Experiences of the Orthodox Community Among Orthodox Jewish Gay Men

Karni Kissil & Haya Itzhaky

To cite this article: Karni Kissil & Haya Itzhaky (2015) Experiences of the Orthodox Community Among Orthodox Jewish Gay Men, Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 27:3, 371-389, DOI: 10.1080/10538720.2015.1051686

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2015.1051686

Published online: 11 Aug 2015.

Article views: 92

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Experiences of the Orthodox Community Among Orthodox Jewish Gay Men

KARNI KISSIL
Private Practice, Jupiter, Florida, USA

HAYA ITZHAKY
Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel

Sense of community includes elements such as sense of belonging, mutual interdependence, trust, shared goals and values, and shared history. It is associated with benefits for both the members and the community and is believed to be stronger in religious minority groups. This qualitative study describes the experiences of the Jewish Orthodox community among Orthodox Jewish gay men. In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 men about their experiences of being gay in their Orthodox communities. A content analysis revealed four themes: community as a home, community as a comprehensive provider, community as a strict behavior regulator, and community as punitive toward gay men. Findings suggest that Orthodox Jewish gay men have mixed feelings about their community; being satisfied with a community that provides for all their needs, but also living in constant fear of the negative consequences they and their families may endure if their homosexuality will be revealed. Recommendations for social work practice are provided.

KEYWORDS sense of community, gay men, Orthodox Jews, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

A sense of community is an important concept that has received much attention in social work and community psychology literature in the past several decades (Itzhaky & Dekel, 2005; Itzhaky & Makarus, 2013; Itzhaky & York,
One of the goals of social work interventions is facilitating a sense of community among community members, which can be done by macro- and/or micro-level interventions by social workers (Itzhaky & Dekel, 2005; Itzhaky & Makarus, 2013; Itzhaky & York, 2001). In his seminal work on sense of community, Sarason (1974) defined the concept as “the sense that one was part of a readily supportive network of relationships upon which one can depend” (p. 1). Sense of community is believed to be associated with psychological benefits for the individual as well as for the community (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Farrell, Aubry, & Coulombe, 2004; Levy, Itzhaky, Zanbar, & Schwartz, 2012; Prezza, Amici, Roberti, & Tedeschi, 2001). Scholarship about sense of community suggests that sense of community is stronger in minority groups, including religious minority populations (Sivan & Kaplan, 2003; Tönnies, 1955). However, there is no research or scholarship addressing the sense of community experienced by members of close-knit minority groups who feel different from their community because of a stigmatized status (minority within minority). This study has begun to address this gap by exploring the sense of community in a particular minority subgroup within a religious minority population. Specifically, the goal of this study was to explore the perceptions of the Orthodox Jewish community among ultra-Orthodox Jewish closeted gay men.

Sense of Community

Much has been written about the concept of community, resulting in a plethora of definitions and uses of the term. Researchers and scholars (e.g., Itzhaky & Bustin, 2012; Itzhaky, Zanbar, Levy, & Schwartz, 2013) distinguish between two major uses of the term community. The first is the territorial or geographical notion of the word. In this sense community refers to a neighborhood, town, city, or region, thus the sense of community implies a sense of belonging to a particular area or the social structure within the area. The second use refers to communities of interest and is a more relational usage, concerned with quality and character of human relations without reference to locations.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) define community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Others define sense of community as a result of interaction and deliberation by people brought together by similar interests and common goals (Westheimer & Kahn, 1993), or as an environment in which people interact in a cohesive manner, continually reflecting upon the work of the group while always respecting the differences individual members bring to the group (Itzhaky & Bustin, 2012). These
Orthodox Jewish Gay Men

definitions highlight the most essential elements of community: mutual interdependence among members, sense of belonging, connectedness, trust, interactivity, common interests, shared values and goals, and shared history (Roval, 2002).

One of the most accepted and studied models of sense of community was developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) and later revised by McMillan (1996). According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), sense of community consists of four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. There is empirical evidence supporting this model and its dimensions (e.g., Brodsky, 1996; Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2001).

