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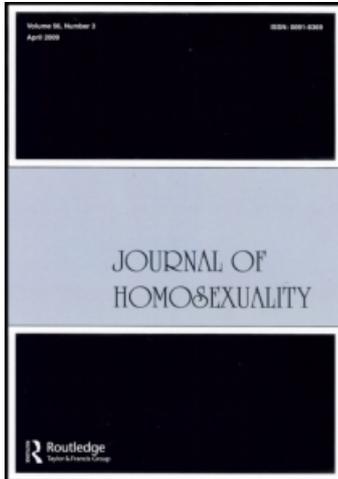
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## Journal of Homosexuality

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792306897>

### Inside and Outcast: Multifaceted Stigma and Redemption in the Lives of Gay and Lesbian Jehovah's Witnesses

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Online publication date: 06 November 2010

**To cite this Article** Lalic, Janja and McLaren, Karla(2010) 'Inside and Outcast: Multifaceted Stigma and Redemption in the Lives of Gay and Lesbian Jehovah's Witnesses', Journal of Homosexuality, 57: 10, 1303 — 1333

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/00918369.2010.517076

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2010.517076>

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## **Inside and Outcast: Multifaceted Stigma and Redemption in the Lives of Gay and Lesbian Jehovah's Witnesses**

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*Homosexuality has become a divisive issue in many religions and congregations. Like many other fundamentalist denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses condemns homosexual acts, thoughts, and feelings. Consequently, gay and lesbian Witnesses experience not just stigmatization and conflict between their sexual and religious identities in the social world, but also a nearly impossible task in their inner world. This inner task adds a new facet to our understanding of stigma (Goffman, 1963). This study explores the written narratives of a subset of gay and lesbian former Jehovah's Witnesses who were able to comprehend, negotiate, and, in most cases, resolve their multifaceted stigmas and conflicts through struggle, self-determination, and eventually connecting with networks of peers who faced or are facing similar stigmas. This research contributes to other work on the intersection of religion, family, and homosexuality; in particular, the findings have implications for the study of other strict fundamentalist religions.*

**KEYWORDS** *coming out, disclosure, Erving Goffman, family conflict, gay identity, homosexuality, identity conflicts, Jehovah's Witnesses, religious fundamentalism, social networks, stigma*

This article focuses on the lived experiences of a subset of gay and lesbian Jehovah's Witnesses who each published his or her own narrative of

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Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2004 annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion and the 2006 meeting of the International Cultic Studies Association. The authors thank Miriam Boeri, Andy Dick, Liahna Gordon, Laurie Wermuth, and anonymous reviewers, all of whom provided insightful comments and useful suggestions.

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self-discovery on the Internet. A content analysis of these narratives reveals not only internal anguish and intense confusion brought on by being stigmatized by one's own religion and family, but also the personal strength and determination found within most of the narrators as they managed to resolve their identity conflicts. Through this process, they found wholeness (even happiness), as well as solidarity and solace among others with similar experiences.

In these times, homosexuality has become a divisive issue in many religious denominations (Hartman, 1996). According to one national survey, the belief that it is a sin to engage in homosexual behavior is "more prevalent among people with a high level of religious commitment," and highly religious people are much more likely to hold negative views of gays and lesbians (PEW Forum on Religious and Public Life, 2003). Research on the relationship between religiosity and prejudicial attitudes toward homosexuals has expanded to include many religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism (Ammerman, 1987; Fink & Press, 1999; Hunsberger, 1996; Hunter, 1983; Roof & McKinney, 1987; Thumma, 1991; Wilkinson, 2004). Many Christians defend their homophobic attitudes on biblical grounds (Fulton, Gorsuch, & Maynard, 1999). As a result, numerous gay and lesbian Christians have felt stigmatized by their own religion (Boyd, 1993; Thumma, 1991; White, 1994; Wolkomir, 2006; Yip, 1997).

Yet, even amid such widespread religious intolerance, Jehovah's Witnesses are often considered stricter than most other conservative denominations in its attitude toward homosexuality. Primarily, this is due to the requirement that a homosexual Witness (including those who may be questioning their sexuality) must suppress both sexual behavior *and* sexual feelings. Witnesses are taught that, like smoking, which is also forbidden, homosexuality is a choice that can be consciously rejected ("Who Is To Blame," 2002; "You Must Be Holy," 1976). Unlike some religions where homosexuals are tolerated as long as they remain celibate (Wolkomir, 2006), Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) are expected to reject their internal sexual identities completely ("Who Is to Blame," 2002).

Erving Goffman's (1963) classic work on stigma proved most useful as an overarching frame through which we analyzed the multifaceted stigma and conflict experienced by the narrators in this study, who proved to be a thrice-stigmatized population. Goffman draws a distinction between the *discredited* person whose stigma is known (visible, apparent in some way, or previously disclosed) to "normals" (his term for the socially normative or unstigmatized majority) and the *discreditable* person whose stigma is hidden or undisclosed (p. 42). A discredited person with a discernible stigma must manage tension in the way that wheelchair-bound people must skillfully manage their own and others' emotions and reactions in order to navigate through the walking world (Cahill & Eggleston, 1994). A discreditable person with a hidden stigma, on the other hand, must manage this information

about themselves in more creative ways so that normals cannot discover any portion of the discredit. In order to explore the types of conflict a discredited or discreditable stigmatized person may face, of particular relevance was Goffman's "three-fold typology of identity," wherein he separates the social identity we present to the larger world, the personal identity we present to family and peers, and the ego identity we present internally as our inner, private, "backstage" selves (p. 106).

The goal of this article is to not only extend our understanding of Goffman's (1963) theories of stigma but also to convey the strength and resilience of those who manage to negotiate their way through multiple stigmas and "come out" the other side with a clear sense of identity. In our examination of the identity dilemma faced by these JW's, we also turned to the literature on the intersection of homosexuality, religion, and family and its relationship to social, emotional, and mental distress.

## HOMOSEXUALITY, RELIGION, AND FAMILY

A growing body of literature has emerged addressing religion and homosexuality. Given that the focus of this study is to shed light on the complexities, especially the inner turmoil, of individuals struggling to reconcile in one way or another their sexual identities with their religious convictions and incumbent norms, three broad areas of research were fruitful: developmental issues, family relations, and social networks; guilt and shame; and social factors influencing mental distress and suicide.

### Developmental Issues, Family Relations, and Social Networks

According to Hardin and Hall (2001), gays and lesbians "grow up in a culture that teaches . . . that homosexuality is wrong: a sign of moral failing, emotional disturbance, hormonal disorders, or bad genes. Constant immersion in such negative cultural beliefs is bound to have a corrosive effect on self-esteem, even [for those] who began life with an abundant supply" (p. 23). Similarly, Lewis, Derlega, Clarke, and Luang's (2006) research describes negative psychological outcomes in the lesbians they studied, wherein the social stigma and social constraints of being homosexual were associated with intrusive thoughts, stress, a negative mood, and self-reported physical symptoms. Self-hatred and low self-esteem are common among gays and lesbians struggling with their sexual identity, and even more so when they are part of nonsupportive families where homosexuality is devalued (Harrison, 2003). This perspective is borne out in Wolkomir's (2006) research on Christian men who experienced serious conflict between their homosexual desires and their beliefs. Earlier, Thumma's (1991) discussion of identity dissonance

experienced by conservative Christians with homosexual feelings indicates struggles with tension, guilt, and confusion resulting specifically from feeling “sinful” and condemned.

