Being Gay and Jewish: Negotiating Intersecting Identities

Randal F. Schnoor[1]
York University

PUBLISHED IN *SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION*, 2006 (67:1, 43-60)

Due to the emphasis on "traditional" gender roles, the "nuclear family," procreation and conservative religious values, many gay and lesbian Jews feel a sense of alienation from the Jewish community and develop an ambivalent or conflicted relationship about their own Jewish identity. As a result, gay Jews often struggle to find ways to successfully negotiate their ethno-religious and sexual identities. Based upon in-depth interviews of thirty gay Jewish men in Toronto, this work offers a case study to empirically explore the varied experiences of these intersecting identities for this under-studied population. Recent research on other ethnic minority gays and lesbians tend to simplify this question by suggesting that the minority gay individual will simply choose to prioritize one of these identities while repressing the other. Building upon studies of gay Christians that stress more fluid, dynamic and evolving approaches to identity construction, this paper underscores the complexity and variability of this phenomenon as it applies to gay Jews.

I'm tired of fighting. I'm exhausted. I spend most of Shabbat sleeping because I'm just exhausted with the daily fight of my identity. It's hard enough having one minority status to negotiate in a society, but to have two, it's exhausting.

Traditional gay Jew in his forties

INTRODUCTION

Due to the emphasis on "traditional" gender roles, the "nuclear family," procreation and conservative religious values, many gay and lesbian Jews feel a sense of alienation from the Jewish community and develop an ambivalent or conflicted relationship about their own Jewish identity (Fishman 2000:106-109; Schnoor 2003). In addition to the difficulty of homophobia in the Jewish community, gay or lesbian Jews cannot presume full acceptance from the broader queer community, as movements that focus on sustaining a collective identity for an oppressed group sometimes overlook the concerns of sub-groups found within the larger movement (Eder, Staggenborg and Sudderth 1995:489; Goffman 1963:138). As a result, gay Jews often struggle to find ways to successfully negotiate their ethno-religious and sexual identities. Based upon in-depth interviews of thirty gay Jewish men Toronto, this work offers a case study in which to empirically explore the varied experiences of these intersecting identities.

It is useful here to review the literature that currently exists on the subject of gay and lesbian Jews. While there is a collection of fiction on the subject (Raphael 1996; Schimel 2000; Tulchinsky 2000), a significant amount of material that offers personal narratives or life-histories (Alpert, Elwell and Idelson 2001; Balka and Rose 1989; Brown 2004; Dworkin 1997; Fink and Press 1999; Moore 1995; Shneer and Aviv 2002; Torton Beck 1989), and a recent body of material that challenges or expounds upon Orthodox

[1] Direct correspondence about this manuscript to Randal F. Schnoor, York University. Email: randal.schnoor@primus.ca I wish to thank Nancy Nason-Clark, the editor of Sociology of Religion, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. This research was supported by a grant from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. Additional support came from McGill University through the Max Bell Fellowship as well as a doctoral fellowship.

Jewish theological interpretations of homosexuality (Alpert 1989, 1997; Greenberg 2004; Levado 1993; Rapoport 2004; Rose 1999), there is precious little in terms of scholarly social-scientific literature devoted to the issue of gay Jews. Shokeid (1995) gives an anthropological account of the gay synagogue in New York City, Cooper (1989) offers a social history of the rise of the gay Jewish movement in terms of its organizational structure, and Walzer (2000) gives a journalistic account of the social and political landscape for gay Jews in Israel. However, with the exception of Mushkat (1999) – a small-scale study based on interview data from a sample of nine Jewish lesbians – and the recent work of wolfman[2] (2002), which focuses on Jewish family issues, there is no empirically based sociological literature that examines micro-issues, such as negotiation of intersecting identities.

As will be discussed later in this work, there are a handful of studies that explore these identity intersections for gays and lesbians of other religious and ethnic groups. This research fills an important void by adding to the sociological literature on identity construction as it pertains to the case of gay Jews.

Interestingly, within the Jewish literature there is considerably more research that concentrates exclusively on Jewish lesbian experiences (Alpert 1997; Alpert et al. 2001; Moore 1995; Mushkat 1999; Torton Beck 1989). There is a distinct gap in the literature regarding the gay Jewish male experiences, particularly in the North American context. This work will address this gap by exclusively exploring the issues of men.

Gay Jewish Organizational History in Toronto

As the largest Jewish centre in Canada (180,000 Jews), Toronto has a rich history of organizations, which have served gay Jewish interests. As such, it serves as an ideal social laboratory in which to examine the intersections of gay Jewish experiences. The first organized gay Jewish entity in Toronto was formed in the mid 1970s and was given the name *Ha'Mishpachah* (The Family) to signify a potential replacement family for those gay Jews who were not receiving sufficient support from their biological families. Certain members of this group had a desire to expand their events to include Friday night religious services. This was the impetus for the formation of the successor group called *B'nai Kehillah* (Children of the Community), a name that more closely resembles those names customarily used for synagogues. The turning point in gay Jewish organizational structure in Toronto came in the early-mid 1980s with the formation *Chutzpah* (Nerve / Gall), a more formalized group that included a constitution, an executive structure and a paying membership. In 1988 the group became an official member of *Keshet Ga'avah* (Rainbow of Pride)*: The World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Jews*, an international umbrella group of LGBT organizations. At its peak in the early 1990s the group consisted of approximately 150 paying members. Similar to what happened in the late 1970s, the gay Jewish entity of the early 1990s desired to re-name and re-orient itself to a more synagogue-like framework. In 1992, with a new president and executive structure in place, Congregation *Keshet Shalom* (Rainbow of Peace) was created. The group thrived in the mid-1990s, organizing formal prayer services, numerous social events, lectures, Passover Seders and Chanukah parties. Due to lack of Jewish community financial support, the group disbanded in 2001. Meanwhile in March of 2000, the Jewish Campus Services (now called Hillel) of Toronto began a group at the University of Toronto Campus called Jewish Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender Students and Young Professionals of Toronto (JLGBT). This group signals the first time a gay Jewish organization in Toronto is primarily funded through the resources of Toronto's Jewish polity. In 2004, the re-energized campus group changed its name to *Kulanu* (Our Voice).

CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACHES TO IDENTITY

Building upon the work of Barth (1969), Gans (1979) and others, much current research on ethnic identity in the social sciences rests upon a model of ethnicity as a socially constructed phenomenon. Rather than having a fixed, primordial status, ethnicity is viewed as a construction that is continually

[2] wolfman does not capitalize his name.

negotiated and re-negotiated by the individual (Nagel 1994, 2000; Spector and Kitsuse 1987). Ethnic identifiers can slip in and out of ethnic roles depending on social context (Waters 1990).

Recent work in the sociology of religion has described a similar societal shift in religious identity, a phenomenon referred to as *religious individualism*. Wuthnow (1998:9-10) emphasizes the fact that the individual no longer feels constrained by ascribed characteristics, but rather, as "Sovereign Self," constructs his/her own personal religious identity by pulling together elements from various repertoires. Roof (1999:43) argues similarly that we have become "meaning-making creatures" who selectively choose interpretations to authenticate our own convictions.

Similar constructionist approaches can be found in studies of sexuality. Shaped by the early work of Foucault (1980), a number of recent thinkers within the field of queer theory have challenged assumptions about the nature and content of sexuality. Through the work of Sedgewick (1990), Butler (1990) and others, sociologists have become increasingly sensitized to the conception of fluid and dynamic sexual identities where a strict binary division between the 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' no longer holds legitimacy. In his ethnography of suburban gay men, Brekhus (2003), for example, has identified three ideal types of gay identities, where the *gay lifestyler* carves out specialized social enclaves to devote their lives to a celebration of being "all gay, all the time," the *gay commuter* moves in and out of gayness as a temporary status, performing a gay identity only in specific gay environments, and the *gay integrator* combines a gay identity with other identities (ethnic, religious, other) so that no one attribute defines the core self. Working within this framework, "homosexual identity" is de-centred to avoid artificial conceptions of a "master status." Identity is dynamic, capable of shifting and changing depending on context and individual predilections.

STUDIES IN JEWISH IDENTITY

Sociologists of the modern Jewish experience have described a similar de-centring of identity. In the transition from pre-modern, traditional societies to post-Enlightenment, modern societies, Jewish identities have gone through a significant transformation from an identity based on collectivism to an identity based on personalism and voluntarism (Cohen 1999:3-4; Elazar 1999:35). As such, many Jews in the North American context and elsewhere now feel free to appropriate only those aspects of Jewishness that they find personally meaningful (Cohen 1991:27; Cohen and Eisen 2000:7-9; Horowitz 1998:74-75). As part of this meaning-based approach to Jewish identity, is the important realization that a person's experience of Jewishness is a fluid, rather than fixed aspect of their lives. Individuals often go through "Jewish journeys" where Jewish identity evolves over the life course, paralleling growth and personal development (Horowitz 2002:26-27).

While Alba (1990) and Waters (1990) have demonstrated the dilution of loyalties to specific European ethnic identities among whites Americans (Italians, Greeks, etc.), the religious aspect of Jewishness provides an extra dimension, which deepens or enlarges the possibilities of Jewish expression. (Horowitz 2002). Thus, Jewishness is unique among cultural identities in that it can be expressed as both an ethnicity and a religion, sometimes referred to as ethno-religious identity. This variability will be evident among my Jewish respondents and will have a bearing on how these men negotiate the intersections of their gayness and Jewishness.

NEGOTIATING INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

Until the early 1980s the vast majority of the empirical sociological literature on issues surrounding lesbians and gay men in North America described only the "'mainstream white" experience. Since the late 1980s, this gap in the literature has begun to narrow, with a handful of studies on the ethnic minority lesbian and gay experience. Some of these studies address the question of how ethnic minority gay individuals attempt to negotiate this dual minority status. This research often tends to simplify this question by suggesting that the minority gay individual will simply choose to prioritize one of these identities while repressing the other. Morales (1990:228-229), for example, theorizes that the individual will form a primary identification to the ethnic community and develop feelings of anger for racism experienced in the gay community. While Greene (1998:48) provides some empirical evidence to support

this from her research on the gay black community, evidence of the opposite phenomenon, primary identification with the gay community, is also reported in the literature. We see that Latino gay men (Garcia 1998:109) and Asian gays and lesbians (Chan 1989:19-20), for example, are reported as feeling more comfortable identifying with the gay community than with their ethnic communities.

Recent studies on gay Christians (Mahaffy 1996; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Thumma 1991; Wilcox 2002, 2003) have provided more nuanced examinations of this question by demonstrating a wider range of strategies that gay Christians implement to negotiate their identities[3] as well as the fluid and shifting nature of these strategies. Through the voices of gay Jewish men, this study builds upon these works by underscoring the complexity and variability of negotiating the intersection of gay and Jewish identities.

