Social phobia in ultra-orthodox Jewish males: culture-bound syndrome or virtue?

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ABSTRACT  Social difficulties of the performing variety are reported by ultra-orthodox male referrals to a psychiatrist in Jerusalem and confirmed by key communal informants. Three cases of social phobia are presented, and the content concerns performing, either speaking on religious matters publicly, a role associated with status and authority, or leading prayers and ceremonies, a role of sanctity and duty. The absence of women sufferers may be understood as a consequence of the value placed on modesty in women and there being no expectation of women to participate in study and public prayer, while the absence of complaints of interactional social phobia may be a consequence of the general discouragement of social intercourse not related to religious study. Aymat zibur, literally meaning fear of the community, is a term used by ultra-orthodox Jews to describe these fears of performance, although in its original meaning the term expresses the respect that the leader of prayers is expected to have for his awesome role. The cases described, however, were motivated by personal shame, similar to social phobia of the performance variety found in other cultures, rather than fear and respect. The values of ultra-orthodox religious life are presented that invest a person who avoids interactional social behaviors with the status of zaddik (a righteous person) while one who avoids the performance behaviors of speaking publicly on religious matters or leading prayers suffers from an idiom of distress in this particular society. Religious law and societal mores appear to be critical factors in deciding whether symptoms of social phobia are perceived and experienced as idioms of distress.

Introduction

Social phobia would appear to have an intricate relationship with the culture in which it appears. The presence of other people and social interaction with them are integral features of the disorder, so the social mores of a culture would be...
expected to influence the presentation of the social phobia. The alternative is that social anxiety is a universal phenomenon, and that interacting socially, addressing an audience and speaking to a person in authority have always given rise to a degree of anxiety.

Within Judaism, the ultra-orthodox are conspicuous by their separate lifestyle, avoidance of secular society and its values, distinctive dress and their overriding concern to keep the commandments of the Torah and Jewish Law (Heilman, 1992; Mintz, 1992). The largest communities of ultra-orthodox Jews are to be found in USA and Israel. The social isolation and preeminence of religious lore create an environment in which the presence of social difficulties may be modified or related to in a way different from other societies. The expectations of Jewish Law on the issue of social relations and specific social components in the structure of ultra-orthodox society will be presented. Cases of social phobia within this society will be presented from a sample of over 500 ultra-orthodox male referrals to a psychiatrist in order to consider the interplay between religious law on social behavior, societal mores and psychopathology.

Social relations in Jewish Law

Social intercourse between the sexes in the Bible

The Bible is the primary text of the Jewish religion, and it is replete with examples of social intercourse between men and women, husbands and wives. Lemech spoke to his wives (Genesis 4:23–4), Abraham spoke to Sarah (ibid 12:11–13; 16:6; 18:6), Sarah spoke to Abraham (ibid 13:2, 5; 16:5). Abraham’s servant had a lengthy conversation with the beautiful single Rebecca (ibid 24:17–25). Jacob kissed then talked to his cousin Rachel (ibid 29:11), and, once married, they argued (ibid 31:1–3), and Jacob made plans with both wives (ibid 31:5–16). The recurring conversations between Potiphar’s wife and Joseph could well be seen as proof of the dangers of such social interactions (ibid 39:7–12), and, indeed, for the rest of the Torah, such interchanges become rare and not for social purposes, although at this stage the entire account becomes less person-oriented and more the account of the growth of a nation. Samson’s recurrent conversations with Delilah may again support the dangers (Judges 16:6–17), although Boaz conversed at length with the widowed Ruth (Ruth 2:8–14; 3:9–13).

Social intercourse in Jewish Law

The earliest collection of written Jewish law, the Mishna, completed in 200, is clear on the subject, and sets the tone of religious texts until today: “Do not speak at length with one’s wife. If this is true of one’s own wife, clearly more so in the
case of the wife of another. The Rabbis concluded: As long as a man speaks at length with his wife, he brings evil on the world, neglects the study of Torah, and in the end will inherit Hell” (Mishna, Avot 1:5). Another reason for this rule is given elsewhere that “it leads to adultery” (Mishna, Nedarim 20:1).

If conversation with the opposite sex is discouraged in Jewish law, what is the attitude toward social conversation in general? Life is to be spent in the study of Torah, so that conversation that does not concern Torah study is discouraged: “One does not behave in a light-hearted way in a house of prayer or Torah study. For example laughter, mockery, and trivial conversation” (Maimonides, Prayer and Priestly blessing 11:6). What is the definition of trivial conversation? “How many measures of produce did we have in year X? How much money did Y spend on his son’s wedding?” (Maimonides, Shabbat 23:18). How serious is this? “Whoever stops studying Torah in order to engage in conversation is fed the embers of a broom fire” (Talmud, Hagiga 12b).

