The Tightrope of Desire: A Qualitative Study of Sexual Conflict in Single Heterosexual Orthodox Jewish Men

Koby Frances, PhD
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

How do adults experience and manage their sexual desires, when these desires are laden with shame, guilt, or religious transgression from an early age? Could adults reared in such families and communities, as Freud (1905) once hypothesized, be more prone to experiencing various forms of pathology and distress, particularly before marriage when sexuality is more conflicted? Although the impact of cultural “shame disgust and morality” (Freud, 1908) on the psychosexuality of adults may now be less insidious than for adults in Freud’s times, prohibitions around masturbation, premarital sex, and homosexuality continue to proliferate in certain strands of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faiths even in today’s more sexually enlightened world (Cochran & Beeghley, 1991). In nonreligious populations, as well, attitudes of sexual shame, silence, and fear prevail in many families and communities (Levine, 2003).

Although a substantial literature on the sexual-religious conflicts of Christian single men and women (Rosenau, 1982) hints at the complicated psychodynamics of these experiences, no studies in this literature have yet examined the ways in which these conflicts are dealt with on an individual level. In qualitative studies of homosexual Jewish observant men (Coyle, 2001) and single, heterosexual Orthodox Jewish men and women (Schachter, 2004), researchers have studied the sexual–religious conflicts of individuals at the level of identity and social affiliation, but refrained from asking participants to reflect upon actual sexual desire and action, leaving open many questions about conflict-defense functioning.

This qualitative study examined the sexual–religious conflicts of single heterosexual men in the Orthodox Jewish community by allowing participants to define for themselves whatever types of conflicts they experienced before, during, and after sexual moments, and how they resolved these over the course of their development. The purpose of focusing on one gender of a homogeneous cultural group whose conflicts play out under similar cultural conditions was to isolate the internal dynamics of this process, which would then highlight important psychological similarities and differences. A more detailed overview of the culture and socialization of Orthodox Jewish men will help to illuminate the nuances of their unique struggles.

Cultural Background

According to Orthodox Jewish law, all forms of premarital physical intimacy and sexual activity are prohibited under a set of religious laws commonly referred to as Shomer Negiah, which in Hebrew translates literally to “observing touch.” Men and women...
who are not married are also forbidden from spending time alone in the same room, a law called Yichud. Men are specifically prohibited from masturbating and from gazing at women in a sexualized manner. These prohibitions, which are taught around the age of puberty, go hand in hand with the ancient Jewish recommendation to marry as early as possible (Biale, 1997), a practice that was historically observed in Jewish communities and that was often reinforced by larger societal norms and values around sexuality, dating, and marriage.1

The prohibitions around premarital intimacy are part of a larger tapestry of Jewish law, called Halakha, which Orthodox Jews see as a proscription for moral living and as a way to imbue their physical lives with spirituality and meaning. These laws, which are ultimately derived from the Pentateuch, deal with a wide array of daily rituals and behaviors, from how one should pray in the morning to how one should feed their pet. Whether each and every law is always observed, the Halakha is often formally taught and practiced from a young age and often becomes intricately linked to a person’s identity. Although violations of Orthodox Jewish law are considered sins, or Aveirot, for which a person is required to repent, the emotional “consequences” of these violations vary greatly, depending on the person and the type of law that is violated and how purposeful or accidental the violation was.2

Once Orthodox men and women reach young adulthood, they face a conundrum unlike any other before, where they are encouraged to interact frequently and intensely with members of the opposite sex for marriage purposes but are, at the same time, forbidden from expressing any and all forms of physical affection. Because their lives also intersect with the norms and values of the secular world through schooling, jobs, and popular culture, the Orthodox rules that have governed so much of their lives up until now may at this point seem unrealistic and outdated and may be called into question or openly violated.

