Identity synthesis as the exclusive or even dominant model of identity formation—its ultimate validation and goal—recently has been challenged by theorists of identity. Alternative modes of identity, which within a synthetic paradigm might by classified as underdevelopment or even personality disorder, are seen using these new frameworks as highly functional and coherent structures of self. Identity development within religious gay and lesbian individuals provides a striking instance of resonance with this theoretical trend.

This chapter focuses on individuals for whom the very notion of identity synthesis, its usefulness as a model to account for their experience, must be called into question. It attempts to hear and to locate the subculture of Orthodox Jewish gay men and lesbian women who claim an identity dualism so deeply embedded that they experience and understand it as divinely bestowed. Previous studies of religious homosexuals have generally tended to present this identity conflict as moving toward synthesis, with
the religious element often exhibiting flexibility in the face of a sexual orientation seen as more intrinsic and therefore less negotiable. For Orthodox Jewish gays and lesbians, however, we find that this is not the case: Religion represents a far more encompassing web of beliefs, values, ritual practices, and social and familial connections that cannot easily be uncoupled from the individual’s deepest sense of being. Precisely because of the profound and pervasive impact of religion on their overall identity formation, Orthodox Jews provide an extreme (and heretofore invisible) counterpoint to previous assessments, a revealing window into the spectrum of cases in which the conflicting claims of same-sex attraction and other deeply held valuative frameworks face each other in all their irreducible and irreconcilable differences.

BACKGROUND: A SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE ON RELIGION, HOMOSEXUALITY, AND IDENTITY

In recent years, religious gays and lesbians, traditionally an all but silenced population, have begun to emerge into public discourse. Mainstream thinking in the political, religious, and educational spheres has been forced increasingly to confront what previously had been seen as an oxymoron. The number of psychologists being called in to help religious gays and lesbians in clinical settings is growing exponentially, although there has yet to be much formal research done on this population. The process of sexual identity formation in general, and homosexual identity in particular, has been explored and reported at length (see, e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Peacock, 2000; Raymond, 1994; Troiden, 1993; Yarhouse, 2001); little has been written, however, about religious gay and lesbian development. Seminal identity theorists such as Erikson (1950, 1968) and Butler (1990, 1993) who have written about sexual identity at length have little to say about the intersection of sexuality and religion. Thus Yarhouse (2001) noted correctly that “there has been much less discussion of identity formation insofar as how personal and religious valuative frameworks influence identity acquisition.” Regarding sexual identity development in particular, Yarhouse added that “religion is often simply neglected or reduced to ‘spirituality’” (p. 336).

When many people are confronted with conflicts between sexuality and religion, they either yield to a teaching in which they do not believe or feel they must abandon their religious heritage. Yarhouse (2001), discussing cases of conflict between same-sex attraction and other valuative frameworks, concluded somewhat more hopefully that “perhaps, on measures of mental health . . . it matters most not whether a person pursues a particular
DISHARMONY: IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN CATHOLIC NONHETEROSEXUALS AND ORTHODOX GAYS

Recently emerged studies about Catholic gay identity note a dualism similar to that of Orthodox Jews and describe a process of inner reconciliation and eventual synthesis. Yip found that “many gay Christians manage to move on in their journey of sexuality and eventually develop a positive personal identity that incorporates both their sexuality and their religious beliefs” (1999, p. 49). In a different study of religious Catholic nonheterosexuals, Yip maintained that “the majority of the respondents had personal identities that harmoniously incorporated their sexualities and Christian faith” (2002, p. 203; emphasis added), despite a seemingly intractable opposition between the two. This harmonious self-synthesis, according to Yip, was made possible by the fact that “the self, rather than religious authority structures, serves as the primary component of the framework within which the respondents engage in the doctrinal and practical reinterpretation of issues affecting their lives” (Yip, 2002, p. 201; emphasis added).

Yip’s account of his respondents’ identity process is consonant with the traditional Eriksonian model of identity necessarily moving toward a stance of integration, continuity, and sameness. His assertion or assumption of a singular self as the dominant reference point for identity—“the ultimate reference point for the respondents’ religious faith and practice” (2002, p. 201; emphasis added)—which achieves harmonization between vying elements—may accurately describe the identity progression of his respondents. It contrasts sharply, however, with our findings among Orthodox Jewish gays and lesbians who, although for the most part eventually achieve a baseline acceptance of their dual identities, nonetheless continue to experience these identities in stridently dualistic terms. In this sense, our participants’ accounts resonate with Holmes’s (1999) description of aboriginal gays leading “complex hybrid lives, lived in multiple ways” (p. 191). In their interviews, there can be found no concept of a singular self through which conflicting claims on their identities are mediated and processed, much less synthesized. The picture that emerges is rather of two mutually exclusive selves that, following formative periods of intense conflict and struggle,
manage ultimately to achieve a working coexistence within the same body and mind. In contrast to Butler (1990) and other constructivist theorists, both of these identities are experienced and described by our participants in essential terms.

It is our intention to situate these reports within a theoretical framework that neither accepts nor rejects this experience of essentialness but rather gives an account of how it may have arisen, or at least been significantly reinforced, within this particular identity conflict in this particular cultural context. This framework is narrative in the sense of locating participants' personal, individual narratives—the accounts they gave of their identity formation as Orthodox Jewish gays and lesbians, stretching from childhood to the present day—within the context of their culture's master narratives about sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular.

