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ABSTRACT

Managing a marginal identity different from the dominant culture is a difficult process. For a woman who is a lesbian and also Jewish, this means feeling marginal in each of the communities she considers to be her primary support systems. Within the Jewish community, lesbianism is not acceptable, and within the lesbian community, there is often anti-Semitism. This paper begins by briefly discussing some historical and religious issues of relevance to the empowerment of women within Judaism and to coming out as a Jewish lesbian. It then explores the process of coming out as a Jewish lesbian within the framework of a four-stage model of the coming out process that is generally accepted as the theory for the development of a lesbian identity. From the perspective of this framework, the acceptance of two marginal identities is examined. Implications for counselors working with Jewish lesbians are discussed. (Author/TE)

Female, Lesbian, and Jewish: Complex and Invisible

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Abstract

Managing a marginal identity, an identity of difference from the dominant culture, is a difficult process. For a woman who is a lesbian and also Jewish this means feeling marginal in each of the communities she considers to be her primary support systems. Within the Jewish community lesbianism is not acceptable and within the lesbian community there is often anti-Semitism. This paper explores the process of coming out as a Jewish lesbian within the framework of the generally accepted developmental model of coming to terms with a homosexual identity. Implications for counselors working with Jewish lesbians are discussed.

Female, Lesbian, and Jewish: Complex and Invisible

Jewish lesbians have had to go through a complex coming out process. They have had to come out as women demanding their rightful place within the Jewish religion, as lesbians within a tradition that recognizes the existence, albeit unfavorably, of male homosexuality but not female homosexuality and they have had to come out as Jews within the lesbian community. Coming out is usually defined as a process whereby a lesbian adopts a non-traditional identity, restructures her self-concept and reorganizes her personal history in order to fit that identity (De Monteflores & Schultz, 1978). Another part of the coming out process involves the alteration of relationships with other people and with society as a whole (De Monteflores & Schultz, 1978). Coming out is a process which never ends and which has implications not only for a lesbian identity but for a Jewish identity as well. For a lesbian in a heterosexual society which continuously makes heterosexual assumptions there are always situations where she needs to make a decision about whether or not to come out as a lesbian. For a Jew in a Christian culture it is the same. Everytime a Jewish lesbian makes a decision not to remain invisible as a Jew, she comes out as a Jew (Wahba, 1989). This paper will first briefly discuss some historical and religious issues of relevance to the empowerment of women within Judaism and to coming out as a Jewish lesbian. An assumption of this paper is that a Jewish lesbian as compared with a lesbian Jew has come out as a lesbian and her primary support group for her identity of difference (from the dominant culture) is that of lesbian although as this paper will attest her Jewish identity is an important one. A four stage model of the coming out process, generally accepted as the theory for the development of a lesbian identity,

will be used as a broad framework from which to explore the acceptance of two marginal identities. Finally, implications for counselors working with Jewish lesbians will be discussed.

History

In many ways the gay experience parallels the Jewish experience (Rogow, 1989). Throughout history both Jews and gay people have been considered dispensable and have suffered physical, verbal, and emotional abuse and have been put to death solely because of who they are (Balka & Rose, 1989; Beck, 1989). At various times throughout history, Jews have been forced to convert to Christianity and gay/lesbian people have been forced to convert to heterosexuality or to remain invisible. Jewish people and gay/lesbian people have a long history of culture and traditions, have to expend enormous amounts of energy on resistance and survival, practice some rituals which have lost their meanings, and have special colors associated with their cultures (blue and white for Jews, purple for gay/lesbian) (Beck, 1989). Gay/lesbian people and Jewish people have both lived between two cultures.

Learning to pass either as an assimilated Jew, a heterosexual, or as in the case of a lesbian Jew, both, has been the norm (Balka, & Rose, 1989). Jewish immigrants have changed their names in order to Americanize (Kaye, 1982). Jewish women have undergone nose jobs, straightened their hair, and sat on their hands to avoid gesturing, in order to fit into the dominant cultural norm. In the 1960's New York City college students were often forced to take speech classes in order to learn not to dentalize cosonants which is characteristic of speakers of Yiddish. The early activism of the 1960's, activism within the anti-war movement, activism within the

women's movement, and activism within the lesbian movement denied the seriousness of anti-Semitism by not acknowledging its existence and once again Jewish lesbians felt the need to pass to survive (Beck, 1982).