METHODS

In-depth interviews with thirty gay Jewish men in Toronto served as the source of qualitative data for this study. These interviews were conducted between September 2000 and August 2001. Interview respondents were acquired through snowball sampling, through introductions at gay Jewish events and through referrals from Jewish community networks (friends, family, acquaintances). Gay Jewish respondents were distributed evenly by age, with roughly equal numbers in their teens, twenties, thirties, forties and fifties. One respondent was in his eighties.

At the time of the interview, respondents demonstrated considerable variability in their expressions of Jewishness, falling into what could be described as two general categories: one third (10) may be classified as traditional Jews (those that place more emphasis on the religious aspect of Jewishness); two thirds (20) may be classified as secular Jews (those that place more emphasis on the ethnic aspect of their Jewishness or place little emphasis on their Jewishness altogether).[4]

Interviews were semi-structured in format. The same groups of central themes were explored with all respondents. Respondents were first asked to describe their Jewish lives and gay lives separately. This was followed by a series of questions that explored the ways that the respondents attempt to negotiate their gay and Jewish identities.

With the exception of four interviews where notes were taken, interviews were recorded on audiotape and later transcribed verbatim. Respondents signed an Informed Consent form before the start of the interview and were assured that the information gathered would be kept confidential and that pseudonyms would be used in the study.

---

[3] Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), for example, identify similar categories to what I discovered among my sample of gay Jewish men. They refer to them as: *rejecting the religious identity, rejecting the homosexual identity, compartmentalization,* and *identity integration.*

[4] Traditional Jews include both Jews who are strictly religiously observant Orthodox Jews (of which there were three in my sample) as well as those Jews who might not observe all Jewish observances but still maintain "conservative religious values" in terms of placing importance on synagogue attendance, celebrating the Jewish holidays and preserving and perpetuating Jewish religious tradition. Some secular Jews have a strong sense of Jewish identity, but place little importance on these religious concerns, placing greater emphasis instead on matters of ethnic Jewishness (such as Jewish family, food, literature, music, culture, etc.). Other secular Jews may have little attachment to their Jewishness at all. There are, of course, wide ranges of attitudes and behaviors within these categories. These labels should only be understood as approximations. Furthermore, as the paper argues, these identities can evolve and change.

It is helpful to contextualize the Toronto Jewish community. Social scientific research of the Jews of North America has demonstrated that Canadian Jews, in general, are more traditional in their Jewish behaviors than American Jews (Shaffir and Weinfeld 1981:13; Brodbar-Nemzer, Cohen, Reitzes, Shahar and Tobin 1993:43) and Toronto (and Montreal) Jews are more traditional than Jews of other Canadian cities (Davids 1998:212-214).

FINDINGS

There are multiple ways that individuals choose to construct their various personal identities. Added complexity exists when considering the intersection of two identities that come into conflict with each other, as can be the case with Jewishness and gayness. Borrowing from, and expanding upon, Brekhus' (2003) model of ideal types of gay identities, I am able to situate my respondents into four primary negotiation strategies. In keeping with the theoretical perspectives which inform this work, it is important to keep in mind that these categories are not meant to be rigid but rather quite fluid and dynamic. As will be shown in the examples of some of my respondents, these strategies are often temporary or situational, sometimes changing over the lifetime of the individual.[5] One's type of Jewish expression serves as a significant explanatory variable.

1. Jewish Lifestylers

Traditionally minded Jews are the ones more likely to try to repress their gay inclinations so that they do not interfere with their Jewish lives. These are people who consider their Jewishness as one of the key defining features of who they are. Four of my respondents exhibited these qualities of Jewish lifestylers, at least for a certain period of time in their lives. Saul, a traditional Jew, reported:

> If I weren't Jewish, I might be out there fighting for gay rights, but my Jewish identity is far more important to me than my gay identity. And that's something I knew right from [the start]. I did not want to allow my same-gender romantic orientation to affect my passion for Judaism and Jewish life and the Jewish people. I never wanted that to impinge on it, to steal time from it and to even affect it.

While one might guess that being gay would cause a Jew to adopt a more liberal expression of Judaism to accommodate one's homosexuality (a phenomenon that certainly does occur), interestingly two of my respondents consciously chose to become ultra-religious Jewish lifestylers in an attempt to purge themselves of their gay inclination.[6] These respondents also illustrate some shame for being gay. Although somewhat traditionally minded to start with, as a result of the "battle" Nathan was having between his gay and Jewish identities, at a certain period of his life he chose "extreme spirituality because [he] felt guilty for being gay." When I asked him to describe this extreme spirituality he explained that he:

> [became] obsessed about *kashrut* [dietary laws] and *Shabbat* and keeping the holidays. There were a few years [on Yom Kippur] where I made sure I read every word in the *machzor* [prayer book], because it was like the magic potion. If I missed a word it would be like [*gulping sound*] hell to pay.

Surprisingly, even a secular Jew chose the path of extreme religiosity to try to stop himself from being gay. Leonard claims that being gay precipitated his "Jewish journey." He became friendly with some observant Jews at a Jewish summer camp and joined their insular lifestyler community. He claims "It stopped me from being gay for ten years." When I asked him about this seemingly unusual pattern for a gay secular Jew to become extremely observant, he provided the following explanation:

> I think it's common for people in adverse situations in their lives to seek out stability. It's the same way old people become religious. Sort of hedging their bets. So I think that

[5] The pattern of shifting between strategies is also documented in the case of gay Christians. See Wilcox (2003).

[6] See Mahaffy (1996) and Wilcox (2003) for similar examples of this phenomenon in a Christian context.

> religion, maybe twenty years ago more than now, served as a secure footing for people, including me; an opportunity to escape.