All pedagogies are historically located within the range of discourses of a particular time and place. Our formulation of the "master narrative" is, in part, a reference to the ways that some stories of what sexuality (and, indeed, life more generally) is like come to be accepted as "normal" or "obvious." (Epstein & Sears, 1999, p. 3)

The relationship between participants' personal narratives and the master narratives of Orthodox Jewish culture is the central axis of inquiry for this chapter. The notion of positioning these narratives dichotomously, or seeing them as separate at all, is challenged, ultimately generating the need for a re-envisioning of individuals' identity processes and a reformulation of structures of self at which they have arrived.

NONSYNTHETIC SELVES: PLURALISTIC MODELS OF IDENTITY CONFLICT

The temptation to view as atypical any identity conflict that does not result in eventual synthesis is a testament to the power of the Eriksonian developmental model, both as a reflection of the urge for integration and resolution and as a historical–theoretical reference point. In the past 10 years, however, a number of theorists have posited models of the self that challenge the premise that identity conflict must move inexorably toward synthetic resolution. Coined by various authors as "the dialogical self" (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992), "the mutable self" (Cote, 1996), and "the protean self" (Lifton, 1993), these models share the insight that the self need not be viewed as abhorring dissonance, requiring consistency and coherence as prerequisites for survival or even psychic health. The dialogical self, for example, "contrasts with the notion of the self as the center of
control" (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 29). The dialogical self is based on the assumption that

in contrast with the individualistic self . . . there are many I positions that can be occupied by the same person. The I in one position can agree, disagree, understand, misunderstand, oppose, contradict, question, and even ridicule the I in another position. (Hermans et al., 1992, p. 29)

These claims of identity pluralism can be demonstrated best in situations of inner conflict, which “can potentially move the question of inner consistency to the forefront and create difficulty in the formation of a coherent identity” (Schachter, 2004). This difficulty often highlights the central function of what Lifton referred to as the Protean Self “for bringing together disparate and seemingly incompatible elements of identity and involvement in what I call ‘odd combinations’” (Lifton, 1993, p. 7). The coexistence of these “odd combinations” is understood in many cases to be “simultaneous, in the multiplicity of varied, even antithetical images and ideas held at any one time by the self, each of which it may be more or less ready to act upon—a condition sometimes referred to as ‘multimind’” (Lifton, 1993, p. 8).

Multimind is a salient characterization of what emerges from our Orthodox homosexual participants' accounts, and this chapter is a close study of the process of development that brought the participants to that mindset—highlighting the pervasive role of culture in identity development, and sexual identity in particular.

To this end, we highlight the classical rabbinic and contemporary Orthodox perspectives concerning homosexuality. We also pay close attention to how these traditions conceive of identity choice and the nuances and complexities regarding homosexual being and doing. Turning to the interviews themselves, we flesh out some of the more knotty and vexing challenges of identity formation faced by Orthodox gay men and lesbian women—the complex negotiations among deep-seated self-knowledge, passionate faith, rigorous religious commitment, and mutually exclusive communal demands through which they make sense of their identities in relation to the traditions, texts, practices, communities, and lifestyles that often seem irreconcilably conflicted but that they nonetheless claim as inexorably their own. We try to understand the developmental trajectory that is experienced when there exists little resonance, indeed extreme friction, between two defining elements of self: sexual identity on the one hand and socio-religious context on the other. For purposes of illustration we describe some of the processes of self-discovery to which this friction gives rise: the forms taken by emerging acceptance of sexual identity, how gays and lesbians find they can and must articulate themselves to their communities and to God.
as they find themselves both essentially religious and fundamentally homosexual. We conclude by suggesting that neither one of these identities is assimilated into the other—that there is neither synthesis nor resolution of the fundamental opposition between them—but that the dialogical process of ever-intensifying communication and deepening mutual understanding itself takes on the dimensions of a primary identification that creates the possibility for their viable coexistence.

**METHODOLOGY**

Following Schachter (2004), we present narrative representations of identity conflict in a culture context (Bruner, 1990; Mishler, 1979) containing opposing elements. To this end, we used a qualitative, narrative methodology involving in-depth interviews with a sample of gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews. This methodology allows insights into participants’ subjective perspectives on themselves and their experiences and provides rich information regarding their social milieu (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) were particularly appropriate for the goals of this study. Because Orthodox gays and lesbians have so seldom made themselves available for this type of study, it was important to develop a picture of their lives that was as rich and nuanced as possible. The narrative methodology was similarly useful in reminding us to take heed of the highly personal and unique ways in which participants came to structure their identities given the opposing forces influencing their development.

**THE SAMPLE**

This study used a sample of 18 adult men and women aged 25 to 30. They were residents of New York or Jerusalem, were engaged in a variety of occupations, and defined themselves as both Orthodox and gay/lesbian. This age cohort was appropriate for our study because it generally represents a more advanced stage of religious and sexual identity formation, combining a broadened perspective on earlier developmental dynamics (the interviewees had all “come out,” at least to some extent, and had already passed through the exploratory stage of identity formation generally associated with adolescence) with a still-sharp lens into the present world of gay and lesbian religious young adults. Unlike the generation immediately preceding them, this is the first generation of Orthodox Jews to feel that it was possible (albeit far from easy) to come out publicly, or at least in limited social circles, as religious gays and lesbians.
This sample was generated through several methods. We placed ads in the Jerusalem “Open House”; contacted Moach Gavra, a group of Orthodox gay men who come together to study religious texts; placed ads on Web sites addressed to the religious gay and lesbian community; and relied on word of mouth.