Jewish lesbians wishing to participate in the rituals of the religion have to do it as single heterosexual women. They are devalued as women and invisible as lesbians. Historically the biological fact of childbearing led to oppressive rules for women (Hendricks, 1985). Women have been seen as unclean, evil and immoral. The language and rules of the religion are male dominated. Sometimes Jewish lesbians have more difficulty as women than as lesbians within the religion (Schneider, 1984). Even though the religion has not had much to say about lesbianism the religion has discussed male homosexuality.

Religion

Lesbians are estimated to make up three percent of the Jewish female population (Schnedier, 1984). According to the Talmud (the compendium of Jewish laws and lore) lesbianism is a lesser crime than male homosexuality. Maimonides, who codified Jewish law, stated that a woman sleeping with another woman was not forbidden to a Cohen (man of the priestly class) or to her own husband if she was married (Schneider, 1984). However this is not the case for male homosexuality. When it is considered, it is considered an abomination (Kahn, 1989). There is a myth that because homosexuality is rarely discussed, then it rarely happens. In fact homosexuality is often seen as part of Western culture and a product of assimilation. Early talmudic law based on scriptural passages prohibited male homosexuality, later talmudic law added prohibitions against female homosexuality (Kahn, 1989). Homosexuality has been condemned as being against creation, as precluding reproduction, and denying the possibility of family (Ackelsberg, 1989; Kahn,

1989). The denial of family is considered a threat to the survival of the Jewish people and therefore considers prominently in the condemnation of homosexual behavior.

In spite of harsh prohibitions, the Jewish religious reponse has included the favoring of civil rights and legal protections for gay/lesbian people (Ewell, 1989; Kahn, 1989). Jewish people have always been concerned with keeping religious doctrine out of civil laws (Kahn, 1989). Jewish people have also been concerned with maintaining a cohesive Jewish community. "Separate not from the community" a statement from Rabbi Hillel and an important value of Judaism (Beck, 1989) may therefore also explain the religious response to homosexuality. Lesbian Jews are welcome to worship and become members of traditional synagogues but full legitimacy is denied (Elwell,1989; Kahn, 1989). The homosexual behavior is condemned but the woman is not. The belief is that discrimination against gay/lesbian people should end but at the same time the expectation within Jewish ritual and practice is for gay/lesbian people to remain in the closet. The bias is toward heterosexuality (Cooper, 1989/90). The only place where gay/lesbian Jews have found complete acceptance is within the Union of American Hebrew Congregations which is part of the Reform Jewish movement (Cooper, 1989/90). For lesbians the gay/lesbian synogogues connected with the Reform movement have sometimes been a mixed blessing. Here she is accepted as a lesbian Jew but often has to struggle with the sexism of and attempt to dominate exhibited by gay men (Schneider, 1984).

Lesbian Jews experience marginality within their religion. Either they pass as single women subject to pressures toward marriage, or they come out as lesbians and are tolerated but not fully accepted as Jews. Even if the

lesbian woman has found a place within a gay/lesbian synagogue she constantly has to press for the valuation of women. Outside of her religious community, the Jewish lesbian has to deal with the anti-Semitism of the lesbian community (defined later in this paper).

Coming out

"Coming out" is the term which has been used for the developmental process whereby a lesbian (and gay man) adopts a non-heterosexual identity and comes to accept that identity (Sophie, 1986). There have been a number of stage theories proposed (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Raphael, 1974) and they all fall into four general stages (Sophie, 1985/86): first awareness, testing and exploration, identity acceptance and identity integration. For many lesbian Jews coming out as a lesbian helped them to come out as Jews (Beck, 1982). Both identities are identities of difference, identities marginal to the dominant culture. To claim either and/or both identities carries costs and benefits. To claim both identities means, among other things, grappling with persuading the heterosexual community that a lesbian identity is more than sex and persuading the lesbian community that a Jewish identity is more than religion. "Jewish invisibility is a symptom of anti-Semitism as surely as lesbian invisibility is a symptom of homophobia" (Beck, 1982, p.xv). There has been a great deal written about the "coming out" process for a lesbian. I have decided to use this as a framework to describe the process of coming out as a Jewish lesbian.