The general attitude to social conversation, not just limited to being distracted from study, is summed up by Maimonides: “A person should excel in silence and should not speak, unless to say matters of wisdom or matters to do with physical needs. It was said of Rav, the pupil of our rabbi [Judah ha-Nasi, compiler of the Mishna] that he did not indulge in trivial conversation all of his life, and that is the conversation of most people” (Maimonides, Deot 2:4).

Social relations in everyday ultra-orthodox Jewish life

The ultra-orthodox Jewish community in Israel provides certain cultural and religious conditions that make it particularly interesting to consider the phenomenology of social phobia in this society in order to consider the interplay between social and religious mores and psychopathology (Greenberg and Witztum, 2001). The cultural features that may be thought to influence the patterns of social communication include the following:

- From infanthood the sexes are educated separately, while from age 13–14, they socialize separately. Social mixing between the sexes is discouraged, and even after marriage, men will often be careful not to speak to women other than their wives.
- Introductions for marriage are arranged by parents. The two young people will be expected to meet. In some sections of ultra-orthodox society they meet only once, and rarely more than 4–5 times. They will meet alone and will be expected to converse with each other. The decision to marry rests with the young couple.
- Qualities that are sought after in a young man are that he is a serious and successful scholar of Talmud. Ease at conversation may be viewed as a sign of someone who is not a serious student, while a disinclination in a young man to stare at a young girl or to talk to her at length may be viewed as a sign of high moral standards.
These characteristics may create a situation in which those with symptoms of interactional social phobia may not suffer from their symptoms and may even be accorded respect and find a matrimonial match with ease.

Despite the earlier statements taken from Jewish law and the above characteristics of ultra-orthodox society, as with most traditional cultures, ultra-orthodox Jewish life is a dense social structure (Levy, 1989). Families are large and incomes are small, so that children grow up sharing bedrooms and surrounded by siblings. In their third year of life, children start studying in heder, where classes are large, and at the end of the day, small children play together. Adolescent boys leave home to go to live and study in a Yeshiva, where they study in pairs, have group lessons, and sleep in dormitories. Girls remain at home and help with their younger siblings while continuing their studies. Girls are usually married by their late teens, and boys by their early twenties.

The discrepancy between the expected and the observed is very apparent in Yeshiva life. As mentioned earlier, the ultimate values are to excel in the study of the Talmud, and to be punctilious in the performance of the commandments, and any other pastime, such as social conversation, are considered ‘Bitul zeman Torah’, a waste of time that should have been spent studying Torah. In reality, however, the environment is very social and a level of social skills is necessary to remain accepted.

This dialectic between the demands of the texts and the realities of communal living is reflected in the following excerpts from interviews with young ultra-orthodox single men aged 16–23 who were referred for a psychiatric evaluation for problems other than social phobia. The young men were asked about their interaction with their social environment as part of this study. All of the referrals who are quoted were evaluated and treated in the course of several interviews.

**Socializing in general**

Lev: It is important to have friends and to have someone you can speak to. It is important to learn (Torah) well, but it is also important to know how to speak to people. One of my study partners is someone who barely speaks.

Mendel: I have friends and a couple of close friends.

Ezekiel: I feel unable to speak with other students and feel that I appear strange. I know I miss out by not being part of social talk.

**Socializing with the other sex**

Lev: I talk to my girl-cousins and aunts. I do not speak to my sisters’ girlfriends—it is forbidden, so there is no difficulty involved. I do not know how it will go when I am introduced to a girl before marriage. I speak freely to my sisters—why not?
Mendel: I have no difficulty in conversing with women.

Aaron: I think that more important (than having friends) is to have a good wife, who is easy-going, a good heart, and with good understanding. It is more important to speak to one’s wife than to one’s friends. I had thought I would tell my wife that quality of contact matters more than quantity, but I like to talk and would want to tell her about things that have happened. I do not speak much to my sisters, although I could. I have one sister to whom I tell things. I think I would know how to speak at a matrimonial introduction. I feel that I would be able to express my feelings, and have no concerns about it.

Ezekiel: I avoid speaking with girls. I feel an urge to, and in my head I hear: No, no, no. I once went into a building to deliver something and spoke to a girl there, but afterwards I was very upset with myself. I have no difficulty speaking to my little sisters, although I do have difficulty with my married sisters and sisters-in-law. On the bus I sit with my head down so that no one talks to me.