We conducted open-ended, phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 1991), which took place wherever the interviewee felt most comfortable. Interviews were conducted in Hebrew. Discussions were unstructured and lasted between an hour and a half and three hours, enabling both interviewer and respondent sufficient time and comfort to explore complex lines of inquiry and consider questions and answers thoughtfully and deeply (Josselson, 1994; Lindlof, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1988).

ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS

The analyses of the interviews were based on the process of grounded theory development (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), thematic analyses, and the interpretive method known as the Reader’s or Listener’s Guide (Gilligan et al., 1988). The Guide format calls for multiple readings of the interviews to sort out distinct themes and voices within the narratives respondents present. This technique makes it possible to tune into the nuances of the speaker’s relationship to his or her own words, with the narrative she or he has constructed about himself or herself—nuances of which the speaker may be aware only vaguely, if at all. It allows us, for example, to zero in on the elements of the speaker’s developing self she or he still finds too frightening to stand by (see Gilligan et al., 1988).

Several themes emerged consistently from participants’ narratives: (a) knowing and not-knowing—in other words, preventing themselves from knowing; (b) the challenges involved in coming out to family, friends, and community, as well as the ramifications of coming out, the personal responses to those ramifications, and attempts to manage them; (c) internalized homophobia, derived both from mainstream Western culture and the Jewish “master narrative” of homosexuality; and (d) choice and nonchoice of religious and sexual identity.

INTERVIEWER AS INSIDER-OUTSIDER

As Orthodox Jews, we the interviewers are familiar with the religious terminology of both the texts and the lived experiences of our respondents, as well as the rabbis they quote and the social context in which they live. We did not require extensive explanations of the aspects of the narratives.
relating to religious Jewish life. As heterosexual women, however, we are attuned to the implications of being in part members of the group we are studying and in other ways total strangers (see Lomsky-Feder, 1996; Sciarra, 1999). During the interviews themselves, we were acutely aware of observing struggles, pains, and joys we do not share, because we were learning from them about their experiences and their world.

**JEWISH LEGAL DISCOURSE ON HOMOSEXUALITY**

The prospect of creating a coherent, reconciled identity as a gay or lesbian Orthodox Jew poses serious, fundamental challenges. First among these is the commitment to upholding a tradition that delegitimizes, condemns, and (at least theoretically) punishes homosexuality. It is important to understand the central, visceral, and dynamic role these religious texts and opinions play in the lives of all Orthodox Jews, including those gay and lesbian Jews who choose to remain (or become) Orthodox. Integrating biblical and rabbinic imperatives with internal experience is the central project of gay Orthodox Jews, in the context of which Jewish legal (halakhic) and meta-legal texts, spanning centuries of rabbinic discussion and debate—which may strike the lay person as esoterica, convoluted abstraction, or hair-splitting legal jargon—are in fact principal mediators of attitude and custom, communally and individually, and primary sources of inspiration and instruction in the daily life of Orthodox Jews. As such, it constitutes a defining element of the religious gay or lesbian individual’s identity formation.

Ancient and modern Jewish legal writings on homosexuality are extensive. Jewish religious communities not only adhere to biblical law (most relevant being the sexual prohibitions found in chap. 18 of Leviticus) but also to a vast rabbinic literature that elaborates, interprets, and expands on these founding precepts. In fleshing out the major themes in the Jewish canonical literature, as well as the views of some contemporary Orthodox rabbis and scholars who have been influential in framing the terms of the current discourse, what we find are two strains of thought that are as distinct from one another as they are internally complex: One views homosexuality as an illicit act people perform (which we refer to as “doing”) but not as an inherent trait; and one that sees homosexuality as definitional to a person’s identity (we refer to this as “being”). Although neither of these perspectives can be said to cast homosexuality in a positive (or, for that matter, halakhically permitted) light, both are bivalent in that they can be understood to represent either sympathetic or condemnatory voices, depending entirely on the speaker and the stance he or she chooses to take.
MODERN FORMULATIONS OF HOMOSEXUALITY
AND RABBINIC RESPONSES

The discussion among contemporary Orthodox Jewish rabbis about homosexuality has been shaped and informed by an evolving political and social context. As community leaders, rabbis have had to address immediate and pressing questions presented to them by a rapidly (and in some cases radically) evolving milieu in which homosexuality has become almost wholly normative, largely destigmatized within the dominant secular culture, and progressively embraced within other movements of Judaism. This shift in political and social climate is in fact only the latest manifestation of a broader historical evolution in the way homosexuals—and the nature of homosexuality itself—are viewed by mainstream culture. It is a trend most crisply observed and succinctly formulated by Foucault (1980).

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; the perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The Nineteenth-Century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life. . . . Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed as one of the forms of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (pp. 42—43)

Implicit already in Foucault’s formulation is the double-edged nature of this trend toward viewing gays and lesbians not merely as “perpetrators,” as doers of “forbidden acts,” but as a distinct category of “soul,” as a “species.” On the one hand, the acknowledgment that homosexuality is not an aberration, that it expresses an interior dimension of the individual’s identity that is integrated with his or her past and his or her childhood can be seen as a gesture of (or at least forming circumstances conducive to) increased empathy, understanding, and respect. This indeed can be seen not merely as a top-down trend, a definition imposed on gays and lesbians by the societies in which they live, but as an interplay between shifting societal awareness and gay and lesbian individuals’ own insistence on a more encompassing self-definition. On the other hand, once an individual ceases to be viewed as a temporary aberration, it is equally possible that he or she will now come to be viewed as a permanent aberration, and the tendency to view the gay or lesbian individual not only as a person but as a “case history,” a bizarre new and not-quite-human species, carries a hint of how this new holistic, being perspective can just as easily be turned against gays and lesbians. Indeed, Foucault understood this trend as forming the backdrop for a distinctly modern new persecution of the peripheral sexualities.
The premodern, doing perspective with regard to homosexuality as understood by Foucault carries a similar and complementary dualism. The negative connotations attendant to a perpetrator of criminal acts is fairly clear. However, one who commits criminal acts does so by choice, and, given sufficient desire and will, can presumably choose to stop. This negative attribute is both localized and chosen. Far better, one could argue, to be viewed as a temporary, voluntary criminal than as being held helplessly in the thrall of a permanent criminal soul. Of course, this element of choice can also easily be turned against the homosexual: What can one say of a person who has the choice to behave properly and morally and instead chooses consistently to commit crimes?

