An Unrelenting Mental Press:
Israeli Gay Men’s Ontological Duality
and Its Discontent

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This study explores the linkages among 45 Israeli gay men’s social circumstances and their intra- and interpersonal communication patterns and media use. The study focused on these gay men’s life stories. One of the most striking themes uncovered in these autobiographies was the common thread of ontological duality: the dichotomous split between “normal” and “abnormal.”

Keywords: Israeli gay men, communication patterns, autobiographies, binaries

Modern ideology constructs two possible discrete human identities that are built on the individual’s sexual orientation: one identity is natural, proper, true, and thus normal, while the other is defective, deficient, and therefore necessarily abnormal. The borderline between these entities constitutes a well-established ingredient of our culture and is transmitted to all new members of society via the socialization processes. Gay men internalize this metaphorical borderline, which is manifested in their “self” throughout their lives as the site of their inner struggle to construct identity as well as the site of the struggle with external social forces. For persons who belong to the “normal” majority, the distinction between the “I” and the “other” is self-evident, clear-cut, and nonnegotiable. Their self-identity and social positioning are indeed quite solid. Hence, the borderline resides outside of their being, on both the cognitive and behavioral levels. Their positioning on the social map is well-
marked: they need no other person or group to validate it. On the other hand, persons who are part of a weak, disenfranchised, and excluded minority—I relate here to gay men, though this is probably applicable to other minorities as well—forever oscillate between the two regions, because their identity is defined and labeled as “other” to begin with. They cross the borderline between the regions countless times during the course of their lives.

This geographical terminology echoes Anzaldua’s (1987) discourse on the borderland. She proposes to replace the common usage of the border as a unidimensional line with the spatial concept of a zone whose area is fluid and subjective. This borderland is not only a cartographic or symbolic territory on either side of which different peoples reside, but also a mental location where various (and clashing) cultural elements congregate within an individual psyche. The borderland is well internalized in the minds of those who are relegated to the social periphery.

Several scholars have already noted gay men’s ontological duality (e.g., Cass, 1979; Weinberg, 1978); however, rather than employing this concept, they concentrated on the individual’s crossing from the heterosexual region to the homosexual one. Theoretical and empirical discussions in this context focus on this very momentous moment in the life of every gay person: self-labeling. Researchers are unanimous regarding the evolution of the homosexual identity at least in the respect that it evolves out of a different one (Troiden, 1993). In a similar vein, many researchers relate to the duality that characterizes gay persons’ interpersonal communication patterns; that is, the need to manage the presentation of self as gay (see Davies, 1992; McDonald, 1982; Wells & Kline, 1992). Coming out of the closet and not disclosing one’s gay identity represent discursive management of two separate arenas: those who are in the know and those who are not (Goffman, 1963). In spite of their new (and radical) version of this dichotomy, Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen (1999) nevertheless continue to oppose social worlds on the basis of which one’s gay identity is constructed. They argue that the closet is no longer a primary organizing principle in the lives of present-day American gay men and women; however, they agree that knowledge about one’s gay identity still plays a significant role in the construction of two spheres of existence. Finally, the literature sheds light on another experience that contributes to the duality in gay men’s existence: men who retreat from their daily routines in order to have sex. Several anthropologists have documented the split between these men’s visible interactions and their secret practices (see Delph, 1978; Desroches, 1990; Humphreys, 1975).

The rich literature on individual and social aspects of gay persons in industrialized countries substantially contributes to the theoretical understanding that their lives are fundamentally split into two regions. Diachronically, all gay persons’ lives are divided into two discrete periods: before and after the self-revelation of being gay and the resultant self-labeling. During the “before” period, they define themselves as nongay, and as a consequence of the labeling, they construct a gay identity and in most cases resocialize into the gay world. Synchronously speaking, their existence is separated into two spaces: the space where heteronormativity is the dominant norm and the heterosexual presumptive state (Bunzl, 1997) is self-evident; and the homosexual spaces. To sum up, the closet constitutes the axis or the central prop that sustains these dichotomous social and psychological systems. It exists in the
lives of all gay persons of the 20th century (Sedgwick, 1990) and is indeed the most prevalent metaphor for describing these phenomena.