I found it interesting to note that both Nathan and Leonard abandoned their Jewish lifestyler identities later in their lives. Nathan's next stage on his journey was to make an extreme switch to a gay lifestyler identity, as will be discussed in the next section. Leonard gradually moderated his strategy to become a gay-Jewish integrator. These two individuals provide a vivid example of the fluidity of the process of identity management. As the literature suggests, identity construction can be temporary or situational. Individuals can go through different stages through their lifespan responding to historical experiences, social relationships and personal events.

2. Gay Lifestylers

Secular Jews are the ones more likely to place strong emphasis on their gayness. Three of my secular Jewish respondents lived in openly gay specific neighborhoods and organized their lives around being gay at "high volumes" and in "high duration." These gay lifestylers did not wish to dilute their gayness by placing importance on other aspects of their social identities. As such, their Jewish identities were significantly de-emphasized.

Though not Jewishly religious in any sense, Russell viewed his Jewishness as a "religion" that could be discarded at any time. His gay identity formed the most essential part of his core self. He explained that:

> To me I'm gay. But that's much more fundamental than being Jewish. I can change my religion but I can't change my sexual orientation.

Internalized distaste for one's Jewishness can play a role in taking on a gay lifestyler identity. Nathan reported that:

> I have never known so many internalized anti-Semites as gay Jews. … Because of whatever reason – the homophobia in Jewish tradition, misinterpretations of Torah or whatever – it's far easier to just say "fuck it" to the Jewish world and the Jewish identity, and go blazing out of the closet in the gay world. They're not proud of being Jewish.

Nathan himself is an interesting case in point. He managed his identities in extremes. A one-time Jewish lifestyler who became obsessed with Jewish religious observance, in a later period of his life, to his own surprise, he rebelled against Judaism:

> I never thought I'd be the Jew that would say, "Fuck Judaism! It's persecutory." I was always the one who was going to defend the Jewish community at all costs. And here I was actually becoming that person that I thought I'd never be. The person walking out of the synagogue and saying, "That's a synagogue I'll never go to," questioning a lot about my heritage.

As part of his Jewish rebellion, Nathan became a temporary gay lifestyler, devoting great energy to embracing and celebrating his gayness. Later in his life he adapts yet another management strategy, as will be seen.

3. Gay-Jewish Commuters

For identity commuters the performance of specific identities can be turned on or of depending on the social context. Gay-Jewish commuters travel freely between gay-specific and Jewish-specific settings, but are careful to enact the appropriate identity while submerging the other. By completely compartmentalizing their identities in this way, these commuters are able to enjoy both their gay and

Jewish lives while keeping them separate and free of intersection. I encountered four such commuters among my group of gay Jewish men. A clear example of the gay-Jewish commuter can be found in the case of Abe, a religiously observant Jew, who attended prayer services at an Orthodox synagogue on a regular basis but kept his gay identity hidden in this setting. He explained:

> Like many people, I compartmentalize, and being gay is one thing, it's an integral part of me, and I enjoy it to its fullest extent. Being an observant Jew is something that I also enjoy and get satisfaction from, for a number of reasons. The two separately are both things that make me feel good about myself, so I want to participate in them. Bringing the two together gets a bit more problematic. And so that's why you'll see when I'm at the [Orthodox synagogue], I'm not really "out" at all. I want to enjoy the feelings that I get out of the observant experience, the prayer and that communal experience, and so I sort of put the other on hold and enjoy that.

Gary grew up within a very traditional Jewish background in a small Canadian city. Though he desired to please his parents by having a Jewish wedding with a woman, he knew that he only had attractions only towards men. Because being gay and Jewish were both very important to him and he could see no way to reconcile his two identities, he felt his best solution in his twenties was to keep the two identities completely separate from each other. He lamented that:

> I didn't know any gay couples. I just knew that to be a gay man was to be ostracized and to be alone and not to be Jewish. For a long time, they were completely separate spheres in my life and I find it hard to reflect on how one can do that, but now I know that people do that all the time.

As will be seen, later in life Gary found ways to feel comfortable about combining his gay and Jewish identities and adopted a gay-Jewish integrator strategy.

4. Gay-Jewish Integrators

Identity integrators view themselves as being made up of a multiple of attributes, where no one social identity assumes a role of "master status" around which his or her life is organized. Gay-Jewish integrators perform both their gay and Jewish identities throughout all their social interactions, but these are expressed at lower intensity level than would be the case of lifestylers. Twenty-four of my respondents exhibited the qualities of gay-Jewish integrators at certain times in their lives. These men brought forward four primary ways of doing this: participation in gay Jewish organizations; challenging Jewish theological perspectives on homosexuality; emphasizing linkages between Judaism and homosexuality; and using "Jewish values" to guide them through the gay world. Again, the different styles of Jewish expression serve as an important explanatory variable that can help to distinguish between different types of strategies. There are both traditional ways and secular ways, as will be shown, to integrate one's gay and Jewish identities.

4a) Participation in Gay Jewish Organizations

Shokeid (1995:239), in his ethnography of the gay synagogue in New York City, described the way that attendance at such a synagogue "was for many an act of restoring their cracked self-image and identity, combining its divided parts into one meaningful identity." My respondents reported similar sentiments. The variety of gay Jewish organizations that have existed since the 1970's in Toronto and elsewhere have provided a focal point for identity integration. My respondents described participation in such organizations as "blending the two nicely," and providing "comfort and sense of belonging."