First Awareness

This stage is where the woman first becomes aware that a Jewish lesbian identity might be personally relevant. She is not yet ready to confront the heterosexual community and therefore just begins to consider

the invisibility of lesbians within Judaism. If she is a feminist, she is aware of how women have been devalued within patriarchal religions, of which Judaism is one. As a Jewish lesbian this may be a point where she begins to recognize that her Jewish background whether it is religious, cultural, activist, or just an assumption of certain values (love of learning), a shared history, desire for certain foods, or her use of gestures (Beck, 1982), is relevent to her identity. There may be a beginning of an awareness of anti-Semitism within the lesbian community. This may be displayed through comments perpetuating stereotypes about Jewish women such as the JAP (Jewish American Princess) or the suffocating "Jewish mother" (Siegel, 1986), comments denigrating ethnic behavior such as the passionate, loud, pushy, aggressive style of relating characteristic of many Jewish women (Rich, 1989; Siegel, 1986), or the blaming of the ancient Hebrews for the destruction of the matriarchy (Beck, 1982; Daum, 1982; Hendricks, 1985; Heschel, 1990). This awareness may set up a conflict for the Jewish lesbian. There are those old community and familial messages to remain invisible. "If you are a Jew it doesn't pay to advertise" (Weinrach, 1990, p.548). In addition to these messages to remain invisible as a Jew within the lesbian community where she needs support for her lesbian identity there is the disturbing feeling that she needs to give up her Jewish identity, at least visibly, which may mean alienating her from necessary familial/religious supports (Hendricks, 1985). This stage of first awareness of the importance of incorporating her Jewish side is a difficult one.

Testing and Exploration

In the "coming out" process this is the stage where a person tests others' acceptance of her identity. The Jewish lesbian may no longer feel comfortable with just tolerance of her Jewish identity within the lesbian

communitiy or with tolerance of her lesbian identity within the Jewish community. She believes as Rachael Wahba (1989) has stated that "...Hiding is very unhealthy for the soul" (p. 55). Carefully she begins to publicly acclaim her identity (Beck, 1989). Carefully, because responding to anti-Semitism within the lesbian community is difficult (Beck, 1982). It is as difficult as responding to homophobia within the Jewish community. The message within the lesbian community is often to ignore or forget about anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is not seen as important as other issues the lesbian community faces and is thought to be divisive (Heschel, 1990; Klepfisz, 1982). This is a stage where the Jewish lesbian probably seeks out other Jewish lesbians and supportive non-Jewish lesbians (often the Jewish lesbian's partner in a couple) in order to celebrate holidays such as Passover together (Beck, 1989) or to begin to hold discussions on anti-Semitism. A gay/lesbian synagogue might be attended. A cautious foray into some major issues such as criticism of the aforementioned feminist theology which blames Judaism for the killing of the matriarchy, criticism of some classical lesbian literature such as Rubyfriut Jungle which contains an anti-Semitic character portrayal (Beck, 1982) and expression of feelings about the equation of Zionism with racism and the need for many Jewish people to support the survival of the state of Israel whether or not they support the government of Israel, is begun. These tentative steps have become easier recently because of the publication of books such as: Nice Jewish Girls (Beck, 1982a), The Tribe of Dina (Kantrowitz & Klepfisz, 1986), Twice Blessed Balka & Rose, 1989) and most recently, Speaking for Ourselves (Zahava, 1990) a book of short stories by Jewish Lesbians and the publication of progressive Jewish magazines such as Tikkun. But in spite of these books, it is still difficult to begin questioning attitudes toward Judaism within the lesbian

community especially for Jewish lesbians in smaller cities and rural areas where support systems are limited.