The ramifications of the ontological duality and its all-encompassing impact on gay men’s sense of self and interactions with social and symbolic realities were found in the present research to be of paramount significance. The paper will describe the scope of this phenomenon as it was revealed via the analysis of 45 gay men’s life stories. Four themes will be presented: the intrinsic struggle between hegemonic and authentic selves, the clash between normal and abnormal within one’s mind, playing atypical gender roles, and the reduction of human wholeness.

LIFE STORIES

“[A]utobiographical discourse is defined as the textual account of an actual someone in an actual time and place persuading some situated others of one’s view of what happened” (Barros & Smith, 2000, p. 21). In other words, life stories are the social practice of a meaningful rendering of the self to other/s and consist of events and experiences through which persons have become who they are. They offer a coherent sense of identity by which narrators communicate how they are to be judged and evaluated (Linde, 1993). Remembrance of things past is a reconstruction of real events subjectively shaped by present perspectives and situations. Life stories are thus not a mere cluster of dates, facts, or incidents but a selective unfolding of events and experiences that have played a crucial or substantial role in the narrator’s life (Atkinson, 1998; Corradi, 1991; Finnegan, 1997). Life stories also contain information about the social and material realities outside one’s personal life (Alasuutari, 1997) and reflect sociohistorical developments that took place during the narrator’s life course (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In the case of muted or marginalized autobiographers, rendering their stories serves as a corrective for an intolerant society’s impositions on their lived experiences (see Barros & Smith, 2000). The objects of study are hence narrators who conduct a dialogue not only with the researcher, but mostly with themselves, their past experiences, and their current position and identity (Plummer, 1995).

The use of life stories as a research method emerged briefly in the 1930s at the Chicago School and then, by and large, disappeared until the 1980s, when they were implemented in sociological studies (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984; Laslett, 1999). Although several autobiographical accounts have been published by gay men in recent years (Hall Carpenter Archives, 1989; Merla, 1996; Nardi, Sanders, & Marmor, 1994), these memoirs rarely, if at all, offer theoretical insights.

Forty-five Jewish-Israeli gay men volunteered to unfold their life stories. The choice of this group merits some explanation. First, the overwhelming empirical and theoretical writings about gay men emanate from and concentrate on “Western” arenas, with only scant attention to other societies. Second, Israeli society is, by and large, torn between its grounding in the modern, industrialized, democratic world and the stronghold of the conservative Orthodox Jewish establishment (Kimmerling, 1999). Consequently, local gay men are situated in a unique position where, among other issues, they aspire to be a part of the (“Western”) gay and lesbian community
while confronting unrelenting pressures from traditional religious and heavily family-oriented norms and values.

The respondents were recruited via ads in newspapers, the Internet, gay venues and public events, and snowballing. Among them were public gays and activists in gay organizations as well as men who shun the gay world and refrain from coming out in nongay situations (Harry, 1993). Their age, educational, and occupational distributions were relatively wide (see Harry, 1986). In accordance with the theoretical and methodological premises, I did not conduct any statistical tests. However, impressionistically speaking, there emerged no obvious differences among the interviewees along sociodemographic lines (in particular no generational distinctions were noticeable). All in all, the commonalties among the interviewees exceeded their sociodemographic disparities. Contrary to what is reported in the literature (O’Neil, 1981), the latter were rather insignificant; thus I consider all interviewees en masse.

The interviews were conducted between September, 1997, and September, 1999. All commenced with a standard request: “Tell me your life story.” My intention was to elicit spontaneous autobiographies (Bruner, 1990); therefore the interviewees were not provided any structural scheme. My plan was to draw conclusions about the narrators’ communication patterns according to their perceived, subjective, and relative importance. It was essential to obtain details as they were processed and conceptualized, independent of the research. In order to achieve this, I was careful not to employ a prefigured protocol. Focused questions were asked only when relevant topics arose spontaneously.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The main ideas were then distilled via a thematization process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The intention was to determine what parts of the narrators’ lives were relevant to the study (Kearney, Murphy, & Rosenbaum, 1994). During this process I did not know what themes would arise. These revealed themselves to me as I created and rearranged categories. In order to corroborate and illustrate my conclusions, the following sections include selected citations from the life stories. Translations adhere to the colloquial Hebrew.