Performing in public

Lev: I am the type of person who cannot speak publicly, nor lead the singing in the Sabbath prayers, but it doesn’t bother me. I could lead the weekday prayers (note: weekday prayer, unlike the Sabbath, has no melody, is less formal and less crowded), but I don’t offer myself, only very occasionally, as I will tremble at first and only then get used to it. Usually I refuse when asked to lead, so they have stopped asking. But sometimes I get up courage, but I don’t enjoy it. I am not sorry, what can I do? I don’t join in, and don’t miss it. At home I will speak at the Sabbath meal and at my grandparents’ house, but I would not speak before my class.

Mendel: I don’t like to speak before a group, or to lead the prayers—it causes a certain tension. I get tense if I have to sing on the Sabbath. I tend not to.

Aaron: I have no difficulty speaking publicly. I will not lead the prayers because I believe I do not have the appropriate devoted attention.

Ezekiel: I say very simple ideas at the Sabbath table taken from a book. I am very frightened of leading the prayers. I was asked to be hazzan (leader of prayers) on the Sabbath and practiced for a few weeks, but I have ‘fear of the congregation’ (Hebrew: aymat zibur) with a stutter, and did not want to shame myself in front of the Holy Ark, so my mother agreed it is unnecessary to shame myself. As a child I knew the tunes, but the pressure and fear ruined it all. My brother also doesn’t lead prayers—there are many with ‘fear of the congregation’.

It is clear from these accounts that comfortable conversation with friends is valued. Ezekiel, the only young man interviewed to describe difficulty in conversation with other students, considered this a problem, and did not view it as enabling him to avoid trivial non-Torah talk. Despite the sanctioning of
avoidance of social intercourse with friends and particularly with the opposite sex in Jewish law, in everyday life these young men emphasized the importance of socially interacting with their spouse and were comfortable speaking with their sisters. Nevertheless, ultra-orthodox men will avoid sitting next to a woman on the bus and many will keep their head in a book during the journey, as described by Ezekiel, and a small number of ultra-orthodox men cover their eyes when they pass women in the street. Those who cover their eyes may justify their actions in the Laws quoted but most men do not behave in this way. In contrast with these interactive social situations, anxiety over public performance, referred to by Ezekiel as *aymat zibur* is frequently described in our sample, and is experienced by Lev, Mendel and Ezekiel.

**The zaddik: interactional social phobia among ultra-orthodox Jewish males**

In attempting to explain why he saw so few agoraphobic women in his out-patient sample of women in Qatar, El-Islam wrote: ‘Being bound to the home, which is a sign of severe agoraphobia in the West, is a sign of virtue in a Muslim housewife; the Koran addresses women in the verse ‘stay in your homes and do not misbehave like the early pagans’’ (El-Islam, 1994, p. 139). Similarly, the religious status accorded an ultra-orthodox Jewish person with interactional social difficulties may influence whether such difficulties are perceived as a problem or not. Two informants in the ultra-orthodox community give more insight into the interplay between religious caution and social mores. A young man who is starting to meet potential brides and who supervises younger students in their studies: ‘It is common for boys aged 14–18 to try to study Torah with no other diversions, not talk on non-Torah subjects and try to be careful in guarding their eyes (a term that refers to not looking at women). Once in the yeshiva for older boys this wears off. The pamphlet of guidance before marriage given to young men who are about to meet potential brides explicitly states that young men should talk a lot to their wives when they meet and after they marry. Developing their relationship is a very important matter.’

