Identity and Gender Roles
of Orthodox Jewish Women:
Implications for Social Work Practice

Shoshana Ringel, PhD

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study is to examine how ultra-Orthodox women’s unique religious beliefs and values affect their gender roles and everyday life. The ultra-Orthodox community is one of several sub-groups within the Orthodox community that, overall, has a range of attitudes towards the women’s roles. To date, little research has been conducted with this community. This study, therefore, aims to examine these women’s roles as mothers, wives and community members, and to discuss the implications of those roles for clinical practice. doi:10.1300/J497v77n02_03

KEYWORDS. Orthodox, gender roles, Orthodox women, anti-Semitism

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a study of how the unique spiritual and religious beliefs and values of ultra-Orthodox Jewish women affect their gender roles, identity development and daily lives. The study’s findings will be presented from the women’s point of view. The ultra-Orthodox is a sub-group within the Orthodox community, and represents one of
the most traditional models for defining women’s roles. In this community, women play a significant role as wives and mothers. They are expected to help members in need, and many of them are employed part time as teachers for the community’s children. They are also expected to adhere to strict religious laws, such as not being allowed to perform or engage in public speaking in front of unrelated men, and not speaking publicly in the Synagogue, a role reserved to men in the community. Both men and women are expected to dress modestly, and women cover their hair after marriage.

This was an exploratory study in an area where, so far, little research has been conducted, especially regarding women. Previous studies have examined psychopathology in the Orthodox community, including depression, anxiety disorders and domestic violence (Greenberg & Shefler, 2002; Loewenthal et al., 1997; Twerski, 1996), while some others use a feminist framework to critique its traditional gender roles (Kaufman, 1995; Morris, 1995; Shai, 2002). The current study, however, intends to view ultra-Orthodox Jewish women using a different lens, that is, from their own spiritual and religious perspectives. The intent is to bring about a better understanding of this unique lifestyle, to provide a more balanced view of ultra-Orthodox Jewish women among society at large, and to discuss implications for clinical practice.

JEWS ORTHODOX VALUES
AND FEMINIST THEORIES

The Orthodox Jewish community has been portrayed as a patriarchal system created and run by men. In this depiction, while women play traditional female roles, men are in charge of the public domain and of the religious practice (Beecher, 1999; Heschel, 1990; Rapoport, Garb, & Penso, 1995). The reformed, conservative and reconstructionist streams in Judaism are seen as much more liberal and egalitarian than Orthodox Judaism, which is frequently viewed as anachronistic, hierarchical and irrelevant to modern feminist values (Beecher, 1999). However, the Orthodox community’s emphasis on gender differentiation and on women’s unique role in nurturing and sustaining relational bonds in their homes and community actually does seem to correspond in many respects to the feminist theory of self in relation (Jordan et al., 1991, 1997). According to these authors, the development of women’s sense of self is contingent on their care giving functions and relational bonds with others. Respected feminist theorists have viewed women’s development as
discrete from that of men, based on different social and psychological dynamics, including the early mother-daughter relationship, as well as on cultural values that view care giving and interpersonal bonds as superseding competitiveness and professional attainments (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982).

Connection and mutuality rather than individuality and autonomy are also emphasized among Orthodox Jewish women. All aspects of their daily lives can be characterized as a constant interchange with others and, in fact, their identity is closely aligned to their care giving functions. Orthodox women can be seen to derive their sense of power, agency and vitality from the intricate bonds that constitute the everyday matrix of their lives (Boteach, 2002). Therefore, although initially it seems that these women adhere to more traditional gender roles, their emphasis on relationships and care giving within their family and community actually mirrors some popular feminist perspectives (Jordan et al., 1991, 1997).