HEGEMONIC VERSUS AUTHENTIC SELVES

The first manifestation of ontological duality within intrapersonal communications is the struggle between internalized agents of the hegemonic social order and the individual’s “authentic” needs, desires, and impulses. This theme echoes the modern vogue to discover one’s “true self.” Foucault (1986) delineates the historical progression from the ancient Greeks’ concern with a healthy soul in a healthy body via Christianity’s negation of the self, up to the present time, when cultivation of self has become obsessive. Foucault (p. 362) is both jocular and disdainful when he calls this phenomenon the “Californian Cult of the Self.” Within this cult, it is the individual’s mission to find his or her “true” self, crystallize it, and decipher this inner “truth” by employing psychological and other scientific discourses. These “Californians” are characterized most of all by a ceaseless quest, which in itself is glorified and rewarded, for an entity they may call their authentic identity.
In the present research, many interviewees were indeed preoccupied with locating their “true” selves. Tal, a 30-year-old journalist, divides his life course into two distinct periods:

I think that during that time I was not connected to myself. I didn’t love myself enough to think what I really wanted. Who am I? What am I?… At that time I had been living with a woman for three years and was nearly married to her…. The track was very disconnected…. And then I came out of the closet, and put myself in places that I wanted…. I think that it all relates to the degree of one’s connection to oneself…. For many years I was not connected to the homosexual side. I did not accept it and did not want it.

What does it mean to be “connected to myself”? After introspection, Tal and other interviewees conceive of themselves as two separate autonomous subjects each fighting for control of their identity and life course. On one side stands the hegemonic subject, the successful product of the heteronormative socialization process. This “Normative I” seeks to function according to the dominant blueprints and become a “good” member of society: to marry (a woman), to find a job, etc. On the other side stands the “Subversive I” who wants to shake the foundations of the culture into which he was born and acquire a gay identity (whatever this may be). Tal and his peers yearn to personify the latter, which is feasible only when internal communication is properly accomplished. This success is then conceptualized in terms such as being “connected with myself.”

Tal conceives of homosexuality in essentialist terms. Indeed, the great majority of the interviewees perceive homosexual identity as a natural, inborn component of their “authentic” selves. It is neither perishable nor ephemeral but remains deeply seated even when they are not acting it out in deeds or in self-labeling. According to their perceptions, even when the hegemonic self is mastering their lives (e.g., while having a heterosexual relationship), this hegemonic self can never be fully victorious.

Ronnie, a 53-year-old interior designer, was married for several years and now lives with his boyfriend of two years. He describes a momentous battle between two extremely powerful adversaries: the normative “framework,” as he calls it, because of which he got married, versus an inner entity (“I myself”) that was striving to be free. Ronnie treats the “framework” as dictated by reality, and therefore obedience was not problematic for him. He only needed to take the most traveled road. The trouble arises when the “authentic” self refuses to keep on obeying. This produces mental stress that becomes unbearable until a new self is “born.” Ronnie uses the birth metaphor to explain that this inner process yields “someone completely new”:

When my wife and I returned from New York, then somehow the pressure began…. And it went on for quite a while, a few years…. A mental pressure of stewing within myself, what I want … because I was still married…. I want to become homosexual, I want to live … but, luckily, I had something very basic that was healthy. I did not sit and cry. I said wherever I go I want to be at
one with myself and live properly. And enjoy it. To be me, myself. And I came to the decision and understanding that this life is not for me, life with a woman, but I want a life with a man.... I can say that I was born again, that I started a new life and became someone completely new.... I see it all as a rebirth and a release of all the internal things and needs that were in me but were locked and shut away. And somehow it came out.... I term this pressure, pressure that pushed harder and harder, until I said, “I can’t any- more. I don’t want it like this.”

Amnon, a 25-year-old undergraduate student, reported the existence of two quasi-independent entities that competed for his identity: “I” and “myself.” One is the manifestation of the heteronormative system, the other is the striving toward the actualization of homosexuality. Amnon was terribly afflicted by this conflict and believed that traveling would free him. Only when he arrived in the foreign territory did he sadly realize that his culture was well-ingrained in his soul, that he needed to achieve a new status quo. This insight meant that he had to begin to construct a new identity in which his homosexuality was fully expressed:

And I went to South America, because I thought that if I went alone, I would be free, I would not depend on anyone. As if to get away from this place.... And I also thought that the farther I went, the farther I would get from the person I was. But it did not hap- pen. Nothing happened. This trip taught me that I am stuck with myself everywhere.... To be myself is to be, to feel good with myself. To be gay. Like to feel good with how I look and who I am.... At one point I told myself, “OK, I am gay. I’ll go back home and start living it.”