Although many remain faithful to these laws despite the tensions that they generate, many others may find themselves actively and repeatedly violating them through fantasizing, pornography, masturbation, physical affection, and sexual activity, which can lead to intense feelings of confusion and conflict.3 And though early marriage is one way to minimize these unavoidable conflicts, men and women are currently marrying much later and much less than ever before in Jewish history (Fishman, 2007) and are often navigating these conflicts for a prolonged period of time without the support and understanding of others.

The cultural shame and silence that is associated with sexual discussion provides another layer to their struggles. For example, many Orthodox men and women are reared in families and communities that frown upon sex education or conversations about body parts, puberty, sexual feelings, and behavior, subjects that are culturally taboo though not religiously forbidden to speak about for educational and practical purposes. This silence extends to the religious laws around masturbation and premarital sex, which can be taught tersely and punitively and are not usually placed into a broader religious framework as is done with many of the other Orthodox laws.

Further, as men and women in the community enter their teens and young adulthood, they are encouraged, on the one hand, to explore and analyze their laws and values on a much deeper and more personal level, but, on the other hand, they are discouraged from intellectually engaging in some of the most relevant and conflicted topics of their personal development. This striking “split” in their education and socialization can create a sense of being religiously in control, purpose-driven, and devout in most areas of their life, while also feeling abnormal, dysregulated, and sinful in this one other “pocket” of existence.

As a heterosexual male who was reared in the Orthodox Jewish community and who experienced these conflicts firsthand before marriage, I am aware of the diverse compromises that individuals make that allow them to be sexual and Orthodox at the same time without becoming overwhelmed. But as a psychologist who now treats single men and women in this community who struggle with sexual–religious conflict, I have become increasingly sensitized to the fact that many can experience prolonged years of loneliness, despair, and heightened levels of anxiety and depression. As one 27-year-old interviewee shared, “I think that sexual–religious conflict is the driving force for much of the depression that most people my age go through.”

Because of the diverse ways that individuals in this cohort approach these conflicts, this study was designed to provide a comprehensive and organized understanding of their internal experiences. All of the compounding sociocultural factors discussed previously suggest that the sexual–religious conflicts of Orthodox Jewish single men are unique and worthy of their own independent study, though the ways that these conflicts are dealt with might help us to more deeply understand the experiences of others, including Orthodox Jewish women, Christian and Muslim singles, and members of various religions and cultures who identify as homosexual.

Method

Fifteen men between the ages of 22 and 39, who self-identified as heterosexual and Jewish Orthodox, volunteered to discuss the intersection of their sexual and religious lives in one to two open-ended interviews. These men were recruited though online advertising or through word of mouth. Although each had been raised in different types of Orthodox communities and families—ranging from ultra-Orthodox to liberal Orthodox—all viewed Halakha as the “last word” on religious practice. They each reported being well-informed about the premarital restrictions from a young age. At the time of the interviews, each of these men lived apart from their families, either on their own or with roommates in major metropolitan cities across the United States. They were either graduate students or professionals in a wide range of fields, including the Rabbinate.

Each interview began with the following prompt: “Can you tell me about the intersection of your sexuality and religion over the course of your development and relationship history?” Following this prompt, other open ended questions were used to help each person tell his story. Honing in on some of the classic manifesta-

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1 Biale (1997) discusses some reasons why Rabbis endorsed early marriage.
2 The technical severity of breaking different laws—whether on purpose or by accident—is a topic that is discussed extensively in ancient Rabbinical sources like the Mishna and Talmud.
3 Although there are no formal studies of sexual behavior in Orthodox singles, I would surmise that sexual intercourse is likely to occur less frequently than other sexual acts since it is the most religiously severe of these prohibitions and the most culturally taboo.
tions of psychological conflict—uses of unique metaphors, tangents, discrepancies, nonverbal cues, overelaborations or conspicuous omissions—enabled me to go deeper into their internal experience.