A communal worker who has worked for many years with youth and young couples on mental health issues within the ultra-orthodox community presented a more complex view: ‘My 10 year old grandson and 11 year old granddaughter were playing together and I said to them: ‘When you are a little older you will be ashamed (of this situation).’ Once a boy reaches teenage, the subject of sexual awareness becomes a closed book. For this reason, he does not look at women. It is a great iniquity. Even his mother stops stroking and kissing him at the age of 13. Once he reaches the age of *shidduchim* (matrimonial introductions), the book is opened and he is taught. Some boys know very little about their own sexuality and that of women and they must be taught gradually. So too, some young men are not able to talk easily. In most cases once they are given guidance they are able to be more open. In the case of someone...
with social difficulties, he will not be encouraged not to speak to the girl. No, he will be instructed to speak, but, if he is unable to do so, there will be no stigma attached. In such cases it is common for the rabbis to say that he will need to meet the girl for more meetings before they decide whether to marry. If a young man has serious difficulties talking to people then this is something very personal to him, and not a normal feature of ultra-orthodox life, and in this respect he would be the same as a young man with such difficulties in the outside secular world. But there is an important difference. Non-ultra-orthodox young men are expected to be socially capable throughout their teenage and must learn to do this alone. If they are not, it is a major issue and they may be sent to a psychologist. In our community, however, he is not expected to do it alone. It is not really a problem. He does not have to find the girl, his family will make the enquiries, and even when the couple meet there is no expectation that they will form a deep connection. In fact, it may be enough that they are not actively repelled. For many there will only be one or two such meetings before they decide, so his difficulty speaking will not be a problem. Certainly someone who avoids social contact while studying intensively would be seen as a zaddik (a righteous person), and, unlike his secular counterpart, he would be afforded more help by the community. In our case, the help he receives is not counseling, because he is a zaddik and the community values him for what he is. “A person who does not talk to women will behave in this way all his life. I remember a distant relative of mine who was a great zaddik. He sat and studied all his life with no social contact with the world around him. I once went to visit him. He greeted me with Shalom aleichem (literally, peace be upon you, hallo) and then returned to his studies. It was his wife who then received me, talked to me, invited me to eat and drink. In this way he had lived, had children and grandchildren, and was called a great zaddik in the community. There are two types of zaddik, there is the one who is involved with the community, active in doing things for people, and there is this type, who speaks very little, and certainly not with women. There is a zaddik who just does not speak with people, I confirm this 100%. There is a well-known joke among Gur hasidim (members of a dynasty of the hasidic movement that grew up in the town of Gora Kalvaria in the mid-nineteenth century). Gur hasidim have always been known for being scrupulous about not speaking too much with their wives, and they were careful not to walk in the street with their wives. Some hasidim went to the rebbe (the spiritual leader of the dynasty) to tell him that one of his followers had been seen walking with his wife. ‘Don’t worry,’ answered the rebbe, ‘the woman obviously wasn’t his wife.’”

This joke has been told to us in various forms by hasidim of Gur, and it would seem to encapsulate the paradox of the zaddik with social phobia. As the joke implies, the hasidim are aware that the injunction is aimed at protecting them from immorality, yet the other extreme is that they may be so naïve as to be seen walking with a woman, possibly unaware of her presence. Interactional social phobia in the ultra-orthodox community emerges as a condition that may be very isolating yet may also be accorded religious status and accolade. This is not to
suggest that every *zaddik* has social phobia; rather that among those whose immersion in study is for spiritual betterment may be those whose primary motivation is avoidance of anxiety provoking social contact.

*Aymat zibur*—fear of the congregation: the original meaning of the term

The concept of fear of the congregation (*aymat zibur*), mentioned by the patient Ezekiel, would appear to be a term used by this particular culture to describe a form of distress. The recognition by a culture of a form of disorder has been accepted as an integral component of the definition of a culture bound syndrome in the latest edition of the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Is *aymat zibur* a culture bound syndrome of the ultra-orthodox? To consider this question, the meaning of the concept within the community should be understood.

The term is first mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud (completed by the sixth century) (Sota 40:1): “Rabbi Yitzhak said: May the fear of the congregation (*aymat zibur*) always be upon you, as the priests (when they bless the people during prayers) have their faces to the people and their backs toward the Divine Presence”. On the same page, the Talmud asks why the Rabbis did not allow the priests to bless the people while wearing sandals, and answers that the motivation was not “respect for the congregation”. Rashi (an acronym for Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac), in his eleventh century commentary on this phrase, replaces it by ‘fear of the congregation.’ It is clear that *aymat zibur* is used in the Talmud to refer to the feelings of those fulfilling a public function in prayer (the *hazzan* or the priests blessing the people) who act as intermediaries between God and man. The term is synonymous with respect for the congregation, in that fear is the emotion expected of one who has this onerous task. The respect for the congregation is such that one must wear the cleanest of clothes (for example, sandals should be removed as they may have mud on them) and may face them with one’s back to God. An early twentieth century authority on Jewish law uses *aymat zibur* to explain why the leader of the prayers must always use a prayer book and not allow himself to lead the prayers from memory, and he adds that the term *hazzan* means ‘to see’ because the leader of the prayers must see what he is reading (Mishna Brura 53: commentary 87).

‘Fear of the congregation’ (*aymat zibur*) — performance social phobia among ultra-orthodox men

In the cases of social phobia of the performance variety that will be described, it will be noted that they involve two types of religious activity. The first type is teaching Torah or speaking publicly on a religious topic, and the second is leading prayers or performing a religious ritual publicly. These two situations differ in that public speaking on religious matters is generally an expression of prestige.
Leading prayers differs in that it may be expected of every adult male. Prayers are held three times daily, theoretically anyone could be asked to lead them, while on certain occasions people have a duty to be the leader. A behavior even more commonly offered to any adult male present is to read aloud the benediction over the public reading of the Torah.