Gay youth struggling with “coming out” and integrating their sexual identity into the larger culture experience the most intense conflicts when their communities are religiously devout, when families have high expectations for children to marry and have children, and when gender roles are polarized and stereotypical (Tremble, Schneider, & Appathurai, 1989). Families with a strong emphasis on traditional family values were found to be less accepting of homosexuality than families who rated low on traditionalism (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). In related research on parental reactions to an offspring’s disclosure of a lesbian or gay identity, Savin-Williams and Dubé (1998) note that a family’s religion will most likely have an effect on parents’ attitudes toward a sexual minority offspring. As Kitts (2005) remarks, “What may be even worse than being hated by society because of one’s sexuality is being rejected, humiliated, and victimized by one’s own family or peers” (p. 625). This can be a tremendous stressor for lesbian, gay, or questioning youth. Ultimately, through stigmatization, pressure to hide their sexual conflicts or feelings, and familial and societal nonacceptance, gay and lesbian youth are “denied a fundamental rite of passage common to all adolescents: the development of a coherent, authentic self” (Morrison & L’Heureux, 2001, p. 45). Rejection from family and friends creates a troubling form of social ostracism that “takes a toll” on those who battle with this type of identity crisis (Thumma, 1991).

### Guilt and Shame

For some years now, researchers have been studying the relationship between depression and other negative psychological effects and religious upbringing, in particular when there is an emphasis on a strict interpretation of religious texts. Research findings indicate that regardless of race or ethnicity, stigmatized gay and lesbian youth tend to experience shame, guilt, depression, and self-hate; and these feelings intensify when there is a strong identification with a minority culture that tends to be more traditional (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). According to Slowinski (2001), for example, guilt, shame, embarrassment, and impaired sexual functioning, among other detrimental psychological effects, result from early religious training that upholds absolutist or fundamentalist views. Others (Schuck & Liddle, 2001) have studied depression and suicidal ideation in relation to conflicts between religion and sexual orientation. These researchers highlight the tremendous impact of these religious conflicts on identity formation in lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, noting that “perhaps the most damaging consequence of anti-gay teachings was the belief . . . that they would go to hell

or that God had rejected them" (p. 70). Similarly, in their examination of the relationship between religious fundamentalism and the challenges of forming a sexual identity different from that prescribed by one's belief system, Buchanan Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker (2001) conclude that such religious involvement may be associated with greater internalized homophobia and viewing homosexuality as immoral and sinful, adding "conflict to an already difficult path" (pp. 438–439).

### Social Factors Influencing Mental Distress and Suicide

Because of societal and familial stigmatization, as well as the resultant marginalization, homosexual adolescents in general tend to hide their sexual identities and corresponding thoughts or desires. These pressures put them at risk for isolation, depression, suicide, abuse, and rejection ([Harrison, 2003](#)). In both adolescence and adulthood, lesbians and gays in homophobic families and homophobic religious or ethnic communities are likely to feel isolated and persecuted, with sometimes dire consequences for the conflicted individual ([Wolkimir, 2006](#)); often these individuals self-preserve through hiding that aspect of themselves. Typically, such emotional trauma and the nonresolution of these intensely troubling issues put a person at risk for unhealthy and potentially self-destructive behaviors ([Harrison, 2003](#)). More than 20 years ago, [Hetrick and Martin \(1987\)](#) indicated a growing awareness of suicide risk among gay and lesbian adolescents. One review of research on suicide incidence rates (attempts and completions) and specific risks for suicide within the adolescent homosexual population led researchers to concur with Durkheim that "one of the major reasons people kill themselves is a lack of integration into the dominant culture" ([Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001, p. 39](#)). Ultimately, "a ubiquitous tolerance of homophobic or heterosexist attitudes in teachers, peers, religious leaders, and family members may increase suicide risk for GLBQ [gay, lesbian, bisexual, questioning] youth" ([Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001, p. 43](#)). In the same vein, [Rutter \(2002\)](#) makes the point that social support (family and/or peer) may be a mitigating factor in whether or not gay youth are at increased risk for suicidal behavior. Similarly, [Rosario, Scrimshaw, and Hunter \(2005\)](#) stress the importance of social relationships, finding that the relationship between suicide, suicidal attempts, and post-attempt psychological distress are mediated by supportive social and familial networks. Based on their study of suicide predictors in lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, [D'Augelli et al. \(2005\)](#) stress that parental efforts to discourage gender atypical behavior, parental psychological abuse, and negative parental reactions to gay sexual orientation can be factored in to assist in the prediction of suicide attempts. They note also that "more lifetime gay-related verbal abuse" is characteristic of those who attempted suicide ([D'Augelli et al., 2005, p. 657](#)). As [Kitts \(2005\)](#)

clearly states, "Being gay in-and-of-itself is not the cause of the increase in suicide. The increased risk comes from the psychosocial distress associated with being gay" (p. 624).

In view of these research findings, and taking into consideration the unwavering stance toward homosexuality in Jehovah's Witnesses (outlined in the next section), it appeared likely that gay and lesbian Witnesses would have experiences similar to that described in the literature. Having set itself apart from mainstream society, in many respects the Witness world serves as the dominant culture for active members. This leaves gay and lesbian JWs without a sense of integration on at least two levels. As noted, family relations, social networks, and other societal forces are recognized as having either a positive or negative impact on one's development and on personal (social and psychological) stability. Consequently, in the case of homosexual (or questioning) youth or adults in the Witness community, those social forces would likely be working at the negative end of the scale. Therefore, in our study of this subset of the Witness population, we hypothesized that guilt, shame, self-doubt, self-loathing, and other troubling forms of social and psychological conflict, including suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, would be present.

## THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Charles Taze Russell founded Jehovah's Witnesses, formally known as the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (WTS), in the late 1870s to 1880s. It is one of two surviving traditions of that era that grew out of the Adventist Millennial movement (the other is the Seventh-Day Adventists; Bergman, 1995). Because JWs staunchly believe in Armageddon, WTS can be categorized as a world-renouncing religious movement. JWs follow quite literally the WTS interpretation of the Bible, using their own *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*. Most important, perhaps, they believe "the battle of HarMagedon" is near, that we are "now in the time of the end," when God will "eliminate the present system" and ideal living conditions will ensue in God's kingdom wherein the saved and resurrected will live forever ("What Do They Believe," 2000). Only a few will survive this impending doom, "namely those who believe in its imminent reality, which is to say the Witnesses themselves" (D'Haene, 2002, p. 26). WTS has been identified as a "puritanical religious movement" (Holden, 2002), as "a conservative Christian denomination whose theology differs greatly from that of Fundamentalist and other Evangelical denominations" (Robinson, 2006), and as an organization that symbolizes "extreme authoritarianism" (Franz, 1983). Sociologists Schaefer and Zellner (2008) point out that WTS is often "thought of as going beyond the pale" and, therefore, has met with

indifference, derision, and occasional hostility (p. 249). At least one defector labels the religion as “persuasive, seductive, and cultlike” (D. Wilson, 2003, p. 30).

According to WTS's official Web site (<http://www.watchtower.org>), there are approximately 6,000,000 Witnesses in 230 countries. The Kingdom Hall is each congregation's place for worship and meetings. Every member is expected to proselytize, or witness, and this activity is divided into four categories: special pioneers, pioneers, auxiliary pioneers, and publishers (Schaefer & Zellner, 2008). Pioneers commit to a certain number of fieldwork hours each month, and Witnesses continually study WTS literature, learn the doctrine, regularly attend the congregation's meetings, and meet all normative requirements (“Ways They Use,” 2000). As Bainbridge (1997) notes, “Being a Witness is extremely demanding” (p. 100). Although an essentially isolationist alternative religion, WTS is familiar to the larger society because of adherents' door-to-door witnessing, adherence to pacifist beliefs, refusal to vote, and refusal to celebrate holidays, including birthdays and Christmas. Some of the controversies surrounding WTS include failed prophecies (varied predictions for the precise date of the end of the world), refusal of surgical blood transfusions, discouraging members from seeking higher education, persistent proselytizing (most recently in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union), and recent allegations of protecting child molesters through church policy (Guthrie, 2002). The focus of this study, however, centers on the group's beliefs and attitudes toward sex and sexuality as they influenced the lived experiences of some members who deviated from WTS-prescribed behaviors, principally with regard to homosexuality.