After the interviews were recorded, each was transcribed and analyzed for common themes and patterns around conflict and defense. The frequency or prevalence of each conflict or resolution was not documented, nor was it a central concern to record the specific types of sexual activities being described. The study, assumed that men in this population will share specific and identifiable anxieties and resolutions toward sexual-religious conflict even across their wide array of sexual and religious practices.

**Results**

A qualitative analysis of these 15 narratives yielded three basic conflict/defense positions: (a) sexual disembodiment (b) sexual internalization (c) sexual integration. Each position pivoted around the ways that participants owned and accepted their sexual desire or action in a given moment and are conceptualized as advancing developmental phases on the road to mature sexual personhood. The following section uses narrative excerpts to describe these three positions. To protect the identity of research participants, pseudonyms are used throughout and all identifying information has been removed or altered.

**Position 1: Sexual Disembodiment**

In the disembodiment position, physical intimacy or sexual activity was described by participants as thrilling, addictive, out of control, and unreal. These men often referred to their desires as external forces compelling them to feel, think, and behave in ways that “they” didn’t want: “We spent the first few weeks together not touching, but it started to become very intense. The desire was so powerful, I felt helpless against it” (Abraham, age 32).

Participants also described their sexual desires as impure, dirty, diffuse, and dangerous:

> Viewing sexuality as, like, you know, like drive-oriented and not like love-oriented . . . like getting aroused by some picture or getting like a sexy idea in your head . . . it’s just dirty in my mind . . . . (Mark, age 25)

Some individuals described feeling overwhelming confusion about their will and participation in sexual events:

> Looking back, that’s one of the things that was so scary. How did that happen? How did it get to that point? I was so motivated to go through with this that I broke a number of different things that I would never have considered before. My main concern was this loss of control. (Abraham, age 32)

Aside from the confusion, participants also described feeling ashamed of these strange “symptoms” that hardly fit into their regulated, rational, and well-organized sense of self: “I was exacting and rigorous with religious rituals but, seemingly, had no control over my sexual actions. It didn’t make sense” (Joel, age 25).

This felt discrepancy of selves—the purpose-driven and the senseless—were so discordant and irreconcilable that they were kept apart through splitting, which allowed each mode to pursue its aim unencumbered by the disapproval of the other mode. When the person was sexual, they were senseless and removed from their religious identity. But otherwise they were in-control, rational, and religiously “good,” even if they were breaking other types of laws.

With splitting came the creation of a double life—another way to manage this confusion of selves on a more permanent basis. When they were unable to maintain this splitting/double-life over a prolonged period of time, participants became depressed:

> That whole year, I got really depressed. I stopped talking to my friends; I would sleep in really late and avoid classes. I think I was just really guilty, like, I felt like I was a traitor to myself and a traitor to my family, a traitor to my religion. It was really bad. It seemed like there was no way out. There was no one I could even talk to. (Jacob, age 27)

During this time, some also became overwhelmed with fears of being punished by God or of being found out and humiliated by their communities. Although the victimhood/punishment/depression constellation of feelings was one type of reaction to this breakdown, others reacted with resentment and defiance as they discussed unreasonable, meaningless laws and overbearing Rabbis who somehow expected them to successfully beat these powerful outside urges. “I was angry that religion made me feel so guilty about all my, like, sexual activity that I viewed as failings” (Mark, age 25).

In the disembodiment position, the man’s attempt to forgive himself and “correct his ways” was superficial and short-lived because he was not owning his sexual desires and then finding an acceptable compromise between two conflicted parts of himself; rather, he was trying to obliterate and deny his desires to maintain the important split of his two opposite selves.

> I kept trying to be shomer [observing laws of touch] with her again and again, but we would keep breaking it. We tried this a whole bunch of times. It was like this fight back and forth. It was very unhealthy. (Jacob, age 27)

Two of the men interviewed found a more enduring approach to managing their split-off desires by projecting it onto others and then managing their closeness to that person. Both described being attracted to strong, assertive women who acted seductively toward them and who expressed explicit desires to have a sexual relationship.