A key informant in the community who is well situated to overview ‘fear of the congregation’ among ultra-orthodox Jewish males is the gabbai, the person in every synagogue whose task it is to organize the running of the prayers, including getting someone to lead prayers (thrice daily on weekdays, four times and more lengthy prayers on Sabbaths) and selects people to recite the benediction of the Torah. The gabbai of a large hassidic synagogue in north Jerusalem, Israel had clear impressions: “When you have to go round asking people to lead the prayers, 30% refuse, 20% are zaddikim (plural form of zaddik, righteous)—if you push enough they will accept, and 50% will always accept. Those with difficulties seem to fear they will get stuck saying the prayers aloud or will stutter. But those who refuse break through the barrier once they have to say Kaddish (during the year of mourning for a parent, and month after the loss of a spouse or child, a man is expected to say a special brief prayer known as Kaddish several times during each service and should lead the prayers during weekdays).

“‘A smaller number refuse to say the blessings before and after the Torah reading. We have one man in our community, an eminent rabbi, who refuses to go up and say the blessings and during his year of mourning he refused to lead the prayers and just said the Kaddish prayer quietly. I know he gets nervous saying the blessing over wine on Friday night at home if his son-in-law is present. If you turn to this rabbi privately with a question he’ll talk to you for hours and tell you his innovative ideas with self-confidence, but because of his fear of the congregation he refuses to give public lessons’.

Three cases of social phobia in ultra-orthodox Jewish males

The gabbai and three of the young men interviewed above described anxiety and avoidance of situations specific to ultra-orthodox religious life. We describe below three cases in which these difficulties were the main problem. These three examples are the only cases that presented their social difficulties as their primary problem from a sample of about 500 ultra-orthodox males seen over two decades of clinical work by a psychiatrist.

Case 1

Menasheh is 40, married with six children. He was sent for help by his Rabbi. According to Manasseh, his problem began twenty years ago in an abrupt fashion, and since then it has snowballed. One day, he was in the synagogue, and was ‘called to the Torah’. He went onto the podium and recited the blessing
before the reading of the Torah in the presence of the congregation. He read the blessing slowly. The man leading the prayers made a disparaging comment and Manasseh was hurt by the remark and took it to heart. In the ensuing weeks, he developed a difficulty in being called to the Torah. He became anxious about going to public prayers lest he is called on to say the blessing. Then he found that on the occasions when he was called, he choked while saying the blessing, unable to continue. Next the problem spread to saying the Kaddish prayer, and he found he choked during its recital, and came to a full stop in the middle. The problem continued at this level for seven years. He tried not to avoid situations, but only found that his anxiety and the difficulty completing the blessings worsened.

Then, on the weekend after he married, a further development took place. He said the Friday evening blessing of sanctification in the presence of his wife’s family, and choked in the middle. His hands shook, he felt the family were looking at him, and came to a stop. He went to a psychologist twice and stopped going. He took tranquillizers that only sedated him. He decided on a more spiritual approach: he made vows, said prayers, tikkunim (prayers for the correction of the soul), and his Rabbi gave him a special prayer to say against fears to repeat daily—to no avail.

When he and his family moved to a new area and a new synagogue, he hoped the problem would improve, but when being called to the Torah at his new synagogue, the same thing happened. He began to avoid all synagogues where he may be called upon. He avoided going to visit his parents and parents-in-law on the Sabbath, lest he had to say the blessing of sanctification, and started to avoid all celebrations lest he is called on to say a benediction or lead the communal grace. The symptoms that occur in these situations have broadened over the years, and now include shaking hands, palpitations, weakness and an inability to function.

Menasseh understands his problem as a spiritual one. The problem has afflicted him because of his sins, and for this reason he has visited the tombs of the righteous, hoping their prayers will help him.

Case 2

I (DG) have known Benjamin for several years, having treated two of his children for anxiety disorders, and having evaluated a third with a psychotic disorder. On each occasion, he accompanied them to the initial interview and then left the stage to them. I had found him to be friendly, very courteous, very intelligent in the questions he asked, and very appreciative—on one occasion he was so excited by my summing up at the end of the evaluation that at the end of the interview he came over to me, blessed me and kissed my forehead! Now Benjamin asked to be seen alone.