Nathan, a man who spent part of his adolescence and twenties as both a Jewish lifestlyer and a gay lifestyler, later transferred his passions to a gay-Jewish integrator identity. He became very active in

Keshet Shalom and *Keshet Ga'avah: The World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Jews,* attending the latter group's annual conferences in different parts of the world. He meticulously collected files and information on the numerous gay-Jewish organizations, which have formed in North America and Israel in the last two decades and enthusiastically provided his large box of files to me to aid me in my research of the subject.

Gary, a traditional Jew who was a one-time gay-Jewish commuter, proudly took on the role as one of the leaders of the organized Toronto gay Jewish community. For Gary, being involved in these activities helped to foster an integrated and secure identity:

> I was very, very involved in the gay Jewish community the first years that I was out. And that's part of my identity. I got involved in Pride Day stuff. ... I loved being in queer space and feeling safe and comfortable. I loved being the Jewish leader. I [hope] to continue to challenge Jewish institutions and families to change. I do this by being out and loud and proud as a Jew and a gay Jew as I possibly can.

Gay-Jewish integrators are made up of secular Jews as well. A secular respondent named Michael who played a leadership role in *Chutzpah* in the late 1980s had similar sentiments to share about what his involvement meant to him:

> I was coming to terms with my being both gay and Jewish at the same time. You know, you're a minority within a minority. I think that's the element of it; the need for finding people in the same category and dealing with that in a classical support-group setting was important to me. It helped me come to terms with myself, certainly. And I became certainly bolder in expressing just not the fact that I'm gay, but the fact that I'm Jewish.

4b) Challenging Jewish Theological Perspectives on Homosexuality

Another common strategy of gay-Jewish integrators is to challenge the traditional Jewish position that forbids sexual relations between those of the same gender. Eighteen respondents described this type of approach. Where one might assume it is the secular Jews who are quick to liberalize Jewish values, it is important to note that seven of the eighteen respondents in this section are traditional Jews, and of these seven, two are strictly observant. What is very interesting to observe is the distinct difference in approaches that traditional Jews take in developing more liberal perspectives in contrast to the secular Jews. As will be illustrated, traditional Jews reinterpret the Torah, while secular Jews dismiss the Torah.

Traditional Jews interviewed tend to take the position that the Torah is a divinely written document that must be respected and revered. However, the way in which the passages from the Torah that concern homosexuality (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13) have been traditionally interpreted by religious authorities is, according to them, incorrect and not in keeping with modern times. They emphasize the dynamic and changing nature of *Halachah* (Jewish Law) and argue that more discussion and debate is necessary to develop new Jewish understandings of same-sex attraction. Danny, a religiously observant Jew, reported that he can foresee a time when Orthodox Judaism will even change its position on the issue:

> I believe that there's a way to reconcile it ... I have a gut feeling; maybe it's a hope. ... I believe that the Torah is the word of God, I'm not disputing that. I'm not saying that we sort of excise out sentences ... I think that when brilliant rabbinical minds have turned their thoughts to various issues that were important to them, they have found ways to come up with analysis that is coherent, consistent and reaches sound conclusions. And I believe that if someone were to spend his attention on the issue of prohibitions against homosexuality in the Torah and the Talmud and what it means to us today as gay people ... I think that it could be bridged.

Gary offered his opinion about the way anti-gay sentiments have been super-imposed onto the Torah, while other passages in the text that support same-sex love are conveniently ignored or denied:

> Homophobia has been added into biblical stories over and over again, when in fact if you look at the biblical text, there are a lot of homo-erotic elements to it: Joseph and Potiphar story and certainly the David and Jonathan story. Those are examples of real loving relationships between men.

Despite these more liberal perspectives on Jewish Law and Jewish religious texts, traditional Jewish respondents imposed certain limits on acceptable liberal innovations. Of the seven traditional Jews who have developed more liberal interpretations of the Jewish stance on homosexuality, six of them expressed a general distaste for Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism (two denominations of Judaism in North America that are officially supportive of Jewish same-sex marriage and inclusion of open gays and lesbians in all aspects of Jewish life, including the rabbinate). Steven, a traditional respondent admitted:

> I'm still a snob about Reform. Reform [is] the movement that has opened up the most to it, obviously ... but I could just not go to a *shul* [synagogue] and see glass windows and an organ and the service in English. It makes my skin crawl. I feel like I am in church [*laughing*].

Other traditional Jews reported that they had no interest in attending religious services at *Keshet Shalom*, the (now disbanded) liberal gay Jewish congregation in Toronto, because of the non-traditional style of prayer services. Mark explained that this type of English-based service "wasn't juicy enough" and "just doesn't have any *ruach* [spirit] to me." He reported that a more traditional Hebrew service has more resonance for him. Another traditional Jew named Justin was more critical of the *Keshet Shalom* service:

> I went to that *Keshet Shalom* once, it was a novelty thing, like going to a D-list comedy theatre. It's pretty cheesy. It's just funny the way they rewrite things.

We see here a distinct style of negotiation for traditionally minded gay Jews. They tend to adopt a liberal Jewish understanding to the prohibition of homosexuality, but want to maintain their more traditional style of Jewish ritual expression that they are used to from their childhood. As Shokeid (1995:79-81) alludes to, just because one is a gay Jew does not mean one will become a Reform or Reconstructionist Jew. My data illustrate that those gay Jews who come from more traditional backgrounds have developed a more complex or nuanced method of negotiating a traditional Jewish gay identity.