Participants were found in the disembodiment position when sexual ideation or experience felt particularly conflicted, shameful, or alien, such as with first-time experiences of physical intimacy and intensified sexual experience with a partner (e.g., engaging for the first time in oral sex when kissing and petting was more the norm). Participants were also found in the disembodiment position around specific sexual compulsions:

> I felt very strongly driven to peep. It’s a feeling of not being in control, like I have to do this, total, like, compulsion. I would feel like taken over, possessed, by you know the vetar hara (evil spirit). I sort of felt like an excitement or a drive that was not part of my normal state of being. (Joel, age 25)

Importantly, all of the preceding examples are from men reflecting on the maladaptive ways that they previously related to them-

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4 According to what this author was taught, this ancient term is a metaphor that Rabbis used to help individuals anthropomorphize their desire for sinful behavior, but it is sometimes misunderstood and misused as a convenient way of disowning these desires.
selves and their sexuality. But for those who were currently in the disembodiment position, just the idea of putting words to their sexual desires and actions was overwhelming, for it threatened to break through their defensive splitting. This can explain why so many individuals refused to participate in the study despite the high levels of publicity and excitement that it generated in the singles Orthodox community. And it also explains why 3 of the participants were able to examine sexual-religious conflicts on only an intellectual and impersonal level, even after directly asking them to discuss their sexual experiences.

To summarize, in the disembodiment position, sexual conflicts have little to do with identity and moral failure because sexual desires have not yet had the opportunity to coalesce into an organized and named part of the self. In this position, sexual desires feel senseless, dirty, and abnormal and are thought of as external to the otherwise logical and sequential self. When juxtaposed with the purpose-driven ways in which he can own, plan, and regulate other drives and interests, the man is struck with a perplexing discrepancy that is resolved by splitting. However, when this splitting breaks down and his disorganized self intrudes on his controlled self for a prolonged period of time, he becomes overwhelmed with feelings of failure and depression or anger and resentment. This latter set of feelings led some study participants to reject their religion and distance themselves from the Orthodox community.

**Position 2: Sexual Internalization**

As participants remained single and as their sexual fantasies, feelings, and behavior became more pressing and intense, many were forced to consider their sexuality as something real that was there to stay—though not always welcome—and as something that was internally generated by them. “As I was kissing her, I remember all these feelings of hypocrisy; ‘Well how could I be doing this? This isn’t who I am!’ So I started to tell myself well maybe this is who I am now” (Mark, age 25).

With the carving out of a sexual self, individuals began to consolidate a new internal schema that was compared and placed next to other schemas: “Person who enjoys sexual fantasy and action” was now at odds with “person who enjoys being religiously observant.” Or “person who is actively choosing to transgress” versus “person who always tries to be observant.” For those whose religious identity was more socially and community-based, the conflict existed at the level of “person who is proud of doing what other people do” versus “person doing something counter to the community standard.”

In this study, some of the men were able to clearly articulate a difference in their sexual selves as they moved from disembodiment to internalization

I used to reason that if God gave everyone challenges, mine was definitely in the sexual realm... that I was created with these kinds of tests. Now, I frame it more physiologically since I’m not really sure how God is involved. I think my body is built to release whatever chemicals are that motivate those kinds of needs. (Sol, age 29)

As the preceding quote demonstrates, even when sexual urges were seen as internally generated, they continued to feel meaningless and disconnected, which led some participants to reflect harshly on them:

When I look at a woman in a certain way walking down the street, whether or not she wants to be looked at, I’m objectifying someone as a sexual object and that’s not something I’m OK with. I should somehow try to squelch these feelings because it’s terrible to treat women as sexual objects. (Isaac, age 26)

As the preceding quote implies, it is the ongoing antagonism toward one’s desire that obfuscates its function and meaning. For example, why this man feels compelled to look, what he is imagining about these women, and what need he is looking to fulfill are questions that are obscured by his harsh self-judgments.