**STUDIES WITH ORTHODOX WOMEN**

Only a few studies have been done on the ultra-Orthodox community, and even fewer with women. Some have been conducted with the Modern Orthodox community, which is more accessible but different in many respects from the ultra-Orthodox community (Davidman & Greil, 1993; Semans & Fish, 2000). One study, however, conducted with newly Orthodox women (Baalot Tshuva), determined that these women, many of whom had experienced the women’s movement and had previously lived in the secular society, found the Orthodox lifestyle much more respectful of women, more spiritually fulfilling and more receptive to women’s special roles within their families and communities (Rapoport, Garb, & Penso, 1995). Specifically, that sample of newly Orthodox women felt that during the human potential movement, freedom and individuality came at the expense of commitment and community. Another study found that ultra-Orthodox women found it easier to create their own sense of empowerment and freedom within the traditional structure of the Orthodox lifestyle (Kaufman, 1989). Beecher (1999) reported similar findings that suggest Orthodox women view feminist values based on equal gender roles both at home and at work as irrelevant to the Orthodox way of life. Two well-known Orthodox scholars suggest that Orthodox Judaism as a whole tends to value so-called feminine qualities such as gentleness, modesty and empathy,
not just in women, but also in men and in the community as a whole (Boteach, 2002), and that certain concepts and rituals, such as the Sabbath, have uniquely feminine characteristics (Heschel, 1990). Heschel does note, however, that the Jewish position on women is somewhat ambivalent, and that other rituals may be seen to devalue women and sexuality.

The empirical findings from this limited group of studies suggest that the women who have chosen to live in the Orthodox lifestyle have created their own special model of empowerment and fulfillment based on marriage, family and community relationships (Kaufman, 1989), and/or have chosen safety and stability within a traditional community over an egalitarian and secular lifestyle (Dufour, 2000).

WOMEN’S ROLES AND RELIGIOUS LAWS

Several Jewish Orthodox scholars support the view that women have a special place in Jewish tradition, and that women’s particular contributions to Jewish life are in the areas of relationship, family and community. Strassfeld (2002), for example, states that “attaining holiness through relationships is central to Judaism as a spiritual practice” (p. 361), and that consequently women’s lives are inherently spiritual because their lives are about taking care of others. Boteach (2002) goes further and notes that the Jewish religion favors “feminine” principles such as introspection, motherhood, selflessness and nurturing over “masculine” principles of competition and control. He adds that “the feminine-passive, our nurturing and mothering instinct are superior to our predilection to domination and victory” (p. 29). He suggests that the home, not the Synagogue, is the focal point of religious life, and that the Jewish tradition emphasizes the everyday rather than special occasions and miracles because “the mundane is where God resides” (p. 29). Therefore, according to him, Orthodox women, who are already close to God through their roles as wives and mothers, have less need to observe prayers and rituals than Orthodox men. Boteach adds that women come from a much higher spiritual source than men, according to Kabbalah, because they have “more refined characters, spiritual dispositions, and greater commitment” (2002, p. 175). Women’s sphere in Judaism is separate and different from that of men and requires different roles and responsibilities (Steinsaltz, 1987). Finally, caring for oneself and for others is seen as an expression of religious practice in everyday life, for in order to “love God, one must first love another human being;
one must first love oneself” (Steinsaltz, p. 363). Actions in the everyday world rather than mere rituals, and the striving for social justice and good deeds, are seen as the primary aspects of Judaism.

The current study aims to address the gap in the empirical literature regarding the self-perceptions and family and community roles of ultra-Orthodox women in the United States utilizing their own subjective lens.

**METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study using Grounded Theory was conducted in an urban Jewish community. The open-ended interviews were conducted at the respondents’ home or office, and lasted approximately one-and-a-half hours. The open-ended interview guide was designed to investigate the women’s perceptions of their roles with their children, husbands and in the Orthodox community. It also investigated their perceptions of the secular community and its attitudes towards them. The interview guide was designed by a modern Orthodox colleague and a friend from the ultra-Orthodox community. All interviews were tape-recorded after the respondents gave permission and signed a consent form. To protect the respondents’ identity, each was given a code name that was used on a taped interview and on a demographic questionnaire. The taped interviews were then transcribed and fed onto NUDIST software for qualitative data analysis (Scolari/Sage Publications software).