Benjamin is 48, married with eight children. He has spent all his life in Jewish studies, and has worked on editing ancient manuscripts. ‘I have a phobia that cripples me, although I function. It affects me when I appear in public. If not for
this problem, I would have opened a school. When I am writing, I have no fear’. Benjamin is a successful and admired person in his community, but feels he is unable to do what he really wants, and describes his academic life sadly: ‘When you are in such a jail, no one realizes the problem exists’.

Ever since he can remember, Benjamin has had a fear of appearing in public. At wedding meals, he leaves before the Grace after Meals to avoid being asked to recite a blessing. In synagogue he avoids being asked to read the \textit{Haftara} (public reading of a chapter of Bible), and he can only lead the prayers in a synagogue where he is unknown. Despite being a very meticulous ultra-orthodox Jew, he avoids going to the synagogue on Saturday afternoon, as the crowd is small and the chance of being called to the Torah is high. He becomes anxious before saying the blessing for wine on Friday night with his family, and very anxious if strangers are present.

When his daughters become pregnant he starts to become anxious, as if a son is born, there will be a public circumcision, and he will be expected to take a role in the ceremony. His parents, ‘May they live many years’, are alive, and he finds himself thinking about the eventuality of their deaths, when he will have to lead public prayers for a whole year, and say \textit{Kaddish}.

His fear in all of these situations is that he will blush. Blushing starts a chain reaction in him. His voice chokes, his legs tremble. He then feels sure that people are aware of his difficulty, stare at him, and he blushes.

As a result of his difficulties, he feels frustrated that none of his intellectual ability has ever been able to be transmitted verbally, but is only for those who read his books. An additional problem is an inability to use public toilets, another expression of the performance variety of social phobia.

In the past he sought a range of help. He first went to Rabbis for advice, then to Kabalists for blessings and remedies. ‘Sorcerers’, he added with a wry smile. He explains that his Lithuanian background did not really encourage him to seek help from Kabalists, but after the advice of his rabbi had not helped, it was worth a try (Nadler, 1997).

\section*{Case 3}

Levi, 27, is married with four children. I (DG) have known him for four years as the husband of a patient with schizoaffective disorder. He nearly always accompanied his wife to sessions. He is a short, thin, pale young man, who looks younger than his years, with a thin wispy beard and thick spectacles. He would arrive at interviews with a religious text under his arm, and would smile shyly and then sit over his book throughout the interview. He would not speak unless asked, and would then look up from his text, and speak in chosen words, looking at his wife to gauge her responses.

Levi’s parents divorced when he was young, and his mother brought him up in a secular environment. Nevertheless, from age 12 he became increasingly religious, transferred to a yeshiva, where he has studied ever since. He was a very
quiet, shy student, who become known as a *masmid*, someone who studies Talmud at all times, and rarely talks on non-Torah subjects. He became respected by his fellow students and was selected for marriage into an honored family.

Since marriage, he has continued to study, although his wife’s difficulties have often meant he must be away from his studies. Her increasing expectations that he spend time with her and the children bewildered him initially, and encroached on his wishes to devote himself to his Talmudic studies.

It was after four years that he mentioned that he had been attending a group for ultra-orthodox men who have a problem of social performance. The two main features of his problem are that he becomes anxious if he has to give a public lesson, and that he is unable to lead the public prayers. The main consequence of this problem is that he cannot teach. Although respected as a brilliant student, his knowledge will only be apparent in private conversation. In the group he attended, the leader taught the members relaxation, which he found useful.

**Discussion**

The principal social situations that gave rise to anxiety and avoidance in the three ultra-orthodox males with social phobia and those referred for other problems involved performance in front of an audience. Opportunities for public performance for males in this community arise in two types of situations, teaching and prayer. Teaching Torah is the highest status in the ultra-orthodox world, and the *talmid haham* (literally, wise student, refers to someone respected for his level of religious knowledge) is the pinnacle of social success. The *talmid haham* is asked to speak publicly at social gatherings, ceremonies and festive meals and is expected to speak on a religious subject. Public speaking, therefore, reflects the highest social recognition. Although an authority’s most sophisticated ideas may be expressed in written works, these are accessible to the able few, while the invitation to speak at public occasions is announced, seen and acknowledged by many. The relationship between performance type social phobia and a person’s sense of status is apparent in cases in quite varied cultures (for examples, see the four case studies in Stravynski *et al.*, 2000).

The second situation involving public performance is leading prayers or reciting blessings. Communal prayer is valued above individual prayer: “From where do we know that the Holy one blessed be he is to be found in the synagogue? As it is said: ‘God stands in the congregation of God’ (Psalms 82:1). And from where do we know that the Divine presence is to be found where ten are praying together? As it is said: ‘God stands in the congregation of God’” (Talmud Brachot 6a).