WTS is a traditional patriarchal religion in which men are considered superior and women are expected to be submissive to their husbands (“Does the Bible Discriminate,” 2005). A woman is regarded as a “weaker vessel” (*Awake!*, 1967, pp. 27, 28), should have no authority over men, and should exhibit “lowliness of mind” before her husband (“Show Honor,” 1999, pp.19–20). Women are expected to actively witness, but they cannot instruct men on spiritual matters, nor can they serve as elders or ministerial servants addressing congregations from the pulpit. The extent of control over members' daily lives and decisions may vary within congregations in different locales; some individuals and families may exhibit more independence of thought and action. In general, however, adherents exhibiting laxness toward WTS norms and rules will typically be asked to leave (“Discipline,” 1988).

Given the patriarchal view of gender roles and responsibilities, one might well expect that “liberated” sexual attitudes or practices would not be condoned. Indeed, sex before or outside of marriage is forbidden, as is engaging in masturbation (“You Must Be Holy,” 1976). Not only is masturbation considered self-love, but also “Witnesses take the unique position that

masturbation can lead to homosexuality” (Schaefer & Zellner, 2008, p. 264; “You Must Be Holy,” 1976). In the WTS, homosexuality is considered Satanic, an abomination, an unnatural act, detestable, and a demonic influence (“Let Us Abhor,” 1997). In the teachings and literature, such as *Awake!* and *The Watchtower* magazines, homosexuality is regarded as an “unclean degradation” and equated with pedophilia and other heinous acts (“Let Us Abhor,” 1997; see also Robinson, 2006, and <http://www.gayxjw.org/ped.html>).

A Kingdom Ministry School textbook (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1991) called *Pay Attention to Yourself and to All the Flock* is the standard handbook for elders and overseers (this previously confidential handbook is now available online at <http://www.watchtower.cc/flock.htm><sup>1</sup>). In it are instructions on providing counsel to members of the church, with specific details covering most aspects of daily life, including explicit guidance on the adjudication of sexual misconduct. Sexual misconduct includes homosexual acts, oral and anal sex, lesbianism, the mutual masturbation of persons not married to one another, and adultery. In the text, homosexuality and lesbianism are listed alongside incest and bestiality as wrongdoings requiring judicial action by the elders (pp. 92–94). Neither penetration nor orgasm is necessary for judicial action to be taken against a Witness who engages in (or is accused of engaging in) such activities; however, two or three eyewitnesses or a written or oral confession are required for conviction. In the case of allegations of homosexuality, evidence that “the accused stayed all night . . . with a known homosexual . . . under improper circumstances” is sufficient proof (p. 111). Under these guidelines, homosexuality is cause for expulsion from the group. WTS does not promote sexual conversion, or reparative, therapy for adherents who struggle with homosexuality, as do some other fundamental and evangelical denominations (Wolkomir, 2006), although it has been reported that some elders may make suggestions along those lines (A Common Bond, 2007). In general, WTS does not offer much counseling for self-avowed homosexuals or suspected wrongdoers. At best, a troubled Witness who confesses to homosexual thoughts may be told to pray, and in many cases, a heterosexual relationship or marriage may be suggested or chosen as a path to correct behavior.

In conjunction with its unyielding policy on homosexuality, WTS also upholds one of the most severe practices in dealing with wrongdoers. Typically, an unrepentant Witness who disobeys or violates one of the rules (from smoking cigarettes to having extramarital sex to engaging in homosexual acts) is publicly denounced and expelled from the congregation through an excommunication procedure known as “disfellowshipping” (“Discipline,” 1998). Spiritually, being disfellowshipped means that one will not survive Armageddon or ascend to heaven with the faithful; socially, being disfellowshipped is tantamount to being dead. Devout JW’s are to have no contact with a disfellowshipped person. There is some leniency

in the implementation of this no-contact rule when it comes to families, whereby active and disfellowshipped members are allowed to have contact with each other, and may even live in the same house, so long as there is no discussion of WTS matters ("Discipline," 1998). Often, whether or not to shun a disfellowshipped member is a decision left to each family, although many WTS writings make clear the spiritual disadvantages of doing so.

WTS's approach to homosexuality—combined with the inherent isolationism and authoritarianism of this group—creates an especially difficult environment for gay and lesbian members. As JW's, they experience social stigmatization and segregation from the outside world and, therefore, tend not to reach outside of their religious communities for support. However, if they divulge their sexual identity within the congregation, they face ostracism and stigmatization that may lead to expulsion and the loss of their personal, social, religious, and familial networks. Added to that is a unique form of stigmatization that comes from the knowledge that, according to WTS, Jehovah (God) abhors homosexuality. This internalized stigma leaves these individuals with no field—public or private—in which to construct a viable identity as a gay or lesbian person who is also a Jehovah's Witness. (It is important to note that there is no such thing as an *active* gay or lesbian JW. An active Witness must be either heterosexual or a celibate homosexual who is working toward heterosexuality in thought, feeling, and action.) Adherents who are gay (or who might be questioning their sexuality) are caught in a double bind: Either they can remain silently celibate (i.e., never any admission, discussion, or even thoughts of the "gay" self) or they can actively opt against their homosexual self by engaging in heterosexual relationships. Either choice in this double bind can be regarded as a denial of self. Yet, this becomes a triple bind when we consider that for many, avoiding sexual behavior is not as difficult as the constant suppression of the inner self that is required in this context. It is not enough to stay in the closet; rather, a gay Witness must banish any and all thoughts related to homosexuality, as well as the emotions that may accompany such thoughts. This puts an enormous psychological burden on gay and lesbian JW's, as the control and elimination of thoughts and feelings becomes a near-impossible task. As suggested by the research cited earlier, this complicated task would surely heighten the intensity of guilt and shame these individuals experience, as well as increase the potential for self-destructive behaviors, such as alcoholism, drug use, and suicide.

Nonetheless, even in the strictest of milieus, people find ways around the rules; exceptions may always be found. Thus, we do not contend that what is described here is the reality for every WTS member (gay or straight) or every Witness family. Rather, our intention is to present and discuss the lived experiences of a subset of gay and lesbian Jehovah's Witnesses who struggled with these issues, as well as identify one source

of nonjudgmental encouragement and comfort that has aided many of these conflicted individuals in sorting out their lives.

## DATA AND METHODS

This study included data drawn from several sources; however, this article is based primarily on a content analysis of 24 preexisting personal narratives of gay and lesbian former Jehovah's Witnesses posted by each of them on the Internet for public consumption. One of the article's authors conducted a two-hour semistructured interview with a former JW who was cofounder of the first known support group for gay ex-Witnesses and cofounder of A Common Bond, an international, Internet-based support group for gay and lesbian JWs (<http://www.gayxjw.org>). That individual also had a narrative on the Internet which was included in the 24 mentioned above. Select statistical data were gleaned from written surveys prepared and gathered by the organizers of the 1999 and 2000 A Common Bond conferences; such data were used in this article to corroborate or highlight aspects that emerged in the content analysis. Participant observation by the same author at one of the Common Bond conferences (August 25–27, 2000 in San Francisco, CA), as well as informal conversations with active and former JWs (both heterosexual and homosexual) between 2000 and 2006 helped provide data for the purposes of triangulation (Silverman, 1995).