**Respondents**

Thirteen women from an urban Jewish community were interviewed for the study. The inclusion criteria stipulated that the participants must be Orthodox Jewish women. Individuals were recruited using a snowballing technique. An article about the investigator and her study, and an advertisement in the *Jewish Times* did not result in any referrals. The investigator proceeded to create personal relationships with two key informants, meeting them for lunch, going to their homes for the Sabbath and participating in community events. These key participants helped to facilitate the recruitment process by referring other participants to the study, and by giving the investigator legitimacy within the community. The investigator herself is Jewish and Israeli-born, credentials that gave her additional legitimacy in the community. The recruitment process was
longer than usual due to the respondents’ extremely busy lives, including large families, community responsibilities and their religious practice.

The average age of the respondents was 45. The range was from 24 to 69. All of them had children (M = 4), and all except for one who was a widow, were married. Interestingly, over half of the respondents became Orthodox later in life (7), usually in early adulthood, after living in reformed or conservative households. Of these, two became Orthodox later in life, during their thirties and forties. The rest of the respondents were born into ultra-Orthodox households. Among the respondents, one was a physician, one a social worker, one PhD, one a business executive trainer and two who had completed college. The rest had completed two years of religious seminary. All had worked part time except for four who were stay-at-home moms (at least temporarily). All were ultra-Orthodox.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed using the constant comparison method of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Padgett, 1998). This investigator and a collaborator started by assigning the data to basic coding categories, and then grouped these categories into larger aggregates. The initial coding categories were determined by identifying recurrent patterns within the data itself. Coding examples include marital roles, mothering roles and the role of religious practice. Finally, the investigator and her colleague arrived at several general themes that emerged from these criteria. They will be presented later in this paper. A literature review was not conducted until after the data had been analyzed, so that the investigators were more objective and could allow new theories to emerge from the data itself. Notes were taken throughout this process in order to create an audit trail so that the data analysis process could be tracked if necessary. Both confirming and disconfirming data were included in the final analysis, and the investigator and her co-rater constantly compared their insights and perceptions. Finally, respondents were consulted after the data analysis phase in order to clarify questions and ambiguities in the data.

FINDINGS

Five main themes emerged from the data: (1) family as a means toward self-actualization; (2) marriage and sexuality as a spiritual practice;
(3) flexible gender roles within a fixed structure; (4) interface with the external community; and (5) a different paradigm for women’s lives.

Family as a Means for Self-Actualization

It is clear from the findings that family occupies a central place in Orthodox women’s lives. Being wives and mothers are the most important roles these women see themselves as playing. They are the lynchpins of their families, and their role in child rearing is highly respected within the community, “because of us, our families run, we are called the mainstay of the Jewish home . . . without us they would fall apart.” All of the respondents, including the doctor, the social worker and a program director with a PhD, viewed themselves as first and foremost mothers and wives. The following respondent expressed the general consensus: “A religious wife will always have a career that caters to her family. Always.” Even the respondent who was a doctor stated that she adjusted her career decisions to her religious and familial obligations, thus raising seven children and working part time. Consistently, the respondents stated that having a family and raising children were much more important than any individual ambition. As one of the participants noted, “I may not leave this earth as a Nobel Prize winner, curing cancer, but I’m going to leave this world a better place because my three children are going to be good people.”

In particular, the respondents seemed to experience personal fulfillment by putting their children and husbands before themselves. One respondent, for example, saw her identity only in relation to her family “I am a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother, and a mother-in-law.” Mothering infused everything these women did in their daily lives, including their professional lives. One woman, for example, saw her role as a mother reflected through all children: “You know, when you see a little child on the street who’s crying, you know, immediately you think to yourself, Uh, that could be my child.”