Several interviewees used a specific type of rationalization, just as they were beginning to own their desires, where they would construe their behaviors as passive “accidents” or slip-ups using statements like “my urges conquered me,” “it just happened,” or “it felt like I had no control in those situations.” The fact that these statements were accompanied by admissions of how well orchestrated those “slip-ups” actually were, underscored their function as a type of defensive rationalization:

Basically, we spent the evening together. I was showing her around the city; we were just hanging out. But then at the end of the night when we got back to my apartment—which happened to be empty—stuff just happened. So even though I obviously thought this might happen beforehand, it still didn’t feel like a decision to me at the time. (Dan, age 26)

Whereas in Position 1 individuals truly experienced themselves as victims of outside forces because they lacked a well-organized sense of themselves as sexual beings, in Position 2, individuals were seen to be defensively playing the “victim card” as a way of reconciling an identity conflict. Though this rationalization was used by several participants, the defense also seemed to quickly run its course as people continued to have physical relationships and could no longer keep up the façade that “they” were in fact not wanting or orchestrating sexual events. As this rationalization wore itself out, individuals quickly became capable of expanding their defensive repertoire using other mechanisms, such as repression and compartmentalization, as the following quote illustrates:

Even though I took my religious obligations very seriously, I was able to put those feelings at the bottom of the guilt pile. I was good at being able to function with blinders or compartmentalize. To not feel the direct weight of things even if they are very significant in my life. (Abraham, age 32)

Defenses like minimization, and rationalization were also used in this phase, as was the externalization of guilt into anger.

Some individuals in the internalization position resolved their conflicts by changing their behavior, either by becoming less religious overall or by engaging in only “lighter” forms of intimacy or by recommitting themselves to not touch women at all before marriage and then strategizing about how to avoid being tempted. These types of behavioral adaptations were more likely to be successful in the internalization position where participants owned their sexuality.

In summary, if Position 1 is a battle between self and other, Position 2 is a battle between two owned parts of the self. This type of conflict involves more tolerable feelings of anxiety and guilt that are less likely to overwhelm the person because they are managed using a variety of mature defenses and compromises. In
this position, the person’s sexuality is owned, but it is a reluctant ownership that holds him back from appreciating his sexual aliveness and from being curious about the meaning of his desires and how it connects to other nonsexual motives and conflicts.

**Position 3: Sexual Integration**

In the integration position, participants described a shift in thinking where they could own and appreciate their desires without excusing them:

In general, I realized that when it comes to sexual activities, when I make a more active decision, as opposed to a decision where I feel forced, either by my own physical sensations or by someone else, I feel better about those things. I do not feel as anxious about them. I could say, okay, I want to do it. (Sol, age 29)

In this position, participants did not own their sexual desires and actions but they also tried to integrate these into a more coherent sense of self. Participants did this by either adjusting their Orthodox identities and finding more progressive religious communities that would better accept their sexual behaviors or by adjusting their self-perceptions to better tolerate religious imperfections. “If I view the Jewish Law as a separate set of norms for close to perfect existence, I’m OK with not being perfect” (Dan, age 26).

Three of the 15 participants described reaching this position after struggling for some time with disembodiment and internalization level conflicts. Each described their adaptations as permanent, proactive, and well thought-out ways of dealing with conflict. Because they experienced their desires without having to deny, minimize or excuse them, they were able to construct a more stable sexual self-representation, free to interact with other internalized self-representations:

When I was learning in Israel and then in college I was very conscious of the religious problem that looking at immodestly dressed women posed for me. Now, it doesn’t bother me religiously to take a second glance at someone who’s attractive. It’s something I try to avoid more out of respect in how I want to view other people. (Sol, age 29)

With less self-criticism and guilt, participants in this phase were more likely to consider their desires as a subject of interest and reflection and could consider other dynamic concerns around these.