The first element, membership, refers to the feeling of belonging, of being part of a collective, and identification with the community. A major part of membership is boundaries: if you belong to a particular community, this implies there are some who do not. According to McMillan and Chavis, emotional safety is derived from membership, a sense of belonging, and identification with the community. In relation to influence, for a group to be both cohesive and attractive it must influence its individual members while allowing them to feel they have some control and influence over it. Influence therefore is a bidirectional concept.

The third dimension, integration and fulfillment of needs, refers to the idea that for a community to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual-group association must be rewarding for the individual members. McMillan and Chavis (1986) suggest that common needs, goals, and beliefs provide the integrative force for a cohesive community. Some of the more obvious rewards examined in their article are status of membership, success of the community, and the perceived competence of other members. In relation to shared emotional connection, McMillan and Chavis suggest that this is in part based on a sense of shared history and identification with the community. They suggest that the more people interact, the stronger the bond between them, and these bonds then develop into community spirit.

Although a link between sense of community and well-being makes intuitive sense, there is scarcity of current research on this relationship. Several studies demonstrated that higher sense of community is associated with psychological benefits. For example, Riger and Lavrakas (1981) found that need fulfillment, feelings of membership, and shared emotional connection with neighbors were associated with better individual health. In addition, Bachrach and Zautra (1985) showed that a stronger sense of community led to increased problem-focused coping. Davidson and Cotter (1991) demonstrated a link between sense of community and general happiness. Finally, Farrell and colleagues (2004) reported a link between sense of community and well-being. Studies exploring possible variables that may facilitate the development of sense of community suggest that both community
variables, such as community involvement, and individual characteristics, such as sense of mastery and self-esteem, are related to increased sense of community (Itzhaky & Dekel, 2005; Itzhaky & Makarus, 2013; Itzhaky & York, 2001; Itzhaky et al., 2013).

A sense of belonging to the community intensifies in minority groups, including religious minority populations (Sivan & Kaplan, 2003). Within religious minority groups, religiosity and the centrality of the religious institutions create meaningful and close social networks for individuals and families (Chai, 2000). Tönnies (1955) addresses this characteristic of religious groups in his theory of community and his discussion of the typology of communities—gemeinschaft and gesellschaft. Gemeinschaft (community) reflects intimate and holistic “bonding ties” that lead to very strong in-group cohesion but also to closed, inward-looking groups. This type of community has clear boundaries between its members and the outside world. The relationships among the members are tight and accompanied by close family ties. Communities that are characterized as gemeinschaft usually have strong faith and tradition. Gesellschaft (association) involves looser and more specific ties that connect individuals across the borders of social circles based on shared commitments to common interests (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Relationships among members of such groups are often weak and distant. Gemeinschaft fosters collectivist identities, while gesellschaft fosters individualistic identities. Since the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community falls into the typology of gesellschaft, we expect its members to experience a strong sense of community.

To understand the nature, processes, and experience of sense of community at any point in time for a particular community, it is necessary to have some appreciation of the community’s history (Pretty, Bishop, Fisher, & Sonn, 2007). Therefore, in the next section we describe the Orthodox Jewish community in the United States as well as some of its relevant history to provide context to help better understand the nature and characteristics of this community.

The Orthodox Jewish Community in the United States

Judaism in the United States is comprised of four main branches: (a) Orthodox, (b) Conservative, (c) Reform, and (d) 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).

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 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 concept of cultural trauma is important in understanding the history of the Orthodox community and its 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 all. 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 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) (Mirkin & Okun, 2005).
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). Furthermore, Hazal (Jewish sages of the Mishna, Tosefta and Talmud eras, essentially from the times of the final 300 years of the Second Temple of Jerusalem until the 6th century CE) described sexual activity between two men as a sin that might endanger the continuity of the Jewish community. Having sexual relationships that do not create new life and continuity of the community was perceived as a selfish and egocentric act. The punishment of death is described as a “measure for measure” to those who put the continuity of humanity at risk (Luvitz, 2002).