Although most of the respondents emphasized that family and caring for others came first, a number stressed the importance of self-care, as long as it remained in the context of better enabling them to give to others. Consequently, even self-care was experienced in an interpersonal context: “The lynchpin, of course, is my responsibility vis-à-vis myself, because if I don’t take care of myself, then the rest of it all falls apart.” These findings suggest that women in the Orthodox community do seek personal fulfillment and spiritual actualization, but the means they
choose to achieve these goals are through their children, husbands, family and community, rather than through professional or individual endeavors.

**Marriage and Sexuality as a Spiritual Practice**

Religion and spiritual discipline infuse every aspect of daily lives in the Orthodox community. This was clearly the case when respondents spoke about their marital relationships and their sexual lives. They stated that their choices for mates were not based on material ambitions and “shallow” values, as in the society at large, but rather on lasting spiritual values. Comparisons were frequently made with the secular Jewish and non-Jewish community; the respondents felt their community had lower divorce rates, fewer extramarital affairs, more consideration and respect for one another, and more familial harmony.

The religious marriage was described as one with three partners, wife, husband and God, which kept it on the right track. “In a religious marriage, there are three of us and that third partner, God, keeps it all working, it’s not just up to little old me and my flaws.” Another respondent thought that Orthodox Jews had a higher spiritual purpose in life that they shared with their spouses, and that this helped them to overcome marital conflicts and maintain a more harmonious and respectful relationships based on common values and aspirations: “... we both have a higher purpose in life, a spiritual purpose in life. ... It makes us control our characteristics, if we feel like getting angry; it’s not the right thing to do.”

Certain specific religious values, like abstaining from speaking ill of others, were seen as protecting the integrity of married life: “This is how you treat other people, and you don’t speak badly about this other person ... you don’t say bad things about your wife to anyone else, and you don’t say bad things about your husband to anyone else.” Another compared the religion to a thermometer with which one constantly checks one’s self:

Because what the religion does, it gives us a thermometer to check, are you really behaving the way you’re supposed to or not. Check yourself, we are always checking ourselves, is this really honest, it’s not honest, were you supposed to talk like this, so obviously this will also help marriages.
Modesty and sexual purity were described as important values in the Jewish community, especially for women. For that purpose, several respondents explained, there were many laws regulating their sexual lives. Although secular Jews might interpret these religious mores as restrictive, the respondents saw them as spiritual challenges to achieve greater richness in their relationships. One woman explained that the law against husband and wife having a sexual relationship or any physical contact during menstruation had an important spiritual meaning for both husband and wife:

knowing that we’re physically together now, but then there’s this period of time that we’re not and then we come back together again makes that time all the more valuable. In addition to that, the period of time that we’re not physically together, we must struggle to reach each other in non-physical ways and that gives an added dimension to the relationship.

Another respondent, who grew up secular during the women’s movement, regretted the permissiveness she had experienced:

Growing up in college where the pill was introduced and great sex was introduced, I had no respect for my body in those years, looking back, in that I did things that, you know, I regret and Judaism’s teaching that a woman’s appearance is modest because the essence of a woman is inside is so different than American culture where everything seems to be focused on the outside and all the plastic surgery and all the weight stuff and all that; whereas, in Judaism, the essence of the woman is understood to be her character traits, it’s inside and the modesty that comes from that.

One respondent, when asked whether it was customary for husband and wife to fall in love with each other prior to marriage, placed the word “Love” in the context of giving, rather than receiving, so that it did not have the self-involved subtext that is customarily attached to it.

The word love in Hebrew, is AHAVA, I don’t know if anyone told you that. Comes from HAV. Giving. The more you give the more you love. In the beginning there is not much giving. Love grows when you start giving.
The focus on sexual purity extended to premarital dating. The respondents explained that men and women were not allowed to touch each other in any physical ways prior to marriage, and felt that this law too insured greater purity and commitment.

