil, in press).

We believe that helping these men be less burdened requires a top-down intervention, at the macro level of the Orthodox Jewish community, with the rabbinical authorities. 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. Several of the participants in our study reported that they were encouraged to get married, with the promise that getting married would solve everything. The message was clear: their same-sex attraction needed to be eliminated. Obviously, and as the participants in our study painfully learned, this method did not work. Clearly, getting married does not support the well-being of these gay men.

In recent years there has been a significant shift in the Orthodox Jewish community’s openness and willingness to discuss homosexuality and the suffering of ultra-Orthodox gay men (Beck, 2010). Although no clear solution for how to reconcile these two conflicting identities was offered, there has been a change in attitudes toward homosexuality and gay men, 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 Jewish community.

We recommend the development of a community committee, comprised 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, and without feeling pressured to marry in order to hide their sexual orientation. 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 comprised 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.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

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 Jewish gay men who are in mixed-orientation marriages and who have refused to participate in this study have different experiences of the marital relationship. Second, only men participated in the study and therefore the results cannot be generalized to lesbian women, for whom the experience of being in mixed-orientation marriages in the Orthodox community may be different. Future research should explore the experiences of lesbian women in mixed-orientation marriages in the Orthodox community to get a better understanding of how the intersection of gender and their sociocultural context shapes their marital experiences. Third, our study did not include the experiences of bisexual men and/or women which typically do not identify as gay, and therefore the results cannot be generalized to these groups. Fourth, our study included only Orthodox Jews. Future research should explore the experiences of gay men in mixed-orientation marriages in other similar traditional populations (e.g., Amish) to gain a deeper understanding of the ways religious and sociocultural contexts intersect with sexual identity and shape marital experiences. Finally, even though we asked the participants about their lives as gay men in the Orthodox community, they did not provide much information about their sex lives and sexual interactions. This might be the result of a gender effect, as all the interviews were conducted by a female interviewer. It is possible that the participants were very uncomfortable bringing up sexual issues, which are taboo in the Orthodox community, with a female. Future studies may benefit from including male interviewers to allow Orthodox Jewish gay men to talk about this aspect of their lives.

CONCLUSIONS

This study is the first qualitative study designed to examine the experiences of Orthodox Jewish gay men who are in mixed-orientation marriages. Our
findings suggest that religion and the Orthodox community play a major role in Orthodox Jewish gay men’s decision to marry and especially in sustaining the marriage. The findings highlight the importance of attending to the contexts in which people live and to the intersection of contextual variables when attempting to understand their experiences. In addition, our findings suggest that these Jewish Orthodox gay men experience the marital relationship as a means to an end; a highly structured, goal-oriented institute they are obligated to participate in in order to be accepted in the community. Last, the men’s sexual orientation is rarely directly discussed in the relationship. However, it is ever-present in the marital relationship and greatly influences these men’s attitudes, behaviors, and feelings toward their wives.

REFERENCES


Itzhaky, H., & Kissil, K. (in press). “It’s a horrible sin. If they find out, I will not be able to stay”: The experiences of living in secrecy among gay Orthodox Jewish men. *Journal of Homosexuality.*