The online narratives were written by 20 males and 4 females from the United States, Canada, and Australia, and were posted online between 1999 and 2006. Seventeen of the narrators were born and raised in the Jehovah's Witnesses; the remaining 7 converted between the ages of 8 and 20 (3 of the 7 joined prior to 1975 [the year of the WTS's anticipated Armageddon], specifically to "cure" their homosexuality). All of the narrators had left the church at the time of their postings: 16 were formally disfellowshipped, and 8 organized their own departures (in most cases, these departures involved self-disassociations followed by formal disfellowshipping by the WTS). The narratives, which range in length from 1 to 17 single-spaced pages of text when printed out, were analyzed using 10 coding categories (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The initial categories were 1) a person's attempts to approach WTS's view of homosexuality and self; 2) attitudes of family, friends, other members, congregation officials, and outsiders; 3) coping mechanisms and support systems; 4) decision to leave; 5) relationships with family and peers/members; 6) promises/cures; 7) reactions to leaving; 8) realization of and reaction to sexual orientation; 9) self-destructive behavior, including self-caused damage to one's JW identity; and 10) suicidal ideation. From this, 35 subcategories emerged, which were then further refined into analytical patterns and evaluated using the frame of Goffman's (1963) theories

on stigma. All names used in this article are pseudonyms, and all identifying locations and specific dates are obscured.

## MANAGING INFORMATION AND TENSION

Gay and lesbian JW's experience different forms of stigmatization in each of Goffman's (1963) three identity areas: social, personal, and ego. As devoted WTS members, their religious affiliation discredits them in the larger society. This stigma in their social identity requires them to manage tension with outsiders, who may consider a WTS affiliation as unusual. In relation to the personal identity they express among their peers and families, their hidden homosexuality renders them dangerously discreditable; this hidden stigma requires them to vigilantly manage information in their close-knit Witness communities. And, in the innermost area of their private ego identity, gay and lesbian Witnesses carry yet another stigma that must be managed.

Through this concept of the ego identity (also described as the private, inner, backstage self), [Goffman \(1963\)](#) explores an option available to most stigmatized people—that is, to insulate themselves in their alienation and create a separate, untouchable, internally moderated ego identity, wherein the stigma transforms and becomes insignificant, accepted, and sometimes even honored (pp. 6–7). However, the absolute proscriptions against homosexual behaviors, thoughts, and feelings—along with WTS's contention that Jehovah abhors homosexuals—leave gay and lesbian JW's essentially deprived of the insulation that a private ego identity can offer. Inside their private musings, they cannot easily dream in the way many other stigmatized people do—of a world where wheelchairs fly, or facial disfigurements no longer matter, or speech impediments magically disappear. Rather, inside the private worlds of gay and lesbian Witnesses exists a harsh, exacting, and all-knowing Jehovah who is angered and horrified by their very existence. In their internal ego identities, gay and lesbian Witnesses are thoroughly stigmatized and discredited and, therefore, must manage inner tension at all times. This experience is conveyed eloquently in the narratives.

Brendan, born and raised in the Witnesses, knew he was “different” by the age of 5. In late adolescence, as his sexuality awakened more strongly, he began to masturbate (which is regarded as a sin in WTS). Brendan entered an excruciating period of self-doubt and self-hatred:

I felt that if I was redeemable in the slightest to Jehovah, I had wrecked my chances of that by sinning so badly. I felt totally disgusting. I had no self-worth. Many times I had thought out how I was going to kill myself. I would often be crumpled on my bedroom floor behind my closed door and cry my eyes out 'til I fell asleep. I would beg Jehovah to help me; I was so scared that he didn't approve of me. But Jehovah

never answered my prayers, which made me feel worse; to me it was proof that I was disgusting in his eyes. I can't tell you how that can make you feel. I was never, not even from birth, worthy.

Matt was also born and raised in the WTS. At 14, Matt realized he was gay, and reacted with horror and a sense of betrayal:

I couldn't understand how Jehovah could do such a thing to me. I was convinced that I was the only JW in the entire world who was this way, and that it was the result of something bad that I had done. I struggled with the masturbation issue for years, convinced that the Society [WTS] must be right in its connections between it and homosexuality. I would beg Jehovah every night to remove this burden from me, and to not hate me in the meantime.

One consequence of the multifaceted stigmas experienced by gay and lesbian Witnesses is that no matter how well they manage tension in the larger society outside the WTS, or how well they manage information and pass as heterosexual inside the WTS, still they are burdened internally by the fact that none of their management skills—however brilliantly they may wield those skills in the social and personal realms—has any effect whatsoever on their “sinful” inner state. Yet, this private, internal stigma and its related tensions must be managed if gay and lesbian Witnesses are to maintain the personal identities that anchor them within their all-important familial and peer relationships.

## CONCEALMENT STRATEGIES AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Jehovah's Witnesses learn very early that homosexuality is intolerable to Jehovah and the WTS community. Gerri, born and raised in WTS, writes about her conflict with her sexuality and her fears of losing her personal, familial identity if she were to disclose her private ego identity:

All my life, for as long as I can remember, I struggled with who I was and my attraction to the same sex. I was taught that this was wrong. So, I grow up not having anyone to talk to about my thoughts and my feelings. Knowing that if I said anything that God would hate me, and that I would be turned on by the people that loved and accepted me for who they thought I was.

But stigmatized people must learn multiple concealment strategies and become masters in “the arts of impression management,” often as very young children ([Goffman, 1963, p. 130](#)). Families of stigmatized individuals (such as wheelchair-bound children) often provide a protective capsule as one aspect

of this impression-management repertoire. But in this case, even though Witness families can create a capsule around their child's stigma related to being a JW, wherein the child can be taught to deal effectively with non-Witnesses, ultimately that protective cocoon actually intensifies the stigma of the child's hidden homosexuality.

Andrew, born and raised in WTS, writes about his early learning in regard to his stigmatized social identity as a JW. However, he also relates how he learned—on his own as a young boy—to conceal his internal sexual stigma:

I had the typical JW upbringing. I wasn't allowed to have friends outside of the organization. My associations were monitored very closely by my parents . . . . They would even ask about my contacts from other JWs whom I went to school with. I kept wondering how they knew everything. Of course, no holidays. Like all JWs, I had to sit out parties and was the constant object of ridicule. My parents would make me bring literature to school for my teachers and classmates and that was my supposed "territory" for preaching the "truth."

I always knew from an early age that I wasn't attracted to women. It's just something that I always felt. But with the JW teaching, I was made to feel disgusting and abnormal and mentally sick for the way I was feeling, so I never told anyone. So, I played the little good boy because I thought that was what God wanted and required.

Goffman (1963) claims that stigmatized people have an ability to "live on a leash," using their homes or private areas as repair stations where they can remove their masks, rest, and refurbish their disguises in safety (p. 90). The close-knit Witness community clearly acts as a repair station for the social identity stigma of being a JW; however, as we coded the 24 narratives, we observed continual attempts to apply WTS practices and techniques to repair the hidden homosexual stigma as well. All of the narrators described using impression-management strategies that involved heightened devotion and piety, fervent prayer, and what one narrator (Matt) called "being a super-Witness." Also, some ingeniously employed the protective capsule surrounding their stigmatized Witness identities as an apparatus to conceal their homosexuality. For instance, William writes of being able to avoid sexuality altogether:

I knew I was "different" from early on, probably sometime in elementary school, but I knew it wasn't perceived as "normal," so I hid it with a passion and lived in fear that I'd be found out. In high school, I was well liked, even though I was clearly different due to being a Witness. But being a Witness provided me with an easy excuse for not dating, since it was not in harmony with my religious beliefs until I was of marrying age.