[Regarding fooling around sexually] My mom’s voice in my head says, ‘No, ’cause that’s selfish. Really what you are doing is having a good time, something that will make you happy and you’ll be light and silly but there’s the risk of hurting someone else.’ (Isaac, age 26)

When reaching this phase, some individuals reflected on the imposing “thou shalt not” way that they previously internalized the sexual laws rather than as guidelines to living a more meaningful and respectful life. This realization, in and of itself, often propelled them to develop a more personal connection to the laws and their underlying purpose. Because the anxiety around their desires was diminished, they were able to become more curious about their religious laws and, also, their sexual feelings and actions. With more acceptance of their sexuality as a conscious part of their selves, participants were able to make more balanced and well-rounded decisions about their behaviors. Only a small proportion of research participants were shown to have reached the integration position, which may reflect just how difficult it is to accept one’s sexuality when all sexual activity is religiously prohibited and socially discouraged. But it might also be a result of the study design, which stated a specific interest in understanding sexual-religious conflict.

**Discussion**

**Summary of Results**

The results of this study point to three distinct ownership positions along a developmental trajectory: sexual disembodiment, sexual internalization, and sexual integration. The degree to which a person was able to own their sexual needs, fantasies, plans, and actions played an organizing role in determining how he experienced and managed his conflicts and how well he was able to adapt to these. The more alien, shameful, and conflicted the sexual act, the more likely participants were to either regress or remain fixated at lower levels of sexual ownership.

Similar to how Melanie Klein described her paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions (Klein, 1952), the term position was chosen over phase or stage to best capture how defenses operate in-tandem according to levels of development and maturity. Position is also used to depict the fluid ways that individuals moved back and forth from one adaptation to another on the basis of their levels of ownership toward specific sexual acts at a given time and in a given relationship. For example, at the time of the interview, almost all participants were found in the disembodiment position around masturbation, even when they had achieved sexual internalization around their desires for physical intimacy, which also wavered depending on the level of conflict they experienced in a given relationship. Reaching a more mature sexual-ownership level in a particular relationship did not ensure that they would not regress to lower level ownership positions when entering new sexual relationships.

Unlike other studies of sexual–religious conflict that deal with the moral, identity, and social conflicts of single religious people or homosexual men, this study shows how some religious struggles are significantly colored by deficits in owning and accepting sexual desire and in constructing a sexual self-representation that can safely exist side to side with other self-representations. The findings of this study clearly show how adults who struggle with these more primary difficulties can split their sexuality off from other parts of themselves and experience intense feelings of despair and shame, which is much less tolerable and resolvable than the intrapsychic conflict that they feel in the internalization and integration positions. When this splitting defense breaks down on a more permanent basis, it can induce a religious or psychological crisis that will lead some to seek support and guidance from mentors and therapists and others to seriously question and possibly abandon their faith and community.

**Clinical Recommendations**

Participants in this study referred to two essential events that helped them to better own and accept their sexual desires, which informs how therapists can work with conflicts like these: (a) sexual experience and (b) acceptance from an other.
Sexual Experience

Some participants progressed from disembodiment to internalization or integration simply through repeated sexual experience. This progression often occurred as individuals kept repeating certain behaviors despite their efforts to stop, which led them to better “accept their fate” as sexual actors, even if they were not happy with this outcome. As sexual acts became more familiar and predictable, they were better able to use reasoning and reality testing to see these as internally generated.

This finding resonates with Fred Pine’s (1982) discussion of sexual ownership in adolescence, where “repeated experience” is seen as instrumental in allowing sexual feelings and behaviors to feel familiar and “as me or mine rather than it” (p. 164). Having less or delayed sexual experience, will then hinder—or prolong—the person’s ownership process. In groups like Orthodox singles, therapists can be sensitive to the fact that repeated experience is a double-edged sword, acting at once as a reinforcer of ownership, like Pine discussed, but simultaneously, as a potential reinforcer of disownership and externalization since sexual expression is inherently prohibited.