The data indicate that religious and spiritual values are clearly integrated in every aspect of Orthodox women’s lives. These values are the organizing principle in their marital relationships, including their sexual lives, and seem to greatly enrich their marriages and contribute to their harmony, loyalty and stability.

**Variation in Gender Roles Within a Traditional Structure**

Externally, gender roles in the Orthodox community are seen as traditional in that they are structured along gender lines with the husband as the head of the family, the scholar and the religious educator of the children, and the wife assuming household responsibilities and childcare. However, within this basic structure there can be many variations and styles, especially among the younger generation. Changes also seem to occur based on the couple’s personal characteristics, and over time. One respondent stated, for example, that because of her strong personality she made most of the family’s decisions:

> We’ve tried, like, you know, switching things a little bit and giving him (her husband) more, you know, responsibilities and more, you know, control over the family, but it, it kinda didn’t work and it kinda just gradually went back to me being in control again.

Two other respondents went so far as to see themselves as heads of household. One saw the woman as spiritual head of household because she spent so much time with the children, and the other because she made the financial decisions: “Well, I consider myself the head of the family because I’m the one that really makes the decisions.”

Two respondents described their relationship as egalitarian. One stated: “Just by nature the two of us have a kind of egalitarian relationship very much so; my husband is the first to pop up and clean the dishes or whatever he sees that needs doing, he does, this is just him and it stands out because I guess it’s not that usual.”

The other explained:

> We had a relationship where we picked up the slack . . . for one another. If there was anything that had to be done, we didn’t say,
“Dear, could you?” we just did it on our own, we did what had to be done and there was no division of roles.

One respondent described a seemingly patriarchal marriage, where the husband was “sitting in his chair and he’s, you know, enjoying his meal and he’s talking to everybody and he’s sharing Torah,” while the wife was running around doing everything for him. The women who were visiting then told him: “You should be ashamed of yourself, why don’t you get up and help your wife.” Later however, they understood how beautiful the marriage was, and how happy the wife was in her role, and were envious:

At first they don’t see what she gets out of it and so it looks a little bit slavish, but then when they see, they see the two of them and they see their shining faces and they see the children feeling so secure knowing that they have two very distinctive, different types of supports.

Clearly, this respondent was referring to the spiritual harmony between the couple, based on mutual support for each other’s distinct but complementary roles.

According to Jewish law, the father is supposed to teach the children and to be the spiritual head of the family. However, the following respondent stated that in her own family this was her own particular role: “I guess I see myself as, like, the religious provider maybe, and my husband’s like the wild and crazy exciting. . . .” Several respondents noted that their marriages were less traditional than those of their parents, and that their husbands cooked, cleaned and took the children to school. The following story, told by one of the respondents, indicates how gender roles seem to have changed in the Orthodox community over time.

I remember an old woman sitting and saying, “I would never believe that this time will come, when father take the children to school. When I was young it was my duty to take the children to school.” So when society changes, these roles change.

Two other respondents aptly captured the multiplicity of roles an Orthodox woman might now play. The first stated:

I guess I’m like the director of public relations here and the social director and a social worker and a cook and everything, but I do try
to train my kids to, you know, be able to help out their wives when they get married.

The other participant’s son sent her the following Mother’s Day card—“The most Creative Job in the World: It involves, taste, fashion, decorating, recreation, education, transportation, psychology, cuisine, designing, literature, art, medicine, theatrical, geriatric, entertainment, maintenance, accounting, economics, government, community relations, religious, religion management, lots of energy and even more patience, anybody who can handle all of the above has to be special, she is my Mother.”

These excerpts make it clear that the Orthodox community has undergone some important changes in the last generation. In particular, more women now work outside the home, gender roles are less strictly prescribed, especially within the home, and women and men share more in child raising and household chores than in previous generations. Within this small sample, six women presented less traditional marriages, while the other seven presented a more traditional model. However, traditional religious mores still regulate the roles of husband and wife with regard to religious rituals and prayers and many aspects of interpersonal behavior.