Many of the narrators also relied on “cures” sponsored by WTS, such as the purification ritual of baptism or entering into a heterosexual marriage. Prior to the prophesied date of Armageddon in 1975, many prospective converts were told that joining meant that their sins (including homosexuality) would be erased as they ascended into heaven. Bob was one of the three narrators who joined with the express purpose of curing his homosexuality. He used both strategies—the cure and marriage:

I had always known I was homosexual, but I firmly believed that Jehovah would cure me. I felt so strongly about that that I believed that the simple act of water immersion would change my life forever. Of course it didn't, but that did not deter me. I had found the Truth. Every word I read in Watchtower publications seemed truthful, provable, and as one news reporter stated, “invulnerable.” . . . Believing that it was possible to “cure” my homosexuality, I studied diligently, prayed often, and became a Pioneer. I just absolutely knew that if I worked harder at it, Jehovah would cure me . . . . I suffered deep guilt and stress. Nothing I tried seemed to work. I married at age 19 believing that that would help. It didn't, and in fact, it added an additional burden of having to be a good husband and father while maintaining the secrecy of my homosexuality.

Although the cover of marriage offers protection to a closeted gay or lesbian JW, the ethical dilemma of involving another person in a double life takes its toll. Eduardo struggled with his homosexuality for years, but found that his marriage cure only made life more difficult:

I thought I would die because of what I was. This came from my mentality as a Witness. So I made one last effort to “fix” myself. I married a female. She was one of my best friends and a lovely girl. But that lasted for 3.5 months. At that point it became painfully obvious I couldn't be the husband she needed. So, after a scary conversation with her father explaining my reasons, he offered to pay for an annulment.

In another account, Kyle looks back on his failed marriage cure and admits that he knew he was doing something that felt ethically wrong:

At this point in time you're probably asking why someone who obviously had gay feelings would intentionally become involved with a girl and prepare to marry. See, the difficult part is . . . there really is no simple answer for that. I was young, and scared. I was taught that it was my decision to be gay, and as long as I didn't decide to be gay, I guess I thought I could be normal.

Ultimately, the concealment strategies and protective capsules that worked so well for their discredited social identities as JWs actually made their discreditable homosexual identities more unwieldy. The narrators also

experienced intense internal conflict as a consequence of their conviction that their homosexual stigmas could never be concealed from Jehovah.

### TORTURED LEARNING

The term “tortured learning” is used to illuminate the attempts a stigmatized person might take “to correct his condition indirectly by devoting much private effort to the mastery of areas . . . felt to be closed . . . to one with his shortcomings” ([Goffman \(1963, p. 10\)](#)). Laurence is a fourth-generation Witness who devoted himself fully in order to cleanse himself of his homosexuality:

Oh, the teen years. Filled with changes—physical, mental, and emotional. Filled with insecurity. Filled with an awakening realization that I was gay. Like my parents, I have always desired to worship and please God. As a youth, that meant following the Watchtower’s teachings as closely as possible. I pioneered. I suppressed my homosexuality. I was eventually appointed a ministerial servant. I suppressed my homosexuality. I was assigned public talks. I suppressed my homosexuality. Rarely did a day pass that I did not wake depressed and go to bed the same.

This internalized “demand for purity” ([Lifton, 1961, pp. 423–435](#)) creates unrealistic expectations, chronic conflict, and an inescapable sense of shame and failure. Nonetheless, this difficult condition pales in the face of the penalty for homosexuality in WTS. For a gay or lesbian Witness, there is no option other than to deny the inner self because the consequences of self-disclosure are likely to be calamitous ([Lalich, 2004](#)).

[Goffman \(1963\)](#) describes the “corporate life” accessible to stigmatized people through “sympathetic others” and “circles of lament” (p. 20), sponsored publications (p. 25), and “in-group alignments” (p. 112). But for gay and lesbian JW’s, none of these corporate benefits exists, because “coming out” in WTS tends to lead to sanctions and disfellowshipping. This unwanted consequence means that intimates, among whom most of us find solace, can be especially troublesome and even dangerous to gay or lesbian Witnesses.

Given that homosexuality is viewed as demonic by WTS, faithful members may keep watch for any signs of homosexuality in their midst, and if found, tend to report such sins to the elders, for Witnesses are obligated to report wrongdoings that threaten the “cleanliness” of the congregation (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1991, p. 97). Many of the narrators who came out to their intimates were reported to elders by best friends, siblings, parents, or grandparents. In some cases, the elders showed lenience and called a private meeting with the offender to suggest penitence through prayer or the marriage cure. However, many narrators

were dismayed to find that their private information became public very quickly. For example, Brendan, in his late teens and after a long period of declining health, came out to his mother, who immediately called the elders. The elders arrived within hours and were kind to Brendan, who was thoroughly distraught and on the edge of a breakdown that would send him to a psychiatric hospital a few days later. When Brendan returned to his mother's home after several weeks in the hospital, the elders' behavior had changed markedly:

The elders came and saw me again a couple of times with a completely different attitude from the night I came out. You see, it wasn't good enough for me to simply not talk about being gay, I actually was told that I had to work on not thinking gay. I couldn't work out how to do that; I had always been the same. One brother actually asked me, "If you were to look at pornographic material of a girl, would it arouse you?" Of course I said no . . . and then he asked the same thing about seeing a man the same way, and I said yes, it would arouse me. He looked completely disgusted. This kind of thing seemed to be the theme of their visits . . . . So, as far as I was concerned, enough was enough. People who said they would help me only ended up stabbing me in the back. Soon the entire congregation knew about my sexuality.

In a similar plea for help, Matt confessed his doubts about his sexuality directly to the elders after he graduated from high school—and before he began his proselytizing work in earnest. At the time, Matt was a devout and celibate Witness:

At one point, I was so distraught that I went to the elders about my homosexual feelings. One of the elders "chuckled" throughout the entire meeting, and the other, very sternly, continually told me how bad I was. Within a month, most of my congregation had been made aware in one way or another that I had some gay problem, and eventually a young sister that I had been "dating" was told so that she would have nothing to do with me. But I kept putting Jehovah first, and throwing my burden upon him, as my emotional health slowly deteriorated.

After I had changed congregations two more times and had to move back with my parents, I found myself at an all-time low. I was suicidal, and had gone so far as to plan my demise. I met with the PO [Presiding Overseer] of my hall to tell him that I was seeking therapy and would have to resign from the Pioneer list. He looked at me and told me that he understood, being familiar with my struggles with homosexuality in the past.

It was at that moment that my faith in the JW's died. After slaving all of those years, to do everything "right," to go to them when I needed help, after all of that, the elders that I trusted had violated my trust and broken

confidentiality. I then knew that I would always be branded “queer,” it was something I could not escape, and that I needed to take a long look at this organization to which I had devoted all of my life to that point.

In this case, Matt's council of elders offered no curative suggestions, but they did not disfellowship him immediately.

In other cases, disclosures—self-directed or not—resulted in swift, public, and final excommunications. Terry, for example, born and raised in a devout Witness family, came out to his family when he was 18. His experience is one that closeted gay and lesbian JW's dread:

After I graduated high school . . . I knew that I could not live my life being who I am and live the life of a Jehovah's Witness. [The following year] I made a decision that would change my whole life. After coming out to my family, I was verbally reprimanded in front of the whole congregation for a sexual experience that my guilt-driven conscience made me confess to, bringing shame and embarrassment to my family. My father had to step down from his Elder position in the congregation. I decided to write a letter of disassociation from the Jehovah's Witness religion. I was excommunicated from members of the Jehovah's Witness religion, and my family.

I left home with my family in tears, like their only son had died. I had no idea at the time that, to this day [about 15 years later], this was going to be the last time I would see my family—since [then], not even a picture! I tried to not let the reality of what I had done sink in, but to no avail. I was consumed with guilt and a dark, empty pain.