This dynamic was seen clearly in some men who unconsciously sought out intimate relationships with less religious women who were freer with their sexuality and onto whom they could project their own split-off desires. Rather than using repeated experience to own their sexual desires, they enlisted romantic partners to contain it for them but then managed their closeness to that person, often through an anxiety-ridden cycle of break-ups and reunions.

Target (2007) saw this type of projective identification—where one’s desire is projected and then identified in the other rather than in oneself—as a “symptom” of early parent–child mirroring deficits where the caregiver turns away, or even shuns, her child’s erotic excitement in both verbal and gestural ways. In normal heterosexual adults, according to Target, projective identification provides an adaptive way of coping with the mysterious and unfamiliar aspects of sex and acts as a necessary precursor to the eventual reintegration of sexuality, which happens over accumulated experience. This study provides clear examples of how projective identification operates in this manner and how it can also endure and then complicate adult sexuality when it is inherently conflict-ridden. The way that these defenses can play out in psychotherapy is addressed in the context of the next major facilitator of sexual ownership.

Acceptance From an Other

The interviews in this study point to the role of conversations with mentors, family members, friends, therapists, and sexual partners in helping them to better tolerate and own their sexuality. Several men described these conversations as turning points in their abilities to accept their sexual desires and adapt to their conflicts. This finding also resonates with Pine’s (1982) discussion of “the holding role of the caregiver” who helps adolescents “tolerate and internalize disturbing and unpleasant affects and ideation through mirroring, holding and an attitude of love and acceptance” (p. 165).

Because these “holding roles” are much harder to come by in communities with high levels of sexual discomfort, these patients may be hesitant to reach out to mentors and therapists but may secretly struggle to know the difference between breaking a religious law and being a sinful and deplorable person. Although analytically oriented therapists may be more accustomed to helping patients understand and integrate their sexuality—tasks that are best suited for internalization and integration level conflicts—this study highlights the therapeutic value of nonjudgmental listening as a facilitator of sexual ownership, a precursor to reflection and insight. Anecdotally, during the actual study interviews themselves, several participants acknowledged the cathartic relief they felt in being able to speak about their sexuality to a neutral and accepting person for the first time, hinting at the powerful role of the neutral other in jumpstarting the sexual ownership process.

At the same time, the resistant behaviors of many study participants pointed to strong unconscious aversions to speaking about sex. The frequency of missed appointments, last minute withdraw- als, and refusals to speak about personal experience or specific sexual acts, for example, all suggested that language was not only conflicted but also obstructed and possibly dangerous. In psychotherapy, these aversions may need to be tolerated until the patient can trust that the therapist will not get overwhelmed themselves by talking about sex. When patients specifically present with sexual problems, however, these resistances may need to be more actively addressed in order to prevent premature terminations.

In line with Target’s (2007) conceptualization of early parent–child mirroring deficits, patients who come from backgrounds with strong prohibitions around sex might be extra sensitive to the verbal and more subtle, nonverbal ways that therapists “turn away” or unconsciously discourage sexual discussion. But also, as this study illustrates, these types of patients can project their desires for sexual activity onto others, like their therapists, as in, “You want me to be sexually active and violate my religious laws, but I personally don’t have desires or I personally don’t want to violate my laws!”

In my own clinical work with Orthodox Jewish men, I have also seen how the superego is projected onto the therapist, as in, “It’s your job to rid me of sexual urges so that I can continue to do what I want sexually and then complain that you’re not helping me!” These kinds of dynamics provide a cautionary tale about sexual disembodied patients, specifically, who can draw therapists into their conflicts by placing them essentially on the same “tightrope of desire” that they are on. An open conversation about these transference/countertransference dynamics provides a unique opportunity for a more empathic connection that can help lead patients to better tolerate their conflicts and resolve them more adaptively. Therapists who are aware of their own sexual and religious biases will have the most leverage in helping patients to reach higher levels of ownership.