**Interface with the External Community**

**Addressing Negative Perceptions of Orthodox Women**

Many respondents frequently referred to the critical attitudes and unfair judgments regarding their lifestyles held by the secular community. One perceived criticism was that women in the Orthodox community were treated as second class citizens:

Non-religious Jews think that Orthodox women have a second place. They’re not important and they’re shoved in the back and that kind of thing, and it’s such a misconception, I don’t feel any less important than my husband.

Several women discussed negative perceptions related to a specific prayer required by Orthodox men, and offered a different interpretation:

The feminists and the non-religious people say, “Oh, look, so the men thank God for not being a woman.” But you know what else,
they also thank God for not being a servant, and they thank God for not being a non-Jew. And the reason is not because these things are bad. It’s not bad to be a non-Jew, it’s not bad, ok, fine, it may be bad to be a servant, but it’s not bad to be a non-Jew. The reason why it’s this blessing is saying, “Thank you for giving me all these commandments. Thank you for letting me serve you with all these additional things that women don’t have to” (because women have to take care of the home and children, and thus have a lesser obligation to pray).

This respondent suggested that the prayer in itself did not have negative implications regarding the role of women, but rather was meant to give thanks for allowing men to serve God through multiple rituals and prayers. Other respondents agreed that women were by nature more spiritual and observant than men, so they did not need as many prayers or religious rituals as men did. They commented that women already fulfilled their spiritual purpose by being wives and mothers who take care of the home.

One of the most painful negative perceptions in the secular community, according to several participants, was the idea that Orthodox women have too many children. One respondent told the interviewer the following poignant story that was circulating in the community, and was told to her by her Rabbi:

An orthodox woman was walking in the supermarket with a cart full of food, diapers, etc. Another woman stopped her and said: “you have so much stuff, how many children do you have?” The Orthodox woman told her “I have six children.” The other woman looked at her incredulously. “You have six children? How many more do you think you will have before it is all over with?” The Orthodox woman answered: “If I could, if it was possible, I would have not six, but six million children to replace all the Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust.”

There is clearly a great deal of anger and pain behind these women’s statements. The experience of being marginalized, stereotyped and criticized by others is not new to the Jewish experience, and these women’s reactions to what they perceived to be and experienced as negative perceptions of their lifestyle, seemed to evoke attitudes of defiance and protectiveness.
Ambassadors to the World

While only two respondents explicitly expressed this particular idea, it was implied throughout the data. Based on the Jewish commandment in the Torah “be a light unto the world,” the respondents noted that it was their sacred duty to portray their religious lifestyle in the best possible light to the world at large.

It is obvious that we are who we are and we have to be on our toes and make sure we don’t make desecrate God’s name, whether it’s to Jewish people that are not orthodox or whether it’s to people that are not Jewish, we’re always on show and because we’re representatives of the Kehilla [community], you know, we have a big responsibility to live up to. . . . We’re always constantly passing this down to our kids that they should, you know, especially be on their best behavior.

Another participant stated that she saw herself as the community’s ambassador to the world:

I feel like in general I’m like an ambassador in the world, representing my religion and my orthodoxy, so whether I’m doing something secularly or religiously, I’m on a showcase for everyone to see and to judge my people and my God.

These findings indicate that protecting their community as well as representing it to the world in the best way possible is an important responsibility for all Orthodox Jews. In this context as well, the personal becomes communal, and one’s individual existence is closely linked to the spiritual values of the community.

A Different Paradigm for Women’s Lives

All these data suggest that the lives of Orthodox Jewish women can be viewed as different from other feminist models, but as no less vital, fulfilling and empowering. Although outsiders may think that Orthodox women fit into a traditional role stereotype and therefore represent a constrictive, rather than a liberating paradigm for women’s lives, the participants were clear in saying that they see their current lifestyle as a preferred choice, and think that in many ways it is superior to the secular lifestyle they had previously seen, and left behind. An important aspect
of their identity was to live in accordance with religious laws and values. These included the requirement to engage in good deeds, or “Mitzvot,” not just rituals and prayers: “We’re not just told ‘love your neighbor like yourself,’ we’re told how to do it, and this is how you should be doing it.”