Another narrator, Bob, became a respected proselytizer and family man, but he also led a furtive double life. The exposure of his sexuality had equally dire consequences:

I often think I would still be a JW today if I had not been outed by another JW who frequented the same public park to engage in sexual activities. Because I was a well-known public speaker throughout the Circuit, many people I did not know knew me, and he was one of them. Fearing that I, in fact, did know him, he decided to be the first to confess his sins—and while he was at it, to confess my sins too . . . I was 42 years old and by then had been a JW for 25 years and married for 23 of those years. My life as I had known it came to a crashing end. Divorce, family, friends, and all Watchtower connections were severed. In addition, the scary part was that I had no gay friends waiting in the wings. No support system in place. Just me . . . in “the world” . . . alone.

A few of the narrators' families maintained contact and supported their discredited loved ones, but this was atypical and often involved damage to various family members' own positions within the church. Of the 24 narrators,

only one, William, was able to preserve normal ties with his family after he disassociated and was subsequently disfellowshipped. In the survey completed by participants at the 2000 A Common Bond conference, 80% of the respondents reported that their JW families had cut off or curtailed communications, while 97% reported that JW friends and peers had done the same.

Recently, WTS has allowed disfellowshipped Witnesses to be notified of important family events. Yet, in many cases, former members are decidedly unwelcome at such family events as weddings and funerals, including the funerals of their own parents. Andrew was 24 when he was disfellowshipped, his father was given the choice of losing his own position within the WTS hierarchy or kicking Andrew out of the house. Andrew was told to leave the family home. Three months later, Andrew's brother called to tell him that their grandfather had died in an accident:

So I went down to the funeral, which of course was held at the Kingdom Hall. During the whole time I was there, no one came up to me, spoke, or hugged me to console me. [A year and a half later], I had a chance to talk to my mother one more time, and we talked a little bit . . . When I was done, she said, "Don't ever call here again and don't ever come back home." She was crying the whole time. I couldn't really feel sorry for her though, because it was like my heart was ripped outta my chest. That was the last time I spoke with her. I don't really expect to hear from them again unless someone dies. That's the only time they call.

## COSTLY SOLUTIONS

One option for dealing with stigma is "for the individual who cannot maintain an identity norm to alienate himself from the community which upholds the norm . . . . This is of course a costly solution both for society and for the individual" (Goffman, 1963, p. 129). In seeking evidence of such costly solutions, we included "suicidal ideation" and "self-destructive behavior" in our coding categories, but we soon realized that the multifaceted stigmas endured by gay and lesbian JWs required a more nuanced approach. Certainly, evidence of suicidal ideation or self-destructive behaviors was present in all of the narratives. Also, the surveys gathered at the 1999 and 2000 A Common Bond conferences found high rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in this population. The surveys revealed suicidal ideation in this population at 52% in 1999 and 61% in 2000. Actual suicide attempts were also noted: 18% in 1999 and 16% in 2000. This is significantly higher than the prevalence levels for heterosexual youth, where 19–29% report suicidal ideation; and 7–13% report a suicide attempt (Russell & Joyner, 2001, p. 1276)—and also higher than a study of 2,881 gay males, where 21% reported having a suicide plan and 12% made an attempt (Paul et al.,

2002, p. 1342). Naturally, we cannot make a scientific comparison of or draw conclusions from research findings emanating from different samples and methodologies, especially taking into consideration large national surveys versus a small sample of self-selected respondents at a conference of apostates. Nonetheless, these findings offer some indication of the extent of emotional and psychological distress residing in the homosexual population within WTS.

However, another form of self-destruction emerged in our analysis: the very costly but also very necessary destruction of the individual's JW identity as a path to survival. It is clear that there is no way to combine living as an open homosexual with being an active member of WTS. As Terry writes, "I knew that I could not live my life being who I am and live the life of a Jehovah's Witness." It is also clear that WTS's proscription against homosexual behaviors, thoughts, or feelings means that ingroup alignments, circles of lament, and sympathetic others are unavailable to gays and lesbians in Witness communities. Additionally, no protective capsules or repair stations for the stigma of homosexuality exist within WTS, leaving the costly solution of alienation as perhaps the only solution.<sup>2</sup> As we coded the narratives for self-destructive behaviors, we identified this unique alienation process as "self-caused damage to the JW identity." The 24 narratives revealed multiple incidences of rebelliousness, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicidal ideation and behaviors. There were three suicide attempts and one completed suicide (of 16-year-old Elena, whose narrative account was an online eulogy by her father).

Yet, alongside those examples of clear-cut self-destruction were countless intentional and unintentional behaviors that served to terminate the individual's JW identity. Some narrators detached themselves from that identity in measured, conscious steps, often by undertaking a critical study of the church's tenets and ending their association on philosophical or doctrinal grounds. Others, such as Terry and Bob, saw their identities as Witnesses shatter with shocking abruptness. And some found ways to out themselves and sever their ties to WTS, even though they reported feeling deep ambivalence and fear. Vic, for example, writes about a period in his 30s when he was celibate and had devoted himself utterly to WTS. He worked hard to log the hours required of Pioneers, and he suppressed his sexuality through intense focus on church activities:

But . . . to no avail. I am noticing that no matter how hard I pray, and pray I did with tears streaming down my face, that I am afflicted with my sexuality; it won't go away. There I was, in my second month of Auxiliary Pioneering, and I am not able, again, to make my hours. Of course, this brings me down even further. I go to more meetings, I try to take in an extra assembly, extra special talks . . . but to no avail. I'm further mentally tortured and wrecked emotionally, because I cannot stave off my sexual frustrations.

Riding the commuter train one night into work, I pick up the local daily paper. I read the paper, but turn to the classifieds. I notice that there are personals. Yes, even gay personals. I had never seen that before . . . . Having NOT made my hours for the month . . . I give up. I really do. I feel like: "I'm going to be destroyed at Armageddon; Jehovah has lost favor with me. May as well have as much fun as possible before Armageddon." I decide to reply to a few of the ads in the newspaper.

In part due to having a self-affirming gay sexual experience, Vic separated himself from WTS within in few months and was then disfellowshipped.

Abe took a somewhat longer route by rebelling throughout his teens. After moving away from home and into an apartment with a group of JW friends and fellow Pioneers, he experimented with his sexuality. Abe writes of both the joy and the despair he felt after having a positive first gay sexual encounter:

I didn't feel bad at all for what I had done. I loved being close to my friend. I loved holding him. But I knew I would never have a clean Witness conscience again, lest I confess all of my sins to a judicial committee. And I knew my family would find out somehow. There was no way to return to the person I was without considerable pain. This is not even to mention the fear of death I would suffer at Armageddon, should I be unrepentant. So I sat on the fence for months with my rotting conscience, and slowly ate myself alive. I simply could not bring myself to answer for what I had done. I feared a total breakdown. So I remained immobile.

Abe was outed by his roommates (who broke into his computer in search of evidence) and then was reported on to the elders and his parents by his brother. He attempted penitence but was disfellowshipped within a few months.

For Vic and Abe, these sexual relationships, which were a necessary part of their maturation process, were clearly identity endangering. And while all of the narrators experienced the destruction of their identity as JWs (self-initiated or not), their transition to the outside world was made harrowing—not just by the loss of their families, friends, and social support networks, but also by the world-renouncing position of WTS (and the JW stigma they already carried). In many cases (especially for those who were disfellowshipped as teenagers), they had few non-JW friends, no support or resources, and nowhere to go. One teenager, Adam, lived in his car for several weeks after being disfellowshipped. Another, Sam, lived on the streets and became a "go-go boy." Terry, disfellowshipped at 18, describes a long period of drug abuse:

I wasn't away from home for more than six months before I started experimenting with crack cocaine. The high and the lifestyle with this drug was more than the diversion I wanted from my feelings . . . and my life . . . . Over the next few years I tried to call my family, keeping my drug use away from them. But my family saw that I wasn't making any efforts to come back to the JW's so they told me not to call anymore. My drug use slowly progressed over the next five years.