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). 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. Most ultra-Orthodox groups view homosexuality as sin and believe that homosexuals are able and should change their ways (Shbeidel, 2006).

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. Often, a son who comes out is shunned by the Orthodox community and his parents sit shiva (the Jewish mourning ritual on the death of a family member; Mark, 2008) for him. 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.

**AIM OF STUDY**

There is scarcity of research that seeks to understand the experiences of the community among stigmatized minority subgroups who live within religious
Orthodox Jewish Gay Men

minority groups. One such group is Orthodox Jewish gay men who live in the Orthodox community, a community which is characterized by close relationships and rigid boundaries with the outside world. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the perceptions and experiences of the Orthodox community among Orthodox Jewish closeted gay men who live in the Orthodox Jewish community.

METHOD

Participants

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the institute where the second author works. Twenty-two Orthodox Jewish self-identified 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 an Orthodox Jewish gay man (sexual identity of a gay man, regardless of sexual behavior), 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, 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 connected the researcher with other potential participants by giving her 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 to three 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.
TABLE 1 Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 30</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 31 and 40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 40</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married without children</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married with children</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Profession</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White collar</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue collar</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeshiva student</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orthodox affiliation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hassidim</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuanian</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sepharadim</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 (for example, the researcher knew not to expect a handshake when she met the participants, and knew to wear a long skirt). 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; having a good understanding of 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 understand their struggles but who does not pose any threat because she does not belong to their community (minimal risk for their sexuality to be revealed). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and all identifying information (such as names, ages, geographic locations) was removed.

ANALYSIS

Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim by the researchers, and then the transcripts were checked against the audiotapes for accuracy. 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 preconceived 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 the Orthodox community. During the second stage, the coders discussed the subthemes and themes they had independently identified, and by consensus created a master list that only included those that both coders agreed upon.

All the stages of the analysis 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 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

A content analysis of all the statements related to the community revealed four themes: community as a home, community as a comprehensive provider, community as a strict behavior regulator, and community as punitive toward gay men. These themes are described next with illustrative quotes from the participants, with all identifiers removed in order to preserve anonymity.

Community As a Home

Participants described many positive feelings toward the Orthodox community, describing it as a place where they feel they belong. One of them said, “I am part of this community, I was born into it... I don’t know any other life.” Another one stated, “This is the community of my life. This is where I want to live and raise my kids.” Participants described special daily rituals that they like about the community. One of the participants talked about his hope to find an ultra-Orthodox Jewish lover because he will understand:

.... My need to go to the synagogue... to breathe this very special Orthodox culture... to eat the cholent [a Jewish Shabat dish] on Saturday morning after returning from the synagogue ... to smell the challah
baking in the oven after hafrashat challah [separating challah; the Jewish mitzvah of separating a piece of dough from the batch]. This is full life that only an Orthodox Jew who experienced it in his childhood will be able to understand and experience with me.

Participants described a strong sense of familiarity and comfort, derived from knowing the rules and the expectations, and from being aware of the continuity of everyday life in the community: life progresses in a predictable way, “what has been will be again,” rules and rituals remain the same, and this predictability creates a sense of safety in one’s place and purpose in the world. One of the participants said,

I really love this community. I love the tradition, the structured life. Everything is structured; there is time for prayer and time for studying. I know what is allowed and what is forbidden. Life is very structured… I know what my kids learn in school from the time when I was in school … I even know some of their teachers who taught me when I was a kid. There is a clear sense of continuity in this community … even the rabbinical authority goes from father to son.

Participants also talked about the sense of continuity that comes from knowing that previous generations have lived in the community and the next generations will live there too. One of the participants said, “This is my community. This is where my family, my parents live. My kids will get married here and live near me. The future is predictable and known.”