TO BE NORMAL OR TO FEEL ABERRANT

The second indication of ontological duality emanates from the tension the intervie- wees perceive between themselves and their social environs. They conduct ongoing, intensive, and complex negotiations within themselves regarding their positioning in the normative social matrix. They are constantly occupied with questions revolving around the borderline between normal and abnormal. This binary opposition is entrenched in their cognitive, affective, and discursive makeup. Sometimes they relegate themselves to “normal” society; at other times, they vehemently disengage themselves from it. Indeed, these ambivalent relationships contribute to the portrayal of these gay men as homeless nomads. Above all, this sense of otherness or differ- ence is forced on them. They are expelled to a no-man’s-land and from this position conduct a painful voyage. Reflections on childhood may illustrate this phenomenon.

Many interviewees defined their childhood as “regular” or “normal.” They eas- ily positioned their younger selves within normative territory. These statements can be read literally: The narrator looks back at his childhood and does not see any sig-
significant uniqueness. Alternatively, these utterances may be read as implying a schism between the “normal” boy and the “abnormal” adult. That is, the accent on the “regular” aspects of childhood and adolescence—a sort of idyllic nostalgia before the gay identity was labeled and formed, implies that the present time is anything but regular. These men probably distinguish between the two periods of life on the basis of a dichotomous scheme of normalcy. A third reading of this prevalent tendency can be a subversive objection to the culturally received meta-narrative that equates homosexuality with abnormacy. The interviewees thus present their childhood as normal because they wish to banish the idea that all gay men had miserable lives. They do not contrast the past and the present, but emphasize the normalcy of the present as well.

Ziv, a 27-year-old undergraduate student and a political activist, contrasted two biographical narratives:

From the point of view of, let’s say, the regular and uninteresting life, my life course was very ordinary…. From the homosexual point of view … I can see several stages: from thoughts in this direction that began at the age of 14, 15, and then to sexual practices from the age of 16.

Golan, a 16-year-old high-school pupil who only recently labeled himself gay, used a narrative pattern that emphasized the ordinariness of his life. “It was a pretty happy childhood. I had my friends. I went to kindergarten…. I went to school like all the kids.”

The tension between being “like everyone else” (i.e., “normal”) and being “aberrant” was a common thread among all the life stories but especially in that of Yarin, a 23-year-old undergraduate student. The apprehension lest he might cross the line from the “normal territory” is so deep-seated in his perceptions of self and world, that he even characterized the processes of self-labeling as “natural.” It is clear to Yarin that he needs to emphasize the alleged normality of his experiences, because otherwise he might inadvertently enter the appalling realm of the abnormal. This stance took an odd turn when his mother was dying:

If I look at myself, my life, everything was rather routine, more or less, okay. School; friends…. The moment the feelings began, the natural adolescence that happens to everyone, then they began in a regular way, only that instead of thinking of girls—boys. Very simple…. I say that our family was normal. We were not aberrant, but normal. It is connected to this that today I keep telling myself that, if we were once a normal family, today we are dealing with a woman suffering from cancer and a son who is a homosexual. That is, there has been some change in the past few years. And this, from my point of view, is that things look different … this is what normal means.
To sum up this theme of the perception of normality, I am reluctant to offer a clear-cut answer to this theoretical and ethical dilemma and am unable to resolve it. Indeed, this is a veritable ideological mine field. What is the meaning of the self-assured declaration, “I am just like everyone else”? Is this a battle call—unwittingly but essentially queer—against a homophobic society and its heterosexist institutions? Or perhaps the gay man who declares that he is “normal” considers his sexual orientation to be meaningless (i.e., does not constitute the basis of his identity), and consequently wishes to denounce the primary binary opposition (Homo—Hetero)? Seidman et al. (1999) would embrace the latter explanation for they maintain that their subjects routinized their homosexuality to the degree that it is but a minor component of their identity. This sense is attained without the outdated mode of self-aversion or shame. Or perhaps the denouncement of homosexuality as a stigmatized facet of identity is the fruit of a complete internalization of homophobia? Bersani (1987) would have agreed with this explanation, for he claims that internalized homophobia is essentially an integral component of all gay people’s selves.