A related spiritual discipline is living their lives in accordance with the Jewish calendar, which requires a constant process of self-evaluation and reflection. A respondent stated:

Some people are just living day to day and they don’t really go through a self-evaluation process of saying, “Where am I now, where do I want to be next year at this time?” Part of the beauty of the Jewish calendar is that there are these periods of self-evaluation.

The respondents believed that it was their privilege and choice to live life according to Jewish law, and did not see their lifestyle as limiting. They felt proud of their special duties and place within the community, and kept repeating that under no circumstance did they want to have similar duties and responsibilities to those that men had. One participant, who grew up secular, regretted that no one had told her as a child, that “being a woman has its own specialness to it and that instead of saying that what women do is secondary and no good, we should try to be what men are, that we should value the beauty of what we do.” She stated that growing up during the women’s movement, she “was sold a bill of goods” that women could have it all. When she became religious, however, she realized how empowered women could be:

Being religious has ... empowered me as a mother and a wife and reinforced the values that I already had that that was the most important thing, that nobody could make our home a Jewish home.

She added that Orthodox women possess a rich history of strength and leadership:

I feel like Judaism understands much better than our mainstream culture about empowering women and who women are. Women were the ones in the case of the golden calf that did not go along, we did not sell our jewelry, we did not sell out, the women in Judaism have played a very critical role as visionaries and standing up for what’s right.
She believed that the Jewish religion recognized that spirituality was more accessible to women, and was their special domain:

Bringing spirituality to life, it’s much more natural and accessible to women, so I feel that women are really empowered in the way of the home and that that is more highly valued in Judaism than it is in our mainstream culture.

These findings show that the respondents view their role in the family and within ultra-Orthodox community as important and empowered. Women are important in their homes, and have a significant role in the community in helping others. They clearly experience themselves as appreciated and respected for their innate feminine qualities, unlike, in their perception, many secular women. This sense of empowerment and spiritual purpose requires serious commitment to good deeds and generous actions towards others in need, not just words and prayers. It emphasizes generosity towards the poor and needy within the community as an important aspect of a spiritual identity and lifestyle.

**DISCUSSION**

From this study’s findings it is clear that the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle is a freely chosen path for all of these respondents, whether they were born into it, or decided to join later on in life. It offers them safety, a stable community and a lifestyle based on spiritual values and norms. Their religious practice seems to be well integrated in their daily lives and interpersonal relationships, and offers them personal as well as spiritual fulfillment. Although many aspects of these women’s lives are quite traditional and may seem restrictive, the free choice that all of the respondents stated or implied, and their subjective experience as fulfilled and empowered within their homes and community, suggest a different paradigm for women’s actualization, one which is built around spiritual, familial and communal achievements rather than individual and professional aspirations. These women have been able to transform seemingly anachronistic sexual prohibitions into opportunities for growth and into spiritual and relational challenges, and have made their personal domains a central force in the lives of their families and communities.

The findings of this small study do suggest that the need to preserve community unity and cohesiveness may supersede any ambivalence or
personal deviation from the communal norms. There seems to be a high level of conformity among community members, perhaps as a result of interactions with critical outsiders. They may, in fact, have perceived this investigator as potentially critical. As an example, little criticism or dissention was expressed. For example, one respondent noted that she did not fully support the religious prohibition against women appearing in public forums, and another suggested that the community covertly criticized women with few or no children. It is possible that the respondents’ reticence to express criticism stemmed from their concern about this study’s potential negative impact on how they are perceived by the secular Jewish community.

The question arises, however, whether there is a place within this community, which is based on powerful religious bonds, for difference and personal uniqueness. Another issue of concern that may contribute to negative perceptions of the Orthodox community is their limited contact with outsiders, both because of their rigorous and time-consuming religious practice and their perception that they are viewed negatively. This isolation may contribute to mutual miscommunication, negative projections and resentment based on ignorance between the secular and the Orthodox Jewish communities.