Secular Jews have a different approach to gay-Jewish integration. They are not concerned with examining the Jewish texts and traditions to find new ways and interpretations to make them more supportive of homosexuality. Their sense of Jewishness contains a stronger ethnic, rather than religious, component. This means they do not need to have any investment in Jewish text or law to preserve their sense of Jewish identity. Because Jewishness can be defined as both a religious and ethnic system, it does lend itself well to this kind of strictly ethnic identification. One secular respondent named Robert, for example, explained that he feels he is "a more spiritual or cultural Jew, not a religious Jew." Zachary, elaborated well on how this type of secular Jewish identity can play out:

> At a certain point [I decided] that the Leviticus injunction against homosexuality did not mean a thing to me. I've read essays on it, but my acceptance of myself as a gay man is not going to be based on those alternative interpretations. I think some Jewish gay men need them, and so I support them. For me, they're just interesting. That means that, essentially, my view towards the Torah is that it's not the word of God. That's how I've reconciled it. No one can take your Jewish beliefs or your education or your background. It's always with you. And it's fine.

Several secular respondents offered the argument that they knew in their hearts that there is nothing wrong with them being gay. This self-realization was much more important to them than prohibitions written in a Jewish text. As such, the Torah was overruled. A secular Jew named Alan shared this opinion forcefully:

> I don't care. The Torah can say whatever it wants as far as I'm concerned. I don't follow it. I don't care about following it. Because if the Torah is going to tell me that who I am is wrong, then I'm not going to listen to it. Because I know in my heart that I'm right ... because if it wasn't right I wouldn't be feeling it.

We see here a clear example of religious individualism, Jews who feel free to appropriate only those aspects of Jewishness that they find personally meaningful.

4c) Emphasis on Linkages Between Judaism and Homosexuality

Another approach adopted by gay-Jewish integrators is the strategy of emphasizing parallels or linkages between gay and Jewish experiences. Four respondents brought forward such a perspective. Both traditional and secular respondents raised the issue of the similarities between homosexuality and Jewishness in that both involve being a member of a minority group. Kyle, a secular respondent, reported that:

> I've definitely found that the minority thing has hit. You feel like when you're growing up when your Jewish that you're a minority. And being Jewish is also like being gay in that sense. You're cognizant of being a minority, an invisible minority. I think it helps in dealing with that part of it.

This type of parallel of minority status was connected to issues of oppression and the Holocaust. A respondent named Stuart raised the issue that the Nazis in the Second World War murdered both Jews and homosexuals. Blumenfeld (1996:147-148) also raises the theme of the parallels between the dual oppressions of anti-Semitism and homophobia.

Respondents also mentioned parallels between homosexuality and Jewishness in popular culture. Harold argued that:

> There is always a link. There's the "Oy Vay" over-the-top Jewish mother and the over-the-top drag queen. Larger-than-life characters, like "the Nanny" and gay icons, Joan Rivers and people like that. There's lots of overlap. There are a disproportionate number of gay Jewish artists out there. Jews have played a huge part in defining what gay culture is. In the gay culture, there are a lot of big figures, like Tony Kushner, Harvey Fierstein; big, big names in the gay community. Lots of them are Jewish.

We also know that Jews have played a prominent leadership role in gay activism over the last several decades (Rogow 1989:79). Josh offered his insight on why this might be the case:

> Strangely enough, I think that you'll find a lot of gay Jews in the forefront of gay liberation. I think it's because Jews have already had two thousand years of being in a minority [so we] already have a lot in our genes and in our history of questioning majority establishment; we already have some mechanisms in place for questioning ultimate truth.

4d) Use of "Jewish Values" to Guide through the Gay World

Three gay-Jewish integrators who were traditional Jews discussed the idea of using their sense of "Jewish values" to help guide them in their everyday gay lives. A respondent named Charles living in one of Toronto's downtown gay neighborhoods, put it this way:

> In terms of sexual promiscuity, drug use and things that are very prevalent in the gay world, those are things where I try to draw on my Jewish values that I grew up with to help guide me and protect me. The gay world is full of temptations just like any really super-secular world is in any big city. If you live outside your ghetto, it's tough. Judaism is a little candle floating up the street, lighting my way sometimes.

When I asked Danny, an observant Jew, how he negotiates his gay and Jewish identity, he offered a similar type of perspective of the way Jewish values can inform the gay experience:

> Negotiation sounds like trade-offs from one against the other, and I don't like to think of it that way. I'd like to think that the two can in some ways enrich each other. That Jewish identity and experiences can form the way in which you should act as a gay man. Because I think that a lot of Jewish identity is centred upon a morality and a way of acting within a community, and that those are aspects of Judaism that can inform the way that you should participate in the gay community.

CONCLUSION

Due to the emphasis on "traditional" gender roles and conservative religious values, gay men and lesbians of many ethnic and religious groups feel a sense of conflict in their seemingly contradictory identities. As a result, these individuals strive to find ways to negotiate their ethno-religious and sexual identities. Recent studies on gay blacks (Icard 1985; Greene 1998), gay Latinos (Espin 1987; Garcia 1998) and gay Asians (Chan 1989) tend to simplify this question by suggesting that ethnic minority gays and lesbians *either* fully embrace their ethnic identity (by repressing their gay identity) or fully repress their ethnic identity (by embracing their gay identity). Building upon recent work on Christian gays that emphasize a larger range of strategies and the shifting nature of individually constructed identities, this study has added nuance to the discussion by highlighting the complexity and variability of this phenomenon.