BEING EFFEMINATE

In contrast to the theme of the perception of normality, another theme was distilled from other life stories: that of a distinct sense of alienation and difference from others from early childhood. This sense of otherness among pre-gay boys is well documented (Troiden, 1993). Cass (1979) explains that the question “Who am I?” that the pregay boy asks himself is typically answered by “I am different.” This response triggers a long process of estrangement from one’s immediate social world. Following this insight, the adolescent constructs a new identity that is derived from this very feeling of difference. This process is not necessarily correlated with age; many men (Ronnie, for example) never ask themselves this question until their third decade.

This theme adds an additional layer of meaning to the conception of ontological duality. The fact that some interviewees locate themselves in what they consider to be normal territory does not mean that this is stable or permanent. They all move back and forth within the borderland. Only a few position themselves fixedly within one region. The majority internalize the borderland (that is, both sides of the border) and move back and forth during their life course.

The sense of otherness or alienation is nearly always related to gender roles. Being an effeminate boy is often a sure sign of a gay adult (Green, 1987; Zuger, 1984). The research in this field is dominantly grounded in concern—which Sedgwick (1993) terms “effeminophobia”—about the “sissy boy.” This phobia is one of the repercussions of the “Western” fantasy about a hygienic, gay-free world. Indeed, the general desire to see a world “clean” of aberrations is a cornerstone of our civilization. The psychological and medical establishments willingly cooperate with the concern for a purely heterosexual regime. Sedgwick (1993) does not hesitate to point to the political and social institutions of the gay world as well, for their inaction in putting an end to the traditional perception of sexuality and gender as if they were interchangeable categories: as if men who love men must be effeminate. As if it is inconceivable that a “real” man can desire another “real” man. In other words,
gay men themselves replicate this effeminophobia because they do not bother to break down the sexual inversion concept.

Many of the gay men who unfolded their autobiographies for this research reported agonizing experiences of their enforced aloofness due to atypical gender role behavior. No’am, a 27-year-old graduate student, used the metaphor of ball-games to express the sense of estrangement of a boy who does not fulfill social expectations: whoever does not play ball is not a “real boy” and hence threatens the social order. Whoever crosses gender lines is punished by being stigmatized as an “outsider”:

Since a young age I had good friends who were boys, but I often played with the girls. Although my best friend was the leader of the ballgames … sometimes I joined the games, sometimes I didn’t. I didn’t like the games and felt like an outsider.

Yo’av, a 29-year-old travel agent, also emphasized his nonconformance in terms of gender roles. Interaction with the social surroundings corroborates the atypical boy’s perceived otherness. Intolerance (early manifestation of homophobia?) is rampant among children, who mercilessly penalize—by using verbal and/or corporal violence and/or shaming practices—those boys who dare cross accepted gender lines. Yo’av recalled a painful episode:

In seventh and eighth grades I was rather effeminate in comparison to the other boys. My voice, my gentleness. I was very gentle…. They were conscientious in telling me this, the others. Sometimes when they made fun of you, they made gestures as if you were behaving like a girl or something…. In eighth grade I left the kibbutz … because of this mocking by the others of my gentleness and seeming effeminacy. Because that’s the way they saw it. I did not … I was not effeminate, but that’s how they saw it and showed it to me. I suppose I was, but I did not define my sexuality at that time.

Other interviewees reported processes of social comparison, where they compared themselves and their behavior with those of their peers. Their sense of otherness was reinforced by concluding that their friends were progressing toward a different goal, while they were obviously digressing. Raphael, a 44-year-old shift manager at a factory, is one of the few religiously observant interviewees. He is adamantly secretive about his homosexuality:

I always knew that I was different than—let’s say—my friends. That I … my power of attraction was different from theirs. This is the power of attraction to men, not to women. And since I … the age of 12-13, I knew it…. I was sure that I was different in my power of attraction.
The final theme distilled from the autobiographies attests to the prevalence and importance of the issue of self-perception as normal. The gay individual continues to conduct an inner dialogue even after he has labeled himself. This dialogue concerns his self-definition and position in the social world. Indeed, the question “Who am I?” recurs again and again and remains high on his intrapersonal agenda. For the most part, two complementary responses were given by the interviewees. Both deal with the tension between homosexual practices and other components of their identity. In spite of the apparent gap between the two, both accentuate the normal element of gay life. They again shed light on life in the borderland between two culturally constructed territories, demarcated by received notions of what constitutes “normal.” It seems that the men who took part in this study did not challenge this widely accepted perception of “normal life.” Even when some did contest cultural constructs (particularly regarding gay identity), none were really concerned with overturning social norms (especially the bedrock of the family institution).