Modern halakhic discourse has been clearly—although incompletely— influenced by the broader Western trend articulated by Foucault (1980). On the one hand, the halakhic process’s conservative tendencies (in the legalistic sense of favoring precedent) demonstrate a strong inclination toward the more biblically rooted doing perspective. At the same time, however, a strain of modern rabbinic thought has expanded its focus to address homosexuality as category of being—expressing legal and meta-legal opinions not only about the banned homosexual act but regarding the homosexual him- or herself; in other words, the spiritual and psychological essence of individual gay men and lesbian women. Although Foucault places being and doing in a linear, mutually exclusive relationship with one another, Orthodox Judaism—with its contemporary incarnation with one foot firmly planted in what Foucault called the ancient canonical codes and the other in more modern times—holds being and doing concurrently as viable ways of understanding homosexuality.

Moreover, whatever the various and complex motivations of their proponents, these two perspectives are used to dualistic (and dueling) effects. Those who insist that homosexuality should still be viewed a series of acts (doing), aligning themselves with biblical and rabbinic tradition against the gay community’s self-definition and the modern social reality articulated by Foucault, do so to both sympathetic and condemnatory ends. This is the case as well for those who adhere to the claim that homosexuality is a result of an essential trait that cannot be overcome (being).

THE PROCESS OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Given the dualism described, it is not surprising to find that all of our study participants faced serious obstacles in the development of their identities as Orthodox gays and lesbians, beginning at the earliest developmental stages. The abundance of recent research on general gay and lesbian identity formation has mapped a developmental trajectory that begins with
(a) a general sense of feeling different (Troiden, 1993), known as preconscious awareness (Coleman, 1982); it moves to (b) manifestations of dissociation and stages of coming out to oneself; then culminates in (c) a crisis point at which she or he realizes that her or his sexual identity could be labeled as homosexual and understands the import of the severe stigma that this label bears (this stage entails a struggle with the perimeters of self-definition with an eye toward external characterizations); and eventually moves to (d) stages of integration, affirmation (Troiden, 1993), and identity synthesis (Cass, 1979).

During our interviews we heard the first three of these basic stages of development taking shape among emerging Orthodox gay and lesbian identities, although with important, culturally conditioned differences that contributed to a sharp divergence with regard to the fourth (d). Because of both the encompassing and highly normative nature of halakha—its regulation of every aspect of personal and public life through a voluminous and ever-evolving legal and meta-legal canon—its awareness infuses Orthodox communities and homes and minds, on levels ranging from the unconscious to the stridently overt. For young Orthodox Jews who find themselves with nascent, preconscious forms of homosexual awareness, this chorus of authoritative voices, stretching back millennia and speaking unequivocally into the present, often drowns out any such self awareness before it can begin to find footing in conscious thought.

It was not surprising, then, to find an ongoing dissonance in our participants' descriptions of their earliest three stages of homosexual awareness between knowing and not knowing—in other words, various levels of denial or even dissociation. For them, these stages entailed a dialectical pattern of accruing self-knowledge as homosexuals, while at the same time working hard to undo this knowledge—to not-know. This attempt at repression was the first stage in a dialogical process through which the sexual and religious selves began to assert and communicate the content and the demands of their respective identities. At this stage, the religious identity was challenged by inchoate same-sex awareness and maintained dominance by virtue of both its temporal primacy and its ability to communicate compellingly the dangerous nonviability of the emerging sexual preference.

KNOWING AND NOT-KNOWING: IDENTITY CURRENTS AND CROSS-CURRENTS

By the time in their lives at which we met with our participants, they could speak openly of how the self-knowledge with which they eventually had managed to come to terms had previously signified certain danger,
isolation, and pain. Understandably—accompanied as they were by an increasing awareness of the potential traumatic consequences and steep costs of this dawning knowledge to their most significant relationships (family, community, God, even self) these messages were frequently ignored or repressed (see Warner, 1999; Weis & Fine, 1993). One participant, Chana, aged 25, poignantly illuminated this initial stage of denial and its complex, simultaneous interplay between knowing and not-knowing by describing the following dream.

The image that I had in my head was that of Joshua as he surrounded the walls of Jericho and blowing the shofar and the walls coming down, and those huge walls just crumbling down in my mind, and what was behind them were these huge 20-meter neon letters saying: “You are a lesbian! You are a lesbian!” I never really thought of myself that way, but it was the truth.

Chana’s identity was announced to her in a dramatic and powerful way, a resounding voice of truth sufficiently strong to topple the walls of ignorance. She needed her identity to be written out in huge neon letters so that she could neither claim to misread nor feasibly ignore it. Even so, she explained, “I didn’t really think that way about myself—and I spent the next 5 years trying to prove that it wasn’t true. Now, I am a lesbian. I know that now.”