As part of this larger discussion, this study has added the voices of the under-studied population of gay *Jews.* Jewishness is unique among cultural identities in that it can be expressed as both an ethnicity and a religion, sometimes referred to as ethno-religious identity. This variability is shown to have important explanatory value. Borrowing from, and expanding upon, the theoretical model of Brekhus (2003), which classifies gay men into ideal types of *gay lifestylers*, *gay commuters* and *gay integrators*, I have developed new social categories to help to better understand the various negotiation strategies of gay Jewish men. In general, traditional Jews, those that tend to emphasize the religious dimension of their Jewishness, are more likely to be *Jewish lifestylers*, while secular Jews, those that tend to emphasize the ethnic dimension of Jewishness, are more likely to be *gay lifestylers.* In the case of *gay-Jewish integrators* we can find both traditional and secular Jews, but there is some variation in the methods used to achieve this integration. While both traditional and secular Jews found participation in one of the numerous Toronto gay Jewish organizations, or emphasis on the linkages between Judaism and homosexuality, to be helpful in reconciling their two identities, on the issue of challenging Jewish theological perspectives on homosexuality we see a divergence of approach. Traditional Jews tend to reinterpret Torah passages, while secular Jews dismiss what they consider outdated Torah passages. In addition, traditional Jews sometimes adapt a perspective of using what they consider the moral values of Judaism to safely guide them through their gay lives.

Beyond these general patterns is the important realization that these identities are continually negotiated and re-negotiated. Working within a theoretical framework that understands identity as a fluid journey, rather than a fixed aspect of one's life, the work has illustrated the ways that gay and Jewish identities evolve over the life course, paralleling growth and personal development. As was demonstrated, these social categories can be temporary or situational. In the case of Nathan we see a man who in his late teens and early twenties took on the extreme roles of Jewish lifestyler followed by gay lifestyler. In his thirties he moderated his approach to that of a gay-integrator. This pattern of experimentation in extremes

in earlier life while seeking a more moderate strategy in later life is a common, though certainly not the only, pattern in attempting to negotiate stigmatized identities (Brekhus 2003:124-5). This leads to a discussion of age and historical cohort as important variables to consider. As opposed to respondents in their forties and fifties, respondents in their twenties or early thirties grew up in a world where being openly gay is not overly problematic. As such, these younger men saw less need for the strong identity politics of gay lifestylers or the religious insulation of Jewish lifestylers. Rather than compartmentalizing their identities (as in the case of identity commuters), or emphasizing a "master status" which defined their core self, these men had the clear expectation that multiple parts of their identities can and should be validated by society at the same time. They were thus more likely to find comfort as *gay-Jewish integrators.*

As Brekhus (2003:11 from Gamson and Moone 2004) reports in his ethnography of suburban gay men: "contrary to the public perception of a unitary, easily identifiable and coherent way to be gay (or to be any other identity), there are multiple ways to present and organize a marked identity" and "there is considerable conflict within identity categories about how to perform one's identity." This work has demonstrated that this variability of identity performance is only amplified when examining the intersections of *two* identities. Future research, which incorporates this complexity, is recommended on gay men and lesbians of other ethnic minority groups (Greeks, Italians, Chinese, etc.) as well as the significantly understudied populations of gay and lesbian Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus.

References

Alba, R. D. 1990. *Ethnic identity: The transformation of White America.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Alpert, R. T., S. L. Elwell and S. Idelson. 2001. *Lesbian rabbis: The first generation*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

----------. 1997. *Like bread on the Seder plate: Jewish lesbians and the transformation of tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press.

----------. 1989. In god's image: coming to terms with Leviticus. In *Twice blessed: On being lesbian or gay and Jewish*, edited by C. Balka and A. Rose, 61-70. Boston: Beacon Press,

Balka, C. and A. Rose, eds. 1989. *Twice blessed: On being lesbian or gay and Jewish*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Barth, F., ed. 1969. *Ethnic groups and boundaries*: *The social organization of culture difference*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Blumenfeld. W. J. 1996. History/hysteria: Parallel representations of Jews and gays, lesbians and bisexuals. In *Queer studies: A lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender anthology*, edited by B. Beemyn and M. Eliason, 146-162. New York: NYU Press.

Brekhus, W. 2003. *Peacocks, chameleons, centaurs: Gay suburbia and the grammar of social identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Brodbar-Nemzer, J., S.M. Cohen, A. Reitzes, C. Shahar, and G. Tobin. 1993. An overview of the Canadian Jewish community. In *The Jews in Canada*, edited by. R. J. Brym, W. Shaffir and M. Weinfeld, 39-72. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Brown, A., ed. 2004. *Mentsch: On being Jewish and queer*. Los Angeles: Alyson Books.

Butler, J. 1990. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Chan, C. 1989. Issues of identity development among Asian American lesbians and gay men. *Journal of Counselling and Development* 68:16-20.

Cohen, S. M. and A.M. Eisen. 2000. *The Jew within*: *Self, family, and community in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

----------. 1999. Introduction. In *National variations in Jewish identity: Implications for Jewish education*, edited by S. M. Cohen and G. Horencyzk, 1-17. Albany: State University of New York Press.

----------. 1991. *Content or continuity?: Alternative bases for commitment*. New York: American Jewish Committee.

Cooper, A. 1989. No longer invisible: Gay and lesbian Jews build a movement. *Journal of Homosexuality* 18(3/4):83-94.

Davids, L. 1998. Tracking demographic assimilation. In *Jewish survival*, edited by E. Krausz and G. Tulea, 207-26. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers.

Dworkin, S. H. 1997. Female, lesbian and Jewish: Complex and invisible. In *Ethnic and cultural diversity among lesbians and gay men*, edited by B. Greene, 63-87. London: Sage Publications.