Community As a Comprehensive Provider

Participants talked about the Orthodox community as a place where all their needs are met, including work, school, economic opportunities, social interaction, religious institutes, etc. One of the participants said, “I am a man of faith and all the services I need—religious, educational, and social—are here.” Another participant talked about considering moving to a less strict Orthodox community so he can live openly as a gay man and said “but you will not be able to live there [other community]; you need the Orthodox services of this community, the synagogue, the schools.”

Participants also talked about their status as something that they get from living in the community, either because of their family lineage or because they excelled in their religious studies. One of the participants said,

I belong to a very respectable family of rabbis … no one is bothering me because of my father’s status. I was also considered a good marriage match, and I assume my kids will too … my brothers are preparing for careers as rabbis.
Another participant said the following:

I come from a very respected family for several generations. My parents came from Eastern Europe. My mother’s family and my father’s family were rabbis already in Europe . . . my kids will be leaders in this community and we are preparing them for that.

A third participant said, “I never participated in sports . . . I felt rejected by my peers, but because I was a bright student, I was highly valued by the rabbis and later by some of my classmates.” Thus, the community is perceived as providing all their needs. There is no need to go outside of the community.

Community As a Strict Behavior Regulator

Participants described their community as a place where the rules of behavior are clear and all-encompassing. Every aspect of daily life is regulated and monitored. There are rules about what to wear, who to talk to, which schools to go to, what to eat, etc. One of the participants said, “In this community you have to fit the norms. Even our clothes are the same... kind of like uniforms... based on your clothes people know your community affiliation.” Participants described the community as uncompromising about the rules. They described a strong push to comply with all the rules and norms, and a strong requirement of conformity; there is no room for differences. One of the participants said the following:

You have to live in an orthodox community to understand why it is so important for everyone to be part of the community. You have to accept all the norms, the values and the behaviors. It is hard to be accepted into this community. It is a little bit like a cult; the rabbi is like a guru and you have to satisfy him all the time. You are expected to only use the services in the community.

Another participant said,

It was clear to me that I have to get married 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.

While as described earlier when discussing the theme about community as a home participants appreciated the consistent and predictable structure the rules have provided to their lives, in the current theme they expressed some frustration with the extent of the community regulation and control.
Community As Punitive Toward Gay Men

Participants described their community as very punitive and unforgiving toward homosexuals. They expressed fear of the consequences they will have to endure if they ever get caught. They were worried not only for their own well-being but also for their extended families that will be negatively affected as well as future generations. One of the participants explained: “You can’t be gay in the Orthodox community... 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.” Another one said, “You can’t be gay in the Orthodox community. You will be shunned or excommunicated from the community with all your family, or you will be cut off of your family.” A third one stated, “If they catch that you are different and even worse, a homosexual, which is a sin that should be punished with stoning, you will not be able to belong to any Orthodox community, nor your family and kids.” Participants were especially worried about their children’s education and chances for having a good marriage match. One of them explained: “Nobody knows anything. I make sure no one knows. My kids belong to educational institutes in the community. If anyone finds out about me, my kids will not be accepted to school; they will not be able to find a marriage match.”

Participants recalled stories of community members who were expelled or suffered other negative consequences when their same-sex attraction was revealed. One of the participants stated, “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 participant said the following:

I had a lover who was also ultra-Orthodox. His neighborhood found out and the next day he killed himself. I know his family and I am worried about them. It is not simple to be a family of a gay man. It is a stigma that gets the family rejected. That includes schools and marriage matches. I don’t dare check on them so nobody suspects I had any connection to him ... I am sure his family doesn’t know about me otherwise they would have already reported it in my neighborhood.