The limitations of the study are that the sample is small and thus, the findings cannot be generalized to the Orthodox community as a whole. In addition, ultra-Orthodox women are only one group among the larger community of Orthodox women who present a wide range of attitudes and gender roles. In addition, because of the difficulty in enrolling participants due to the closed nature of the community, this small sample included a wide variation in age, and a mixture of Orthodox-born and newly Orthodox women. The beliefs and opinions expressed by the respondents, however, were surprisingly cohesive considering that there was such a wide variation in demographics. Finally, this investigator’s outsider status must be included as a factor influencing the data. The respondents may have felt reluctant to voice any doubt, dissension, or criticism of their community and thus, the investigator’s position as someone outside the community may have been an inhibiting factor.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

This paper is a small segment of a larger study and consequently it is difficult to fully discuss implications for clinical practice without
considering other factors that are not discussed here, such as the role of religious practice and spiritual development among the participants. It is clear, however, that mistrust and negative opinions of the secular community will make it difficult for clinicians outside the community to practice effectively with Orthodox clients. Potentially negative views of Orthodox women as oppressed, second class and/or with too many children may also make it difficult for secular clinicians to maintain objectivity with these clients, or for Orthodox clients to establish trust in the clinician. This may be especially true with clinicians who work from a postmodern feminist orientation (Flax, 1991, Layton, 1998). Postmodernism attempts to critique the dominant social narrative, to consider issues of social justice, and to give voice to previously marginalized social and cultural perspectives. Although this perspective may be useful in looking at women in the ultra-Orthodox community as a marginalized minority within society as a whole, it would be counterproductive when trying to understand the roles Orthodox women play within their own community. Some therapists, for example, might be critical of these women’s “patriarchal” familial structures and their strict adherence to many religious rules and values. In addition, a lack of knowledge about the particular value of religion in these women’s lives and identities, and the norms of the community, would make it difficult for a secular clinician to fully understand this subgroup of clients and their dilemmas. As in all cross-cultural therapy, the clinician would have to thoroughly learn the religious principles and customs that organize these women’s lives, in order to avoid imposing his/her own values on the clients.

Although some of the respondents did express distrust of non-Orthodox clinicians, others stated that they would be willing to see a non-Orthodox clinician who was knowledgeable and sensitive to their lifestyle and values. In addition, seeing a non-Orthodox clinician might offer greater confidentiality in a community where problems such as mental illness, substance abuse and family violence are stigmatized and secretive. While the general course of action for Orthodox community members is to seek advice and referrals from their rabbi, some psychological problems may cause shame and embarrassment. Consequently, clients may seek help in community mental health settings outside the Orthodox community. In general, an Orthodox woman would feel more comfortable with a female therapist due to the strict gender separation in her community. However, there are designated male Orthodox therapists women will see if they are recommended by the woman’s rabbi. One risk in such referrals is that the male therapist would likely be perceived
as an authoritative figure and would elicit compliance from his Orthodox female clients. Another possible issue is that women clients may not want to disclose intimate personal details to a male therapist.

It is clear that more research needs to be done in areas related to the Orthodox community. Future research might study ways of coping with health and mental health issues, indicators of well-being and many other topics. While some studies were found, few of them seemed to demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the spiritual values and norms that the lives of women in the ultra-Orthodox community entail, and how their unique spiritual belief system may contribute to particular attitudes and behaviors. A potential future direction for further research is to compare women in the Orthodox Jewish community with women in other religious communities. Another potential area of investigation would involve examining the influence of the community’s religious values on their mental health, and on the counseling process with Orthodox Jewish clients.

Received: 02/22/05  
Revised: 09/13/05  
Accepted: 08/31/05

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doi:10.1300/J497v77n02_03