Acceptance of Jewish Lesbian Identity

Raphael (as cited in Sophie, 1985/86) includes as part of this stage a resocialization process. For the Jewish lesbian who has come to terms with her lesbian identity, the lesbian community has been an important support system for many years. She has probably felt more of an outcast from the Jewish community because of her sexual orientation and because of her sex; a woman in Judaism is considered as Rachel Adler (cited in Rich,1989) has stated "a peripheral Jew" (p. 4.). But "as part of a minority group, it may be more difficult for a Jewish woman to allow herself to make choices in spirituality that could alienate her from her familial/religious support systems" (Hendricks, 1985, p.144). So, the Jewish lesbian begins a resocialization process into the lesbian community as a Jewish lesbian. This may involve re-embracing ethnic characteristics such as a passionate, argumentative style as opposed to the polite style of many non-Jews (Rofes, 1989), using Yiddish phrases in everyday speech, and expressing a need to visit Jewish neighborhoods in metropolitan areas and eating in delicatessens. She is accepting that her identity is comprised of her gender, her sexual orientation, and her ethnicity and moving toward the identity integration of the final stage.

Identity Integration

The final stage of coming out as a Jewish Lesbian is a stage of integration and pride about who one is. No longer will the Jewish lesbian tolerate Jewish invisibility. She will confront anti-Semitism and expect non-

Jewish lesbians to also be sensitive to and confront anti-Semitism (Rofes, 1989). This is a time to build on her Jewish identity, Jewish pride and community, and to participate in all struggles whether or not they relate to Jewish issues, clearly, openly, as a Jew (Kantrowitz & Klepfisz, 1986). There is an awareness that it is possible to deal with Jewish racism and still confront anti-Semitism, it is possible to disagree with Israeli policies and still confront anti-Semitism (Klepfisz, 1982). Within the heterosexual Jewish community the openly Jewish lesbian can confront the traditional definition of family, counter the myth that there are no lesbian families, and show how the acceptance of lesbian families can help the Jewish people continue the traditions and values of Judaism (Ackelsberg, 1989). Openly identifying as a Jewish lesbian not only allows the Jewish lesbian to confront anti-Semitism within the lesbian community, and homphobia and sexism within the Jewish community, but also allows her to begin to deal with issues affecting the Jewish lesbian community such as non-Jewish partners, raising children with a Jewish consciousness, and lesbian-feminist converts to Judaism (Beck, 1989). Integrating all aspects of her identity allows the Jewish lesbian to be all of who she is and not suffer from the damage which invariably results from invisibility.

Implications for Counseling

The most effective counselor for a Jewish lesbian would probably be a Jewish lesbian therapist who has dealt with coming out both as a lesbian and as a Jew. It is important for a therapist to understand Jewish ethnicity and Jewish oppression (Weinrach, 1990) as well as homosexual oppression. Both groups experience internal and external oppression. It is important to assess for internalized anti-Semitism and for internalized homophobia. The

therapist needs to explore the client's background in terms of what her Jewish identity has meant for her and for her family in the past as well as in the present. An awareness of anti-Semitism within the lesbian community will help the therapist explore with the client how this has affected her feelings of self worth as a Jewish lesbian. An exploration of support systems has often been an area of concern for therapy. For a Jewish lesbian a critical issue is the delicate balance of maintaining her identity and still receiving support from the communities of importance to her; the lesbian community and the Jewish community. Another area for therapy involves significant relationships. How important is it to the client that she find a Jewish partner (if this is important and she lives in a smaller city or rural area, there may be some problems). If she already is in a relationship and it is with a non Jewish partner there may be areas of conflict due to culture clashes and anti-Semitism. If there are children, how those children are being raised may be an issue.

We know that counseling is not value free and counselors are affected by the culture in which they live (Dworkin & Gutierrez, 1989). Therapists working with Jewish lesbians must be willing to explore their own feelings about both Judaism and about sexual orientation differences. We live in a homophobic and anti-Semitic culture. It is important that counselors do not subtly reinforce these oppressions.

Conclusion

To reiterate "...hiding is very unhealty for the soul" (Wahba, 1989, p.55) and many Jewish lesbians have made the decision to no longer be invisible. To describe coming out as a Jewish lesbian I have used the theoretical model for the coming out process which is prevalent in the

literature describing the acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity. As we know from the identity development literature (Sophie, 1985/86), coming out is not a linear process. I would suspect that this is true for coming out as a lesbian Jew as well. Coming out, giving up the protection of invisibility, in order to integrate all aspects of one's identity in a positive, self-affirming way, is a life long process. As therapists it is important that we facilitate our Jewish lesbian client's journey to be complete, as a woman, as a Jew, and as a lesbian.

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