The replies to the question “Who am I?” are grounded in the reduction of the gay identity to sexual practice *per se*. Society, by and large, diminishes and objectifies homosexuals: this is a sort of existential *reductio ad absurdum* in which gay individuals are conceived solely on the basis of their sexual practices, while their romantic and intimate relationships are ignored. As long as their humanity is lacking and their wholeness is deficient, the inherent threat they present is lessened. In other words, heteronormative ideology prevents gay people from developing a “full” identity in which sexual practice is but a secondary element. Moreover, a patriarchal structure (i.e., “fertile,” heterosexual relationships) is necessary in modern, capitalist societies; therefore, same-sex couples are shunned and not cultivated (Sedgwick, 1985).

One response, then, was a rejection of a gay identity that today is celebrated by lesbigay activists and scholars. These interviewees saw themselves as well-situated within the normal system and could not understand other gay men’s motives to challenge it or even to create a so-called gay community. If we are all normal, what is the point of flaunting our sexuality? Isn’t identification with some vague gay cause a disservice? Danny, a 38-year-old nurse who has been living with his partner for two years, maintained:

I don’t want it to sound like I have anything against them. Against me. Against gays. Not really. But I don’t see myself being involved in the gay life. Except for the fact that I have a boyfriend and I live with him…. I think that there is something in the gay thing that is overemphasized … really a feeling that many gay men take it and make it a big thing…. I want homosexuality to be only on the sexual thing. I don’t think that homosexuality should be expressed in parades, different clothes, various posters. To be provocative. I see homosexuality in the sense of “who you are comfortable with.”… Sexual preference should, I believe, be private.
In other words, Danny and others deny the construction of an identity based on sexual practices. Gay identity should be just like the heterosexual correlate: sexuality has nothing to do with it.

The other response was a resolute rejection of the dominant attempt at reduction. These interviewees perceive their sexual practices as only negligible constituents of their entire identity. Indeed, they contest the idea that their entire identity is based on sexuality. Johann is a 49-year-old immigrant to Israel who arrived two years ago from Western Europe, where he had a wife and children. He now lives with Ronnie (mentioned above) and works as an executive. The partners were interviewed together and expressed similar views on this topic. As far as they are concerned, reduction means exclusion into the esoteric margins of normal society. If being gay means only having sex with other men, they said, gay men will never be full members of society. Implicit in this view is the notion that the sharp division between homosexual practices and conducting long-term relationships is imposed by heteronormative ideology in order to reproduce itself. Yet, if it seems that Ronnie or Johann are challenging the social structure, this is not the case. They repeatedly referred to the normative aspects of their lives: aside from the obvious fact that their spouse is a man; they are both just like everyone else. That is, they do not question the existence of the normal territory; they only wish to be embraced by it.

Ronnie: It took some years before I realized that a homosexual is not only sexual attraction, but the need to live with a man, to have a family life of some sort beyond sex. It is the need to do it all but with a man and not with a woman…. The first time I met a couple that really lived together it was a scandalous, shocking revelation for me…. Once I spoke to one of them, … and I remember one thing he said: “It is not only sex; it is a way of life. It is a disposition.” Only later did I begin to understand and feel it.

Johann: I really wanted to get into a relationship that was … looked like … a kind of family relationship. I agree with Ronnie because we talked about it, and it’s true, this is really what you want. It is not only sex. Sex is one thing, but living with a man is another thing, and even if there comes a time when sex is not important anymore, I think there is enough to go on. Gay life is not just sex.

NOMADS ASPIRING TO SETTLE DOWN

The present study was aimed at learning how various aspects—historical background, cultural circumstances, social positioning, and psychological processes—weave into gay men’s lives and their communication patterns. The reversal of sexual roles in the act of pleasure has been perceived to be the source of evil and chaos since time immemorial: when a male does not use his phallus for insertion but provides an orifice into which another man’s phallus penetrates, the desired gender division is threatened, and patriarchy seems to be losing its foothold (Bersani, 1987).
Consequently, one of the most basic binary oppositions in our civilization is the hetero-homosexual conflict that was designed to strengthen masculinity and reproductive sexuality. Like all binary oppositions, it is irreversible, hierarchical, and sacred (MacKinnon, 1989). Indeed, sociohistorical processes that culminate in this binary opposition necessarily position the latter pole as an inferior “other” in order to validate the identity of the powerful “normal” (Derrida, 1972/1981). Binarc logic is one of subordination and clearly denotes the power distribution in each society: it is never a natural given but a product of perpetual cultural mechanisms of construction (Benhabib, 1990).