In her description of the dream, Chana’s homosexuality was revealed to her by an external source; she was not yet able to accept it for (much less proclaim it) herself. The initial moment of self-revelation is also a moment of intense self-alienation, opening a fissure between what she knows intuitively and what she is willing to accept. Initially, she is approached by an external, impersonal, indeed inanimate (albeit emphatic) voice insisting that “you” are a lesbian. Only after 5 years of aggressively attempting to hold that knowledge at bay could she finally use the integrated first-person pronoun to accept “lesbian” as a term of self-identification.

The dream Chana discusses is one of miraculous victory in battle, yet her own battle for self-integration was far more arduous and drawn out. Her world of associations is biblical, and within this metaphorical battlefield she instinctively finds a framework to describe her feelings. The same biblical imagery is infused with inspiration and fraught with danger, inasmuch as it reflects a powerful world view with which she passionately identifies, yet which at the same time rejects a central dimension of who she is. She sees her imprisoned consciousness as a walled city akin to Jericho, and the neon sign overwhelming the naturalistic biblical scene evokes the garish flamboyance associated with popular images of homosexual culture. This starkly contrasting dynamic can be understood as a representation of her
increasing subconscious resistance to biblical norms—the wrenching conflict of cultures and visions of self, even at this early stage of denial—in vivid (i.e., neon) terms. It cannot go unnoticed, however, that it is the shefar, the quintessential biblical symbol of human freedom, that heralds the breakthrough to this new stage of awareness. It also should not be forgotten that, just as in Chana's dream Jericho represents the enemy, so too within the context of the biblical story Jericho is the enemy of the Jewish people: the first enemy, the first stage in the process of vanquishing the Canaanite idolaters and settling into the Promised Land. Significantly, this moment in the biblical story precisely parallels the stage of identity formation in which Chana presently finds herself, and it is therefore telling that she identifies the triumphal, liberational force within herself with Joshua, who led the Jews to victory in defeating countless enemies and breaking unprecedented new ground. Although the neon signs clearly represent a disruption in the classical biblical scene, the courage and inspiration that makes this disruption possible is drawn directly from the biblical source.

It can be said, then, that in addition to the powerful external and internal voices holding Chana's self-awareness at bay, her dual knowledge itself gave rise to a sense of sheer identity confusion that placed seemingly natural enemies—traditional Judaism and homosexuality—as allies on the same, winning team. It is not difficult to imagine the despair faced by a young person, for whom this internal alliance is so natural and deep-seated, on realizing the extent to which externally, in the world in which she lives, it is considered not only unspeakable and unthinkable but impossible, ludicrous, absurd. At this early stage, when in any event identity-related knowing is inchoate and protean, the motivations for not-knowing something about oneself that is both potentially devastating and cognitively hard to grasp are overpowering. In Chana's case, it took half a decade for her to allow herself to know that which she battled so intensely to keep walled up within the fortress of not-knowing.

Tal, aged 28, likewise spent many years in this suspended state of simultaneous knowing and not-knowing. She spoke of always feeling different when her friends were interested in boys and she was not. She recalled a dream during late adolescence (see Weis & Fine, 1993) in which a woman entered her room, then her bed, “and then I realized that this is what I wanted and I understood and I was really scared, really scared ... I knew what that was.” Notwithstanding this initial burst of clarity, it was several more years before Tal managed to translate her knowledge into a fuller lesbian identity. It is noteworthy that even in describing this revelation, she used the demonstrative pronoun “that” rather than any specific term denoting lesbianism. This type of linguistic distancing characterized much of her interview, and her struggle between knowing and not-knowing can
be illustrated sharply by cataloguing her preference for the nonspecific third-person pronoun.

ignored it.
I completely ignored it.
I fell in love with a woman and it was real, you know, but still . . . .
It was there, it was certain and unambiguous . . . but I still ignored it.
I went out with other men, I completely ignored it.
... even though I knew that this is it. [emphasis added]

In contrast to Chana, who was able to speak the word “lesbian” only by addressing herself in the second person, Tal spoke from the “I,” yet obfuscated her identification with lesbianism via the unspeakable and unnamable “it.” What we find is a kind of conservation-of-distancing mechanism, wherein the speaker either uses the first person or speaks directly of her homosexuality. To use both in concert would create a stronger, more unequivocal form of identity knowledge than our participants were prepared to allow.

CHOICE

Despite the strong incentive to remain in a perpetual state of sexual not-knowing, all of our participants eventually felt impelled to acknowledge the inexorable reality of their same-sex attraction. There has been much discussion among researchers about the extent to which sexual identity is fluid and adaptable versus inherent and fixed (see Birke, 1996; Lampert, 1994; Money, 1987, 1988; Okley, 1996; Usser, 1994). What has emerged from this discourse has been a kind of spectrum on which our participants found themselves experiencing their sexual orientation as an inherent and nonnegotiable fact—an experience of intrinsic being rather than a series of chosen behaviors. What makes their process of identity formation distinct from that of individuals who have dominated previous studies—for whom religion has generally played a less central role—is the matching of their sense of an inherent sexual identity with an equally inherent, and nonetheless antithetical, ontological reality: their religion. In other words, neither their Orthodox Jewish nor their gay identities were or are experienced in terms of choice. As one of the men said, “I was born gay, and I was born religious.”

It must be acknowledged that within the psychological discourse on homosexuality and sexuality in general, the notion of choice is complicated. Whether homosexuality is an innate trait or an acquired one—whether one can choose his or her sexual identity at all—has been discussed at great length (see Garents & Kimmel, 1993; Lampert, 1994; Money, 1987, 1988). We will not add to the ongoing debate between constructivist and essentialist
views. We do not take a position on the nature of identity formation per se, but rather listen to the ways gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews experience and describe their lives; and we observe the developmental patterns that emerge from these self-perceptions. Almost uniformly, we heard them speaking about themselves as essentially both religious and gay.