Therapists who encounter rigid forms of disownership and sexual externalization and projection might benefit from psycho-educating patients about the power of sexual desire and the time and effort that is needed to feel more in control of it. I have also found it helpful to ask patients what they remember about how their culture and family dealt with sexual topics, which helps them gain more distance from their shame. Therapists who can find ways of gently suggesting that there is a deeper meaning behind their sexual desires may be able to help patients become more curious in understanding this part of their lives.

Conclusion

Several idiosyncratic factors of contemporary Orthodox Judaism allow the sexual–religious conflicts of heterosexual single men to stand out prominently and uniformly, providing an opportunity
to deeply understand the sexual ownership process that is referenced in several psychoanalytic writings. Because of their religious prohibitions and their silent sexual culture, and because of their more limited sexual interactions, individuals in this community are more likely to internalize a strong antipathy toward their own desires, whether rooted in family, religion, or intrapsychic dynamics, which can inhibit the development of more mature defenses and adaptations to conflict.

Indeed, the narratives of most participants centered around their journey back and forth from sexual disembodiment to sexual internalization, with only a few men moving past this second position into the more advanced sexual integration, a position that may be easier to reach with more time and experience, especially within a nonconflicted, long-term sexual relationship. My own clinical work with Orthodox single men also attests to the powerful benefits of psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy in helping individuals to better integrate their sexual desires with other parts of identity and with other dynamic concerns.

Several limitations of this study—including its small sample size and its research method of using just one interviewer and one mode of data collection—suggest that more research is needed to better understand the sexual conflicts of Orthodox single men. Studies of other Orthodox populations could also help to deepen our understanding of sexual conflict and the sexual-ownership trajectory. For example, how do single women, differently than men, struggle to accept and integrate their own sexual desires and actions? How does their ownership process intersect with the ways that female sexuality is implicitly and explicitly addressed in this community? A study of married Orthodox men would also help to isolate psychological problems in the management and acceptance of sexual desire, as marital intimacy is not only allowed, but also greatly encouraged by religious law. Both types of studies would be a worthwhile next step in better understanding how Orthodox culture shapes the person’s sexual development and how the process of sexual ownership is involved in the management of sexual–religious conflict.

In individuals or groups who share some of these cultural features—including religiously observant singles from Christian, Jewish, or Muslim faiths, or individuals who identify as homosexual—we might expect similar delays or obstructions, even though their conflicts are colored by a different set of social and religious concerns. However, in generalizing to other populations, some degree of caution is necessary: The strict Orthodox laws around men’s masturbation, physical touching, and sexual gazing, combined with the cultural silence and shame around sexual discourse may strongly predispose this particular research cohort to operate at lower level positions of sexual ownership much more than any other group.

Participants alluded to other dynamic factors that impacted their abilities to own their sexual desires, including early experiences of family humiliation, sexual abuse, primal scene exposure, global personality conflicts around aggression, pleasure and perfectionism, and a more general tendency to rely on primitive defenses like denial and splitting. These kinds of dynamics are discussed extensively by psychoanalytic thinkers, and some like Messler-Davies (1998) and Dumas (1997) address these specifically in the context of sexual ownership, underscoring how the sexual ownership process is not at all an isolated one.

In terms of progressing to higher levels of ownership, though Target (2007) viewed the adult’s externalization of sexual desire as a universal relic of early parent–child mirroring deficits, this study shows how the reintegration of sexual desire is accomplished, either through nonconflicted sexual experience or open dialogue with a trusted other, as Pine (1982) suggested. Given the powerful role of sexual discourse in promoting sexual ownership, community efforts to discuss and normalize the sexual–religious struggles of single Orthodox men and women could make a significant difference in alleviating the distress, loneliness, and confusion that these conflicts generate. Addressing the larger educational and familial factors that give rise to these conflicts would also go far in helping Orthodox Jews of all ages and types to live more fully and adaptively within the boundaries of their culture and religious law.

References