Because same-sex attraction is perceived as a horrible sin which carries severe consequences, participants reported not having anyone to talk to about their struggle and being scared of anyone finding out. One of the participants said,

I have no one to consult with ... I can’t trust the rabbis, they will not bring me closer, they will push me away ... I can’t count on them to help me refrain from the sin... they push away cases like me because it is an abomination.
Another one said, “I can’t even think about the possibility of sharing any of this with my wife. It can ruin her life, mine, and the kids’... we will not have the right to exist in this community.” A third one recalled the following: “I was terrified [after finding out he was gay]... I had nobody to talk to... I looked for a non-Jewish psychologist. I called him a few times to make sure he didn’t know any Jews and wouldn’t tell anyone... I was so scared.”

Participants reported that their only option to stay in the community was to hide their homosexuality. One of the participants stated, “I invest a lot of energy in hiding it [the homosexuality] from the community.” Another participant said, “I learned to hide and to pretend. I function as a straight man in the community.”

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to explore the perceptions of the community among ultra-Orthodox Jewish closeted gay men. Findings from this study provide support for existing theoretical models of sense of community and the importance of attending to the larger community and religious contexts to more fully understand the lived experiences of religious minority populations.

The themes found in our study are both similar to and different from the categories suggested by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Two of the themes found in our study fit well with McMillan and Chavis’ model. The theme of community as a home is similar to their theme of membership, reflecting a strong sense of belonging, familiarity, and identification with the community values and way of life. In addition, participants in our study also talked about strict boundaries of the community with a clear demarcation of who belongs and who does not belong in the community.

The theme of community as a comprehensive provider found in our study fits well with McMillan and Chavis’ category of integration and fulfillment of needs. This category refers to the idea that for a community to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual-group association must be rewarding for the individual members. Participants in our study talked about the ultra-Orthodox community as providing all of their needs, to the extent that they can live their entire lives without leaving the community. The community provides, among others, for their social, religious, economic, and educational needs, as well as for status. This in turn creates a sense of togetherness and results in a very cohesive and close-knit community.

The theme of community as a strict behavior regulator partially fits with McMillan and Chavis’ category of influence. McMillan and Chavis suggest that influence is a bidirectional concept because for a group to be both cohesive and attractive it must influence its individual members while allowing them
to feel they have some control and influence over it. It seems as if for the participants in our study the direction of the influence has been one way. The participants reported that every aspect of their daily lives is regulated and monitored by religious laws and religious authority, and by extension, by the community. Participants’ accounts reflect a strong and comprehensive influence of the community on their behaviors. However, their stories do not suggest that they believe they have any influence on the community. They reported a strong sense of continuity in the community (i.e., “what has been will be again”). Although some of them expressed negative feelings about the extent of the community control, none of them reported wanting to change the way the community functions or wishing that things would be different. None of the participants reported any attempts to change the way things are in the community.

The fourth category of McMillan and Chavis (1986), shared emotional connection, did not emerge in our study. This category refers to shared history, values, and beliefs, which lead to a sense of safety and trust. Even though the ultra-Orthodox community has shared history, values, and beliefs, the participants in our study did not talk about having a sense of safety and trust. It is possible that because of their same-sex attraction and the intense fear of the consequences of getting caught, the participants in our study did not feel shared emotional connection with their community, knowing that their sense of belonging will be severed immediately if their same-sex attraction was to be revealed.

None of the participants in our study mentioned any connection to a gay community. This may be the result of not having such a community because of the need to keep their same-sex attraction a secret, or maybe they were uncomfortable talking about this forbidden issue with a female interviewer. Another possible reason may be that for the participants, their primary identity has been being an ultra-Orthodox Jew and therefore this is the only community of which they feel a part. They refused to accept their same-sex attraction as part of their identity, which may have caused them to resist searching for a gay community, a step that will involve the acceptance of being gay (Itzhaky & Kissil, 2015). The picture that emerges is of men who do not feel safe and emotionally connected to any community, and deep inside feel disconnected and scared. Future research should explore whether ultra-Orthodox gay men feel that they belong to any community and whether they have any outlets to express their emotional struggles (e.g., virtual communities).