Leading the prayers is an honor, only offered, according to the Code of Jewish Law (Orach Hayyim, 53:4), to one who is “worthy, free of sin, who does not have a bad reputation... and who is modest and accepted by the people”.

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Humility, but not avoidance, is encouraged, for when asked by the gabbai, one should: “refuse a little before going to lead the prayers, but not too much. The first time he is asked, he should refuse, and when asked a second time he should get ready as if he wants to, and at the third request he should go straight there” (ibid, 53:16).

Leading the prayers when a mourner is a duty and being called upon to say the blessing of the Torah during public prayer is unpleasant to decline, as it is an honor. If, as a result of this problem, a sufferer does not attend public prayer, he is avoiding an integral part of religious life. If a mourner does not lead the prayers during the year of mourning, this will be immediately noted. He has first right to the honor, and will feel uncomfortable at not doing so. Similarly, saying the benediction at the Sabbath meal is a natural part of the role of the religious Jewish father. Anticipatory anxiety, commonly found in phobic disorders, was common in our cases, both in the short-term, fearing they would be asked to lead the prayers or say a benediction during daily prayers, and long-term, contemplating if a male grandchild will be born and the subsequent ceremony, or the eventual death of parents, and the subsequent recital of Kaddish.

Other symptoms of performance type social phobia are difficulties eating in public, which were not mentioned by our sample of 500 cases, while one patient had difficulty using public lavatories. A complete facet of social phobia not mentioned by these referrals was difficulty in social conversation (interactional rather than performance). It appears that there is indeed a dichotomy here in that the social milieu of Yeshiva life, large and extended families, and community involvement require social interaction. On the other hand, the texts are reassuring for someone who has difficulties in these behaviors, so that, as explained by our informant, an experienced counselor on mental health issues (see p. 7), someone with serious interactional social phobia may be protected by the community and treated with admiration for his withdrawal. These conditions may be presumed to make it unlikely that someone will seek help for interactional difficulties and explain their absence as a main complaint in our sample.

An interesting observation is the absence of women in this sample. The role of women in ultra-orthodox life is summarized by the oft-quoted phrase: “The king’s daughter is all glorious within” (Psalms 45:14). A woman is expected to be modest and withdrawn, creating a home environment so that her husband can study Torah. She has no duty to study Torah nor is she expected to participate in regular public prayer and is forbidden to lead it in the presence of men. Public performance is not a lauded component of an ultra-orthodox woman’s life. A self-effacing shy woman would be viewed as modest and therefore virtuous. However, as in the case of the social life of males, the realities of daily living are more complex and women are exposed to many social situations: running the home, shopping for supplies, interacting with neighbors, and in many cases ultra-orthodox women in Israel also have an occupation in order to supplement the family income. Nevertheless, the formal religious role of an ultra-orthodox woman makes no demands of social performance.
The limitations of our findings are clear so that conclusions should be cautious. The sample is very small and selected; indeed, two of the three cases with social phobia may not have sought help if not for previous contact. The cases were extracted from well over 500 cases seen over two decades of clinical work. The interviewer was a psychiatrist and a male. A psychiatrist is perceived within the ultra-orthodox community as someone who gives medication, so that he may be less likely to see cases of social phobia, in contrast to a psychologist working closely with the community. Further, given the concerns over immodesty, the sex of the therapist is likely to influence the sex of the clientele seen from the ultra-orthodox community (Goshen-Gottstein, 1994).

Our findings are that the symptoms of social phobia that are presented for treatment in referrals from the ultra-orthodox community concern behaviors that have sanctity or status. The referrals were men and not women, the difficulties concerned performance rather than social interaction, and the situations concerned public speaking on Torah and leading prayers. This does not mean that other types of difficulties do not exist, rather that they were not presented.

Social phobia and culture

The most studied example of a cultural variant of social phobia is taijin kyofusho. First described in Japan in the early twentieth century, its main feature is a concern that the sufferer may give offence to others, resulting in social avoidance. The sufferer believes that blushing, eye contact, their body odor or their facial expressions or looks may be a cause of offence. Taijin kyofusho was considered to be a Japanese variant of social phobia, and the emphasis on not hurting the feelings of others as a normative Japanese value was proposed as the explanation for this variation (Kirmayer, 1991). However, six cases were reported from New York that resembled taijin (Clarvit et al., 1996), and a study of American and Japanese students found that 50% of those with symptoms of taijin also had symptoms of social phobia, while 50% did not (Kleinknecht et al., 1997). Similarly, the symptoms of social phobia and taijin were distributed equally in the two countries, suggesting that the symptoms in both forms, of offending others (as in taijin) and of shaming oneself or being rejected (as in social phobia) are expressions of social anxiety present in any culture. Consistent with our study, Kleinknecht et al. suggest that it is not the distribution of symptoms that is culture-specific, rather that the values of a culture give a symptom significance so that it is a focus of attention.