Ted, who struggled for years to fit in with the JW's until he was dis-fellowshipped in his 30s, also turned to drugs and alcohol after being ejected from the church:

It was not easy for me to recover from the influences of the JW's. Belief that I had been abandoned by God took its toll on me. I began using illegal drugs, drank even more heavily, was hospitalized several times, and attempted suicide once.

### RECLAIMING THE STIGMA SYMBOL

While leaving the Witnesses became the only clear option for these narrators, life on the outside was disconcerting and disorienting. As gay former JW's, they had now revealed their secret stigmas and made open declarations of their sexual orientation. But [Goffman \(1963\)](#) points out that when a stigma is discovered (or finally accepted) later in life, someone actually has to "inform the infirm who he is going to have to be" (p. 43).

Brian is a fourth-generation Witness who left WTS after an intensive study of its tenets led him to reject the teachings. He left of his own volition at age 25, but found that his life in WTS had not prepared him for the outside world:

That same month, I "remembered" that I'm gay and that I could, for the first time in my life, experiment with my sexuality. I've always felt a little bit underdeveloped, since I started doing at age 25 what most kids did in their teens, which is explore themselves and sex. But, I'm dealing with it now at 28. It was difficult being out "in the world" for the first time, I was undereducated, wasn't under the protective wing of the Organization, and left to fend for myself.

Vic also left the group as an adult. Even though he had a home and a job that provided stability, he had serious adjustment difficulties that were compounded by the stigma of having been a JW:

I struggled for many years. I never told most "worldly" persons that I had ever been a Jehovah's Witness. Here I was gay, and wanting to admit

that I had been a JW? No way; it was difficult to deal with my sexuality as it was, let alone admit my previous involvement with them. I had a great deal of shame. [Then] a pen pal that I knew had been a JW as well, and she knew of some ex-JWs that were gay. I *couldn't* believe it. See, there were no Internet or support groups for ex-JWs of any sort back in the early/mid 1980s . . . . So, my healing, more or less began then [approximately seven or eight years after he left the JW]. It took me a long time. I'd say in the last couple of years, I've found myself. I am more at peace than I ever was. Sad to say, I'm 40 now, and it took me this long to get to that point.

It is possible that a stigmatized individual “can use his disadvantage as a basis for organizing his life” (Goffman, 1963, p. 21). He can also begin to feel he is human and normal through contact with sympathetic and similar others who can help him reclaim and dignify the stigma symbol and reorganize his life in relation to it. However, until the Internet was more widely accessible, gay and lesbian former JWs could not easily find others like themselves. Since early 1994, the Web site called A Common Bond (ACB) has served as a connection tool and protective capsule for lesbian and gay Witnesses (see <http://www.gayxjw.org>). ACB was founded by two gay ex-JWs (one of whom is Ted, quoted above) who were living in the San Francisco Bay Area. The ACB mission statement reads:

A Common Bond is the international support network of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals whose common bond is that we are now, or have been, associated with Jehovah's Witnesses. Our purpose is to give support to one another by sharing our experiences, giving and receiving encouragement and hope to others whose lives have been impacted by their sexual orientation and association with the Watchtower organization. As a group, we are not associated in any way with any organized religion. Our members are free to choose their own spiritual path, or none at all, without condemnation. Our ultimate goal is to assist our members in finding genuine happiness and self esteem. (<http://www.gayxjw.org/faq.html>)

The Web site includes a calendar of events (including information on past and upcoming annual conferences), a bookstore, a live chat room, and links to chapters, discussion groups, and blogs all over the world. In addition to personal testimonials, photos, and general information, the site includes pages on “Homosexuality and the Bible,” “Coping with Anger,” “For Active JWs,” plus a blow-by-blow recounting of the attempt by the Watchtower Society to shut down the ACB site, “The Watchtower Tries to Silence Us—and Fails!!” As of January 11, 2008, the site's visitor counter recorded more than 123,999 hits.

All of the online narratives analyzed for this study were connected in some way to ACB or its satellite sites. Many narrators referred to this

connection in the telling of their stories. For instance, Eduardo came out to his custodial grandmother when he was in his mid-20s; she immediately kicked him out of their home and called the elders to have him disfellowshipped. He writes:

A few years later, I learned of a group called A Common Bond. These people are a group of ex-JWs who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (did I leave anyone out?). I found these people to be a source of strength and friendship for me. Between them and my therapist, I can finally sleep well at night.

As Goffman would have predicted, ACB seems to have a protective and restorative effect on gay and lesbian former JW's. The surveys taken at the ACB conference in 2000 revealed that 53% of respondents felt guilty about their sexual orientation at the time they left the Witnesses, while 87% reported they no longer felt guilty about it. As for regrets, 77% regretted leaving WTS at the time, while 90% indicated they no longer regret having left (these respondents had been away from WTS for an average of 16 years). And 80% stated they did not currently associate with any other religion. This low level of subsequent religious observance contradicts the findings in Holden's (2002) study of apostate (heterosexual) Witnesses, who tended to seek out other world-renouncing religions. The low percentage of religious observance among these gay and lesbian former JW's may be due to the fact that many religions—and world-renouncing religions in particular—do not welcome homosexuals.

Through ACB and its satellites, former Witnesses have become able to reclaim the stigma symbols that previously made life unworkable. The label "gay ex-JW," which contains a multitude of stigmas, has become an organizing principle, and the Internet has become a vibrant and viable community for this previously isolated population. As research has shown, emotional sustenance from family, peers, or religious leaders can prove instrumental in countering the negative impact of living as a sexual minority (Rosario et al., 2005; Rutter, 2002). Given the lack of understanding reported in WTS communities and in Witness families, locating or, as in this case, creating avenues of support can be crucial for these individuals, just as it is for others leaving closed and authoritarian groups, families, or relationships (Lalich & Tobias, 2006).

The various ex-JW blogs, discussion groups, and Web sites that link to the ACB site serve as Goffman's "sponsored publications." Here, stigmatized gay and lesbian Witnesses can (perhaps furtively) read "exemplary moral tales" (Goffman, 1963, p. 25), in which the authors can act as mentors for other struggling JW's or as ambassadors and tour guides for curious outsiders. While all of the online narratives gathered for this study recount struggle, trauma, and despair, the excerpts below

demonstrate the encouraging concluding tone adopted by many of the narrators.

Carrie left WTS in her late teens by “escaping” to college with the help of her father, a non-practicing Witness: “I am grateful I escaped from an organization that would have led to my eventual breakdown, and for my wonderful girlfriend. Life on the outside isn’t about gnashing your teeth in the darkness; it’s about being true to yourself.”

Brendan, who spent time in a psychiatric facility after he came out to his mother and the elders, left WTS soon after his release from the hospital:

It took me ’til the age of 21 to finally come out. I have found the man I love and adore and he treats me so well. I am very happy for the place I stand at this point in time. It hasn’t been easy to write this and I have been crying for most of the time I have been typing it . . . . There isn’t anything left to say except I wish I didn’t have to go through all of this to get where I am today.

Bill, who was kicked out of his home at the age of 20 and disowned by his family, contrasts the pain of losing his family to the pain of living as a closeted gay JW:

Sounds bad, huh? Well, to be honest, after all these years, being out beats being in by a landslide. If I was still in, I’d be a slave to that religion and most likely married to someone I did not love. I would most likely have attempted suicide several times. My personal happiness would be nonexistent . . . . I know this to be fact. Thanks to the Internet, I’ve been able to get in touch with several gay, lesbian, and bisexual former Jehovah’s Witnesses who tried the straight life and failed miserably, hurting a lot of people along the way . . . . By leaving and coming out, I freed myself from a stifled childhood and a life of enslavement to the Jehovah’s Witnesses. I could finally breathe and be myself. Although I was completely cut off from my family, it made me stronger as a person to be independent and make my own decisions.