Rachel, aged 30, an ultra-Orthodox American woman living in Israel, is married to a man. She spoke about both her religiosity and her lesbianism as aspects of her core self, and she described two experiences that brought about these realizations.

So one, was the first time I was with a woman physically and I just said: "oh this is it, now the world makes sense to me, just everything makes sense, this is it" . . . and the other time I had this experience was one of the first times I studied Chumash [Torah], and I could hardly read Hebrew, and as I am reading it I thought, I have been here before, this is such a big part of me, it was completely an experience of "this is it." I didn't know exactly what this "it" was, but I knew that it has to be a part of my life. . . . They both hit me at the same places—to the core.

Tal also related to the strength of her gay and religious identities as equivalent. She defined her religious identity not as an emerging discovery about herself nor as a choice but rather as a defining element of who she is. She formulated her religiosity as a tautological truism: "I am religious just because I am religious." Expressing a parallel experience of his parallel identities, Amiram, aged 28, expressed his God-given dilemma in terms of a lament.

"You are stuck with both of them. . . . Whatever they say, this is not from choice. I am not planning to fight with myself or change myself, there is no point, I will never change, and to become straight I will never in this life become straight. This I know. This is the hardest test for me to withstand—you are torn from the inside, the Evil Desire is so great and "just this" you say, it had to come in my sexuality. How many gays are there in the whole world, and from them how many have to be born religious, and I had to be that kind? Why me?"

A distillation of Amiram's complaints opens a window to his still-unreconciled self-perception.

You feel like you are in a war with your hands tied.
There is nothing you can do.
You don't want to give up on anything.
You don't want to give up on the religion.
You don't want to give up on the mitzvot (the religious laws).
And I do not want to give up on me. [emphasis added]
Noach, aged 27, described what he perceived to be the ultimate impossibility of reconciliation.

There are those who say, “I will not stay religious, I will throw it all out,” but that is also a cop out. It will not bring inner peace at the end. On the one hand, being religious is not peaceful because you want something and you cannot have it; on the other hand, to be not religious brings no peace because religion has certain values, and it is hard to break off from 20 years of education, all of a sudden to change everything. It is a huge difficulty and whatever you do it will always come back to you, no matter what you do. [emphasis added]

Noach felt certain that leaving one of his identities would not bring him inner peace, that in fact “it . . . will always come back to you, no matter what you do.” Even if one were to forfeit one or the other, this cop out would not work as a long-term solution: Both identities, gay and religious, would eventually have to somehow find expression. This profound inner dualism is what marks Orthodox gays and lesbians—and others who not only feel the external pressures of the antigay valuative frameworks in which they live but who internally identify with the values these frameworks represent to such an extent that rejecting them is simply not an option—as distinct from gay men and lesbians for whom the pressure to be something other than what they are derives from sources that can ultimately be externalized, analyzed, critiqued, and abandoned in part or in whole. For our participants, the identification with Jewish tradition was as axiomatic as the attraction to members of the same sex.

NEGOTIATION WITH RELIGIOUS LAW AND CONSOLIDATION OF AN IDENTITY

The lonely journey of negotiating with the religious world has, for our participants, taken different forms. Many began by consulting with rabbis to find a way to resolve their predicament: Either to help them become heterosexual or to help them find a way to remain gay or lesbian within a religious framework. In both cases, they were left wanting. On the whole, they left those meetings full of guilt, reproach, and with a tool kit of bizarre methods toward a “cure.” Eventually these conversations broke down, as faith that the religious leaders’ ability to help them was progressively attenuated and often, ultimately, abandoned. This alienation from the religious establishment led to crisis points out of which new modes of identity synthesis were attempted. Yehezkel, 28, made a series of statements about the Jewish perspective with regard to homosexuals, born out of his conversations with rabbis, which evidence an emphatic prominence of the harshly condemna-
tory being perspective and encapsulate the experience of many of our partici-
pants in relating to religious authorities.

It is thought of as if you are tainted. If you transgress the Sabbath then you did a bad deed, but it doesn't reflect your whole personality. Here, if you did a sexual act it means your whole life, your whole outlook, it means you are secular, it means beginning that slippery slope downhill.

I am considered an abomination. [emphasis added]

In the course of countless conversations with local rabbis, Yehezkel has not only developed a vivid rabbinic self-portrait but internalized this perspective to the extent that he addresses himself in the second-person voice of those very rabbis. He unpacks the difference between doing a transgression like not observing the Sabbath and being homosexual, which becomes "your" entire definition in their eyes. The only first-person statement he makes is a passive affirmation of their bleak assessment of his current status and worth.

Once a person has internalized an image of self as abominable, as tainted, as secular—which for someone who sees him- or herself as essentially religious represents an even more profound and disorienting level of self-negation—how does one go about building an identity that is positive and integrated?

Roi, aged 25, has carved out an approach of mutual affirmation and strategic limitation.

At one point when I accepted that I live with this contradiction, I understood that I want to live in both of these worlds. I can love a man and live with him but not transgress the specific law that is very clear and straightforward.