Studies of social phobia in other societies have reached conflicting conclusions. Chaleby (1987) diagnosed social phobia in up to 13% of all neurotic outpatient referrals in Saudi Arabia. He described 35 cases, 28 of them males, and suggested there are links with social mores; Saudi culture includes rigid moral codes and rules for minor social rituals, “such as the manner of greeting somebody, or how to start a conversation by asking about the health of every member of the family, naming only the males and referring to the females by
symbols. Particular attitudes of standing or sitting must be assumed according to the social status and age of those present at a gathering and the social relationships. There are traditions and rituals for every social situation” (p. 169). In contrast, women are confined, not exposed to social situations, and their social gatherings are for recreation, without comparable social rituals. He suggested that the predominance of referrals is because Saudi social routine is “stressful, and requires discipline and self-control... at the expense of personal autonomy” (p. 169). The same author described a larger sample of 80 cases, 25% of his private clinic (Chaleby & Raslan, 1990). Al-Khodair and Freeman (1997) compared 21 clinic referrals with social phobia in Scotland with 21 in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis felt easier with younger people, and these authors also suggested this was related to the emphasis on social rules and a fear of authority inculcated in Saudi culture.

Chambers et al. (1986) compared 39 phobic patients in India with 39 in UK and noted significantly less referrals with social phobia in their Indian sample. In contrast to the conclusions of the studies in Saudi Arabia that rules predisposed to social phobia, they speculated that the well-demarcated social roles in Indian society placed less social pressure on people.

Interactional versus performance variants of social phobia

Weissman et al. (1996) compared the type of situation in which difficulty is experienced in social phobia in epidemiological studies carried out in four countries, and found that over 70% of the Koreans with social phobia had difficulties speaking to strangers, while 30% had difficulty speaking in front of a group. In contrast, 35% of Puerto Ricans with social phobia had difficulties speaking to strangers while over 70% had difficulties speaking in front of a group. The USA and Canadian samples were more evenly spread and over 20% had difficulty eating in front of people. In the US National Comorbidity study, two main types of social phobia emerged. A third of the sample had purely public speaking phobia, while the rest had multiple social fears, both performance and interactional (Kessler et al., 1998).

It appears that when epidemiological studies are carried out, a wide range of symptoms of social phobia are found. In our own clinical practice, it is very common for parents of ultra-orthodox male referrals to remark en passant that the young man has always had difficulties getting on with other children (Greenberg & Brom, 2001), but rare that these are the principle complaints. On the other hand, the symptoms selected as suitable for seeking help reflect the values of the society. The different expectations of men and women in ultra-orthodox society in the realms of socializing and public performance may explain their help-seeking behavior.

The two main areas of difficulty in ultra-orthodox men were teaching Torah publicly and leading prayers. Aymat zibur is an attitude towards leading prayers recognized by Jewish religious authorities for two thousand years, and, although
applied loosely to describe social phobia of performance, the two differ subtly, in that performance anxiety is usually motivated by a fear of personal shame or humiliation (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), while aymat zibur is condoned, as it is judged appropriate that the responsibility of the leader of prayers as intermediary with God should be treated with awe. Despite the existence of this term that is understood by the community, we do not consider the condition we have described to be a culture bound syndrome (Ritenbaugh, 1982) as the forms of social phobia in the cases described above were more motivated by shame and humiliation than respect for their comrades at prayer. Nevertheless, it would appear to be the religious status given to these situations that makes them a source of distress among these sufferers.

The male in ultra-orthodox Jewish society is exposed to a specific set of religious demands and social expectations. We have reported that forms of obsessive–compulsive disorder in this community usually express themselves in males in a concern for cleanliness before prayer and repetition within prayer (Greenberg & Shefler, 2002; Greenberg & Witztum, 1994), and that adolescent males with learning difficulties may present with nocturnal hallucinations (Greenberg & Brom, 2001). It would appear that aymat zibur is used as a term of distress (Nichter, 1981) for males in a society where public speaking is an expression of recognition of religious leadership and leading public prayer is a duty.

References


Social phobia in ultra-orthodox Jewish males