The result of these macro level processes is the coercion of the gay individual into the ever difficult position of the “other.” In spite of recent advancements in legal measures and actions and a more welcome public sphere in Israel (Kama, 2000a), Israeli gay men are still located in the borderland of “normal” society. This problematic positioning is cardinal in these men’s identities, and it is no wonder that the most fundamental question they ask themselves is “Who am I?” or “Where am I located on the normal-abnormal continuum?” The struggle of gay individuals with their surroundings and with themselves is actually a struggle for inclusion within the “normal” human experience. The adversaries in this battle are the mighty powers of heteronormativity and patriarchy, against or within which the individual needs to construct his own self. As we have seen, there are many manifestations of this battle.

Israeli gay men are hence situated at the social seams. Consequently, they construct their world in a dichotomic fashion. Nearly all references to their identity and social worlds and their interactions are based on clusters of dichotomies: me-them, gay-nongay, normal-abnormal, authentic-fake, negation-validation, and so on. At every moment of their life course, they look at themselves as well as the material, social, and symbolic realities through this bipolar schema—a schema that is the product of cultural and historical processes and their own endeavors to carve a niche for themselves.

In response to general processes of exclusion and negation, many of the interviewees expressed a yearning to join the “normal” fabric of society, which is not marked as “other.” They rarely, if at all, question this yearning to forsake their forced positioning. This is a counterreaction to enforced exclusion: accepting and fulfilling the role of “gay man” serves them badly. Living on the invisible and muted edge of “proper” society necessitates allocation of huge cognitive, emotional, and discursive resources. Therefore, becoming one with the center is deemed right. Life within the consensus is perceived as priceless.

Crucial pragmatic dilemmas are abundant, in particular those that concern both intra- and interpersonal communications: Am I really different? Why? What are the ramifications of being gay in a world that does not want to be contaminated? Who is the real me: the hegemonic “good boy” or the subversive gay within? The gay individual needs to untangle heteronormative and homophobic discourses in order to mold a self of his own. However, the practice of dissociation from a well-established identity—formed as a part of primary socialization—is painful and difficult: after the individual has learned his “mother tongue,” he must start learning new codes. Moreover, he needs to attribute to himself all those negative symbolic loads that his
mother taught him about homosexuals. It can be now understood why many gay men feel they are perpetual nomads: first, in order to fulfill their “authentic” selves, they need to relinquish their secure identity; then they long to return “home” again. But the “home” they long for has no room for deviants like themselves.

The past couple of years have seen the burgeoning of a heated discussion among lesbian and gay political activists, scholars, and journalists (for example, Gamson, 1995; Sullivan, 1995; Warner, 1999) regarding the proper and correct place of their peers: whether we belong at the mainstream table or should work toward the creation of our own social universe independent of heterosexuals and their heterosexuality. Queer theorists in particular voice a tenacious opposition to and abhorrence of any trend of integration within mainstream society: “[I]n our eagerness to assimilate, we leap like lemmings into the melting pot and perform outlandish travesties as happy, healthy, monogamous heterosexuals” (Harris, 1998, p. 24). By becoming like nongays we symbolically annihilate ourselves. Being queer, that is, being transgressive, is our true—so they claim—objective to fulfill our authentic selves. In other words, we need to contribute to the radical change of society and should not expect to be embraced by it.

The 45 Israeli gay men who unfolded their spontaneous autobiographies expressed a willingness to leave the liminal position in which they feel stranded and deserted. They are not happy living in the borderland between normalcy and abnormalcy. Joining dominant society is perceived to be an immense advantage for their well-being. Ontological duality seems to be too exacting. Being nomads is forced upon them. They want to go home.

NOTES

1. I chose to study gay men for epistemic and methodological reasons (Kama, 2000b). Still, this does not mean that all or none of the statements are invalid for lesbians.

2. The sample was rather heterogeneous: the youngest interviewee was 16 years old, the oldest 72. About 40% live in or around Tel Aviv; the rest reside around the country (mainly in towns). About half of the interviewees had some academic education, one-third graduated from secondary schools, and the rest had less schooling. The overwhelming majority were secular and four semi-religious.

REFERENCES


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