Roi's solution was to live with a man, to continue loving him but refrain from anal intercourse, which he understands as the core of the prohibition. He distinguishes his inner life—his love, the objects of his love—from his physical expression of this love. Roi is committed to coming to a compromise with regard to his identity that respects and expresses both of his intrinsic commitments. In formulating this particular compromise, he clearly takes his cues from the doing perspective as it has filtered down to him through Orthodox culture. His decision represents simultaneously an acceptance of this perspective's essential precept—the forbiddenness of the same-sex act—and a subversion of its complementary assertion, the nonexistence of homosexual being. In his tone can be detected a note of defiance against a perspective that insists there are no homosexuals, just heterosexuals performing homosexual acts. Just as those advocating the doing perspective limit their acknowledgment of homosexuality to its physical expression, Roi uses that same standard to circumscribe its jurisdiction over
his identity. By accepting the claim made by halakha over his physical behavior, he remains within the parameters of Jewish law, thereby affirming his Orthodox identity while simultaneously affirming his gay identity by asserting his meta-legal freedom to “love a man and live with him.” His sexual identity is also circumscribed through a commitment to abstinence.

Whether this particular, rigorous balance between the demands of antithetical aspects of self results in a workable identity synthesis will only be proven through time. What is clear and significant is Roi’s commitment to come to some workable synthesis, and the model he has chosen—as well as any future trials and errors he undergoes—represent groundbreaking in the area of gay identity formation.

Amiram, like Roi, maintains the innateness of both his gay and Orthodox identifications. In developing them, however, he makes a different set of distinctions, taking what amounts to a more social-activist approach. He does not challenge or criticize God, in whose judgment he ultimately has faith, but whose role in defining the practical and evolving reality of Jewish life he understands as secondary. Rather, he takes issue with the caretakers of Torah, the contemporary rabbis who he feels have not attempted to understand, much less constructively address, his predicament.

It hurts, it just hurts. I am not angry at God, I am angrier at society. They [the rabbis] have to start looking out for us, what even the halacha minimally would allow. I do not want to go to a counselor. I want to go to a rabbi and say I am gay. But then he will also say, “Just go marry a woman.” . . . Don’t they understand that it is impossible, the world is not built that way?

Although frustrated with the religious establishment’s status quo, Amiram continues to express the essentially religious aspect of his identity: “I do not want to take my kippa [skullcap] off, or to stop observing dietary laws.”

Rather than simply accepting and working within the status quo, Amiram takes a level of ownership over his valuative framework and critiques it, while remaining within. The implications of his distinction between the rabbis as social engineers with a degree of flexibility in what issues they choose to engage and God as a voice of absolute compassion and truth, is interesting and can be unpacked as follows: Throughout history, the rabbis have modified and adapted laws in response to social and economic developments (e.g., abolition of slavery, banning of polygamy), but they steadfastly resist making any changes in regard to homosexuality. In short, Amiram feels that the rabbis have failed him.

For example, when he expressed his feelings of same-sex attraction to his rabbis, Amiram was succinctly told, he said, to “go marry a woman.” In the face of this not-uncommon advice, Levado, a gay Orthodox rabbi (1993), asked, “Don’t they care about the women we would marry?” As shown in
the case of Ghana, the ostensible protection of family values results more often in the destruction of actual families and the tearing of the communal fabric, as fraudulent marriages damage everyone involved and emanate shock waves that must be absorbed by extended family, friends, and community.

Noach was given a different spin on the same obscure directive, instructed by various rabbis with whom he conferred to “go sit and study.”

Sitting and studying seemed so silly—what does that have to do with my problem? I can’t concentrate. . . . One Rabbi kicked me out of his house. Others, however, related to me in some way. On the one hand I felt they understood; but then their solutions seemed just so silly.

When Noach’s dialogue with the rabbis had run its course, he reached a point of crisis. His sense of profound alienation from both his religious and sexual identities is evident from the following series of helpless questions.

I looked for answers:
How will God accept me?
How can I connect to Him?
What should I do? How can I exist as a kosher Jew with this . . . ?
I felt I was in jail, where there was no way out.
Whatever I have tried to do never worked out.

These questions initiated the first phase of what became an ongoing, direct, personal conversation with God, and out of this conversation a model of identity synthesis began to take shape.

The question is what should I do? A compromise? Do some sexual acts but not others? Oh God, I will do some things but to a limit, I cannot refrain completely, so let us make an agreement. I won’t be completely traif [nonkosher]. Everybody puts some limits, so if before I would sleep with a man five times a week so now it will be three times a week, and the two times I don’t I sanctify to you, God. The three times is for me. I do not have a halakhic permission, but this is the direction I am trying to look for.

Noach accepts the category of sin and his accountability within the framework of Divine commandment and Jewish law. What is interesting is his attempt to maintain, even after giving up on rabbinic guidance and authority, a viable relationship with the very God whose religion (and it is important to note that the God with whom Noach converses remains a particularly Jewish God—a God who cares about which sexual acts a person does and refrains from doing, and speaks the language of kosher and traif rather than an abstract spiritual being) he understands to reject his sexual orientation, while remaining a source of profound personal dialogue and an offering of compromise and respect. In a sense, Noach can be seen as going “over the heads” of the rabbis, whom he sees as unwilling or unable to 
address his difficult identity concern. Lacking recourse on the management level, he takes his case directly to the highest authority and attempts there to iron out a workable compromise. Although acknowledging that none of his current solutions are halakhic, he does not reject or exempt himself from the halakhic system, which he affirms as fundamentally valid but feels has not yet evolved to a point of being able to responsibly address his situation and concerns.

Like Amiram and Noach, Michal finds her way to a sharp distinction between religiously dictated social norms—in other words, the rabbinic insistence on relegating homosexuality to the sphere of perversion and taboo—and “religion”/“God,” which connotes an inherent moral–spiritual truth to which the dysfunctional (this is the clear implication) religious establishment has not yet caught up.

