

Leaving an Insular Community: The Case of Ultra Orthodox Jews

Roni Berger

Adelphi University

A qualitative mythology was employed to capture the lived experience of individuals who left Ultra Orthodox Jewish communities where they grew up to enter mainstream society. Their communities of origin are insulated from the modern world and keep outside influences from challenging their basic beliefs or affecting their highly structured way of life. Because Orthodox education consists almost exclusively religious subjects, everyday language is Yiddish and exposure to non-religious media, literature, art, music, and the web is strictly prohibited, they often lack educational and vocational training and marketable skills necessary to function in the modern world. They lack knowledge of norms of behavior relative to dress and interpersonal behaviors and are frequently stigmatized, rejected, and publically humiliated. Such stigmas may extend to their families, who often ostracized them and they may lose contact with children, parents, and siblings. "Exiters" are like new immigrants in a world often demonized by their community of origin, encounter cultural disorientation and must navigate an unfamiliar territory with little preparation and no financial, psychological, or social support. This may beget loneliness, multiple losses, stress, and potentially depression. With very few exceptions, this population group has not been studied.

Non-structured individual in-depth interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 19 individuals to learn how these individuals perceive, describe, and interpret their experience. The interviews were content-analyzed. This analysis yielded six main themes: The nature of the process (beginnings, intellectual vs. relational motivation, phases, and pivotal points), social attitudes (of the families and the community), emotional issues, challenges, and coping strategies (reaching compromises and reasoning, relocating to a different geographical area, pretending, developing a "thick skin", and catching up), support sources, current view of the Ultra Orthodox community and of self. These themes will be discussed and illustrated.

Implications for interventions and future research are suggested.