The fourth theme that emerged in our study, community as punitive toward gay men, is unique to our study. Participants talked about their intense fear of getting caught and the extensive negative consequences they and their families may endure as a result. Participants talked about their ongoing efforts to conceal their stigmatized identity in order to protect themselves
and their loved ones. It is possible that this theme is unique to sexual minority groups living in close-knit and insular religious communities. Future research should explore experiences of the community among sexual minority groups living in similar religious communities (e.g., Amish, Latter-day Saints).

The participants expressed a strong sense of duality in their relationship with the community. On the one hand, they showed appreciation, love, familiarity, and sense of belonging to a community that is stable, consistent, predictable, and comprehensively providing of their needs. On the other hand, they related a sense of pending doom, of possible persecution, and intense fear of losing their world by being excommunicated if their sexual identity was revealed. Thus, they are conditionally allowed to enjoy all the benefits of the community as long as they can maintain the façade of following the rules, rules that dictate that only heterosexuality is an acceptable form of sexual orientation.

In a case where there is a struggling stigmatized group within a community, social workers will usually help the stigmatized group members create their own community to address their specific needs and boost their self-worth and sense of belonging. At the same time they will work with the larger community on ways to embrace “the other” and be more inclusive and supportive of marginalized groups. However, because of the risks involved for this unique group and the need to keep their sexual identity a secret, creating an ultra-Orthodox gay men support group within the ultra-Orthodox community is a major challenge. Such a group will have to remain “underground” for a while until the conditions in the community have changed and the members feel safe to be in the daylight. Reaching out to possible members and creating a group where the members can feel protected has to be done with the utmost care and caution. In addition, we have to think outside the box and come up with creative ways for macro-level interventions (e.g., policy, changes in community attitudes) for how to alleviate their suffering within the Orthodox community.

Since the ultra-Orthodox community is a traditional community that relies fully on the leadership of the rabbis, intervening at the macro level, by working with the rabbinical authority, could possibly be more effective. Social workers could reach out to the rabbinical authorities to discuss how to create a reality in which gay men can be accepted as equal human beings even though homosexuality is a sin. Similar conversations recently have taken place among more modern Orthodox Jews. For example, the “Statement on Principles on the Place of Jews with a Homosexual Orientation in Our Community” was published in 2010 by a large group of Orthodox rabbis, and marked a radical shift in the attitudes of Orthodox Judaism toward gay people and opened for public debate an issue that has been taboo for 3,000 years (Beck, 2010). We believe that by keeping the conversation in
the forefront, this shift can ripple through the entire Orthodox community, a trend that perhaps will eventually make the daily lives of ultra-Orthodox gay men more bearable.

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 Jewish gay men who are heterosexually married and who have refused to participate in this study have different experiences of the ultra-Orthodox community. Second, only men participated in the study and therefore the results cannot be generalized to lesbian women, for whom the experiences of the Orthodox community may be different. Third, our study included only Orthodox Jews. Future research should explore the experiences of the community for gay men 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 community experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative study explored the experiences of the Orthodox community among ultra-Orthodox Jewish closeted gay men. The themes that emerged in our study suggest that these men have mixed feelings about their community. On the one hand, they showed a strong sense of appreciation, belonging, continuity, and gratitude toward a stable community that provides for all their needs. On the other hand, they expressed intense fear of the negative consequences they and their families may suffer if their homosexuality is revealed, and as a result, having to hide a big part of who they are, maintain a façade of normalcy, and feel emotionally isolated and not able to share their struggles with anyone. The participants in our study did not express any expectations that attitudes about homosexuality will ever change in their community. Thus, in order for the discourse around homosexuality to change, social work in the community has to start at the macro level, with the rabbinical authority, to slowly expand on the dominant interpretations and find a way in which gay men can remain in the only world they have ever known and feel fully accepted as equal members.

REFERENCES


Itzhaky, H., Zanbar, L., Levy, D., & Schwartz, C. (2013). The contribution of personal and community resources to well-being and sense of belonging to the

---

Orthodox Jewish Gay Men

387