If the halacha would want to deal with it they would find a way out. All of a sudden women are allowed to do things that a generation ago were not allowed, like learning Torah. The halakha changes, but in this issue the halakha just decided not to deal, just like in the whole world. . . . I have no problems with God: the halakha today has nothing to do with God. It is the religious community. One has to distinguish between the religious establishment and religion.

An alternative route to identity synthesis involved an expansion of the term religious to include appropriation of rabbinic tradition through personal study and interpretation, which in turn allowed for a sense of reconciliation with sexual orientation and practice. Shlomit, for example, no longer discusses her sexuality with rabbis. She decided to study herself and found a way through her own interpretations to live in both worlds. She recently married her girlfriend, creating a ceremony for herself and her partner out of Jewish sources and traditions.

It is hard to be a lesbian in the religious society but not from the halakhic perspective. Nevertheless, I am not willing to give up on the religious world. That is my world. If they will tell me to give up the religious world or the lesbian world I will give up the lesbian part. The religion is me! God is my first love. What I am is first of all a religious person: my beliefs, my way of life, my views are first of all religious. There are no compromises, none. . . . I have studied and I can explicitly say that I can be a religious person and I can be a lesbian and be whole with it.

CONCLUSION

Hermans et al. (1992) posited that “the dialogical self can only be fully understood when its cultural constraints are acknowledged.” It is indeed within an intricate context of culturally specific constraints that we sought
to examine “how preexisting polarities within one cultural and ideological setting manifest themselves in the identity formation process of the individual” (Schachter, 2004). The very biblical and rabbinic laws these young Orthodox homosexuals treasure, and the corresponding lifestyle to which they are committed, prohibit homosexual behavior. Contemporary rabbinic writings are laced with derogatory language with regard to homosexual people and acts. The communities that are organized around these laws reject homosexual behavior and ostracize those identifying as gays and lesbians. The gay and lesbian community, meanwhile, evinces hostility and suspicion toward religion and those identifying with its precepts—all the more so toward individuals living by those precepts and espousing them as positive valuative frameworks, encompassing guidelines for morality and lifestyle.

For individuals who live with such a multiplicity of compelling, ultimately irreconcilable voices, the notion of identity synthesis is far more than merely nonresonant: It is an oxymoron. In fact, the familiar positioning of synthesis as the touchstone of identity formation, its assumption as identity’s telos, is a framework that our participants’ accounts strenuously called into question. To say that they did not achieve a harmonious synthesis of their religious and gay identities is not to say that they have not come to terms, to greater and lesser degrees, with who they are: It is not to say that they lack fully developed identities. It is rather to assert that this self-acceptance, even in its final stages, resisted characterization as synthesis (Shlomit: “There are no compromises, none”) at the same time that it affirmed a sense of self that accepts the valid coexistence of both identities (Shlomit: “I can be a religious person and I can be a lesbian and be whole with it”)—without one requiring the eradication or even conformism of the other for its own survival or health. In fact, the model that emerges is distinctly dialogical, and resonates clearly with the theoretical model that likens different I positions residing within the same mind and body to characters in a story.

The character takes on a life of its own and thus assumes a certain narrative necessity. Each character has a story to tell about experiences from its own stance. As different voices these characters exchange information about their respective Me’s and their worlds, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self. (Hermans et al., 1992, pp. 28, 29)

In the case of our participants, homosexual and religious identities seem indeed to be involved in a constant process of negotiation that posits the intrinsic validity of both as each learns about the other’s experiences, exchanges information about these identities, and thereby comes to learn its requirements for viability and health as it strives to create a psychic landscape conducive to coexistence.
This process of negotiation is far from abstract: It can be traced, for example, in the paradoxical role played by religion as simultaneously a source of confusion and pain and as a path to resilience and acceptance that helped to mitigate that pain. Instead of abandoning the valuative framework that rejects their sexual identity, or vice versa, the Orthodox gay men and women we interviewed allowed their religiosity to push them to understand their homosexuality as an integral element of their religious destiny, which in turn has required them to delve into sexual and religious identities all the more profoundly. In turn, the desire of their sexual identity to understand the other identity that so stubbornly holds it at bay has led to a deepening and intensification of our participants’ bond to Jewish tradition, which became more personalized and nuanced than it might otherwise have been. This evolving relationship between these two mutually exclusive, highly defining aspects of identity—in other words, the dialogical process itself, in turn serves as a source of inspiration, consolation, and strength to a self otherwise exposed to all manner of humiliation, torment, and despair.

For individuals living fully within extremely committed yet mutually exclusive internal and external worlds, identity synthesis begins to seem less unachievable than simply irrelevant. The notion not only of an identity synthesis’s attainability but its desirability is challenged. When multiple identities coincide with a mature self-structure, the lived necessity of an alternative theory of identity—one that goes beyond the emphasis on synthesis—becomes manifest. The emphasis shifts from identity synthesis to identity coherence.

Although this dialogical model of coherence bears its own set of challenges and difficulties, this is far different from characterizing it as a problem per se. Disparate identity elements can at times find themselves in intense conflict, but can also positively reinforce one another, embracing and celebrating various resonant dimensions. In the case of our participants, both religion and sexuality are sites of profound celebration, not merely suffering and angst, and all of these facets contribute to the rich and particular coherence of individual identities. Ultimately, identity coherence is neither a substitution nor an opposition to synthesis but rather an alternative model for understanding how certain individuals manage the various highly developed aspects of themselves.

REFERENCES