Eder, D., S. Staggenborg and L. Sudderth. 1995. The national women's music festival: Collective identity and diversity in a lesbian-feminist community. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 23(4):485-515.

Elazar, D. J. 1999. Jewish religious, ethnic, and national identities: Convergences and Conflicts. In *National variations in Jewish identity: Implications for Jewish education*, edited by S. M. Cohen and G. Horencyzk, 35-52 Albany: State University of New York Press.

Espin, O.M. 1987. Issues of identity in the psychology of Latina lesbians. In *Lesbian psychologies: Explorations and challenge*, edited by the Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective, 35-51. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Fink, A. S. and J. Press. 1999. *Independence park: The lives of gay men in Israel*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Fishman, S.B. 2000. *Jewish life and American culture.* Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Foucault, M. 1980. *The history of sexuality, volume 1*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage.

Gamson, J. and D. Moon. 2004. The sociology of sexualities: Queer and beyond. *Annual Review of Sociology* 30:47-64.

Gans, H. J. 1979. Symbolic ethnicity: The future of ethnic groups and cultures in America. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2(1):1-20.

Garcia, B. 1998. *The development of Latino gay identity*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.

Goffman, E. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Greenberg, S. 2004. *Wrestling with god and men: Homosexuality in the Jewish tradition*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.

Greene, B. 1998. Family, ethnic identity and sexual orientation: African American lesbians and gay men. In *Lesbian, gay and bisexual identities in families: Psychological perspectives*, edited by C. J. Patterson and A. D'Augelli, 40-52. London: Oxford University Press.

Horowitz, B. 2002. Reframing the study of contemporary Jewish identity. *Contemporary Jewry* 23:14-34.

----------. 1998. Connections and journeys: Studying identities among American Jews. *Contemporary Jewry* 19:63-94.

Icard, L. 1985. Black gay men and conflicting social identities: Sexual orientation versus racial identity. *Journal of Social Work and Human Sexuality* 4(1/2):83-93.

Levado, Y. 1993. Gayness and god: Wrestlings of an orthodox rabbi. *Tikkun* 8(5):54-60.

Mahaffy, K. A. 1996. Cognitive dissonance and its resolution: A study of lesbian Christians. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35(4):392-402.

Moore, T., ed. 1995. *Lesbiot: Israeli lesbians talk about sexuality, feminism, Judaism and their lives.* New York: Cassell.

Morales, E. 1990. Ethnic minority families and minority gays and lesbians. *Marriage and Family Review* 14:217-239.

Mushkat, D. 1999. 'Alienated Jews': What about outreach to Jewish lesbians? *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 75(4):239-247.

Nagel, J. 2000. Ethnicity and sexuality. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26:107-33.

----------. 1994. Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture. *Social Problems* 41(1):152-76.

Raphael, L. 1996. *Journeys and arrivals: On being gay and Jewish*. Boston: Faber and Faber.

Rapoport, C. 2004. *Judaism and homosexuality: An authentic Orthodox view*. London: Vallentine Mitchell.

Rodriguez, E. M. and S.C. Ouellette. 2000. Gay and lesbian Christians: Homosexual and religious identity integration in the members and participants of a gay-positive church. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39(3):333-47.

Rogow, F. 1989. Speaking the unspeakable: Gays, Jews and historical inquiry. In *Twice blessed: On being lesbian or gay and Jewish*, edited by C. Balka and A. Rose, 72-84. Boston: Beacon Press.

Roof, W. C. 1999. *Spiritual marketplace: Baby boomers and the remaking of American religion.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Rose, A. 1999. Deconstructing Leviticus: Finding a queer spiritual path back from the exile of a sacred text. In *ReCreations*: *Religion and spirituality in the lives of queer people*, edited by C. Lake and M. Drache, 117-124. Toronto: Queer Press.

Schimel, L. 2000. *Kosher meat*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Sherman Asher Publishing.

Schnoor, R. F. 2003. *Finding one's place: Ethnic identity construction among gay Jewish men.* Doctoral Dissertation. Montreal: McGill University, Department of Sociology.

Sedgwick, E. K. 1990. *Epistemology of the closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shaffir, W. and M. Weinfeld. 1981. Canada and the Jews: An introduction. In *The Canadian Jewish mosaic,* edited by M. Weinfeld, W. Shaffir and I. Cotler, 7-20. Toronto: John

Wiley and Sons.

Shneer, D. and C. Aviv., eds. 2002. *Queer Jews*. New York: Routledge.

Shokeid, M. 1995. *A gay synagogue in New York*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Spector, M. and J. I. Kitsuse. 1987. *Constructing social problems*. New York: Aldin de Gruyter.

Thumma, S. 1991. Negotiating a religious identity: The case of the gay evangelical. *Sociological Analysis* 52(2):333-47.

Torton Beck, E., ed. 1989. *Nice Jewish girls: A lesbian anthology*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Tulchinsky, K. X., ed. 2000. *Friday the rabbi wore lace*. San Francisco, CA.: Cleis Press.

Walzer, L. 2000. *Between Sodom and Eden: A gay journey through today's changing Israel*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Waters, M. C. 1990. *Ethnic options: Choosing identities in America*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Wilcox, M. M. 2003. *Coming out in Christianity: Religion, identity and community*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

----------. 2002. When Sheila's a lesbian: Religious individualism among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians. *Sociology of Religion* 63(4):497-513.

wolfman, o. 2002. Remaking family: Canadian Jews, sexuality and relationships. In *Queer Jews*, edited by D. Shneer and C. Aviv, 156-171, New York: Routledge.

Wuthnow, R. 1998. *After heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. Berkeley: University of California Press.