Matt moved to another town to try to remove himself from the Witnesses and live openly as a gay man. However, he was discovered by a group of WTS elders who outed him to his parents. A public disfellowshipping followed, and Matt’s parents disowned him:

I can truthfully say that I did not stop smiling for the first year that I began living my life as an “out” gay man. I found the world a much nicer place than I had always been taught. I made friends like I’d never had before, most of whom I still have at this very minute. I learned what it means to love and be loved unconditionally. And I had the satisfaction for the first time of living my life without secrets. This is what I call being “in the truth.”

Charlene tried to bury herself in the role of Witness wife and mother, but her sexual and psychological loneliness made her miserable. When she came out as a lesbian, she was disfellowshipped and her husband attempted to take away her children (she and her new partner retrieved them after a bitter fight). She writes: "Even though I have been to hell and back, I am the happiest I have ever been. For the first time in my life, I actually feel like a whole person."

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: PLAYING GOLF WITH THEIR CRUTCHES

There is a tendency in the social sciences to reduce the emotional content of narrative structures—and the narrative structures themselves—to mere artifacts of socialization and group cohesion.<sup>3</sup> Goffman (1963) himself writes that a mature and well-adjusted autobiographical style is a function of the latter stages of the "moral career" of stigmatics (p. 102). However, as we analyzed these narratives, we continually wondered how so many gay and lesbian JW's survive their seemingly unlivable situations. As narrator Kyle writes: "I knew that I was different, and different in a way that was hated by God." This internal stigma, which perilously discredited these homosexuals before Jehovah, meant that they had to completely deny their private ego identities in order to fit in. They struggled secretly throughout their lives to purify, rectify, and cure themselves, but to no avail. And while their close-knit families and peer groups provided a certain comfort (and varying levels of instruction on how to manage their social identity stigmas with regard to being a JW), these closeted individuals were at constant risk of exposure in their intimate relationships. They knew also that disclosure of their homosexuality would lead to the irrevocable loss of family, friends, security, home, and community—as well as the loss of Jehovah's favor and any hope of survival at Armageddon.

And yet, in their writings and in person, these gay and lesbian former Witnesses are generous, socially engaged, wryly humorous, and well adjusted. They are open about their struggles with substance abuse, and about their need for counseling and peer support to adjust to life outside the WTS. With the exception of Elena, who committed suicide at 16 after being disfellowshipped, the 23 surviving narrators have clearly prevailed over the seemingly insurmountable challenge of being stigmatized in each of Goffman's three identity areas (social, personal, and ego). They all found ways to reclaim their previously reviled ego identities; to reject an omnipotent and disapproving god figure; to survive the loss of their families, friends, church, and traditions; and to create lives for themselves in the outside world, where homosexuality is accepted only provisionally, if at

all. Furthermore, many of them managed to make these changes when they were essentially homeless, penniless teenagers. And even for those who left the church as adults, most had only a high school diploma, due to WTS's longstanding opposition to higher education.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, nearly all of the narrators made these cataclysmic changes before they had any notion of or contact with the ex-JW Internet community (only 2 of the 24 narrators discovered A Common Bond before their exit from WTS). The comparatively new phenomenon of Internet access also means that many of the older narrators had no access to the protective capsule of the ACB stigmatic community until years or decades after their departures from the church. While we esteem Goffman's seminal work on stigma, we question whether the survival of these particular stigmatics can be attributed to the sponsored publications, circles of lament, and ingroup alignments these narrators found only *after* they had made the costly decision to leave WTS. Rather, it is possible that the clear benefits that a corporate stigmatic identity can bestow (and which Goffman attributes to the latter part of the stigmatic "moral career") might actually be a pre-existing function of these stigmatized individuals' own, multiple, hard-won social and emotional intelligences.

A stigmatized person, in order to survive, must become a consummate actor, a self-taught social scientist, a skilled manager of tension and information, and a keenly critical observer of "normal" human interactions. Many of the narrators reported learning to manage tension, information, and their multiple stigmas in this way before the age of 5. Stigma, well managed, can give a person a startling depth of insight into the human condition, and a comprehensive, multilayered consciousness of situations that the non-stigmatized pass through without much (or much need for such) awareness. A Common Bond, its satellites, and other ex-JW support sites certainly provide a corporate stigmatic identity, a protective capsule, sympathetic others, circles of lament, sponsored publications, ingroup alignments, and triumphant narratives. But these are not, in the vast majority of cases, social structures that predated its inhabitants or their wrenching departures from WTS. It is our contention that stigmatic outsider communities do not in every case create the structure in which stigmatics can organize their lives. Instead, these groups may represent an unusual construction created by uniquely socially-aware individuals who were forged in the same way by similar social pressures.

Although it might be tempting to identify these final, triumphant narratives as artifacts that exist in all sponsored stigmatic publications, it is more interesting to consider that the multifaceted stigmas gay and lesbian former JWs carry also provide multifaceted psychosocial benefits. This is especially compelling when we recall that our narrators did not possess one of the central "repair stations" (the backstage, or ego identity) that Goffman (1963) relied on to explain the unusual survival skills of stigmatized people.

In order to survive, these thrice-stigmatized individuals had to endure a form of ego destruction (whether self-caused or forced upon them by their WTS excommunication) so that they could build from scratch an ego identity that could then act as a repair station. By enduring—or choosing—the death of their JW social, personal, and ego identities, our narrators' final stigma, of being gay or lesbian ex-Jehovah's Witnesses in the outside world, has an enduring benefit. Although it is certainly a difficult stigma to manage, these WTS survivors are already masters of identity management, and their new stigma is now a *chosen* stigma that is identical in and integrated into each individual's social, personal, and ego identity areas. This ultimately relieves a terrible strain on all three social identities.

This new, chosen stigma also provides something that none of our narrators had access to in their lives as thrice-stigmatized members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. They have achieved the reclamation of their internal ego identity and with it the capacity to not simply dream about a world where they can be accepted, but to create that world with their newfound peers. Finally, as Goffman (1963) writes, "instead of leaning on their crutch, they get to play golf with it" (p. 27).

## NOTES

1. According to the sponsoring Web site, Watchtower Crucial Criteria, "the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania strictly controls this book, and have been know to use the full extent of copyright law, or at least, the threat of litigation, to prevent any authorized use, study, or viewing of its secret contents. Attempts by some to publish this book on the World Wide Web have resulted in litigation from the Society's legal department. Clearly, this book is unique among the extensive library of Watch Tower Society books, as it is not handed out on street corners and not delivered door-to-door." The Web site claims protection under Federal Law regarding copyright issues.

2. While there is at least one online support community for gay and lesbian JW's still in WTS (see <http://www.witnessesplus.com>), the focus there is not to advocate for change within WTS, but to find ways to deny or halt homosexual thoughts and feelings in order to fit more successfully into the WTS community. The 24 narratives analyzed in this article contained the kind of material found on the [witnessesplus.com](http://witnessesplus.com) Web site, but had the study-specific and important further aspect of the narrators' eventual separation from WTS. The Goffmanian perspective in this article includes both the ingroup stigmatization that the individuals at [witnessesplus.com](http://witnessesplus.com) appear to be experiencing, and the outgroup stigmatization that the 24 narrators experienced upon leaving WTS.

3. Another stance is to view the accounts of apostates with suspicion. This unfortunate tendency to distrust people such as these, who were made apostate through culturally codified stigmatization, serves to privilege the group corporate entity over the accounts of the people who actually lived within it, and whose experiences of expulsion resulted in the most intense misery. It is important to remember that these narrators are "actual" Jehovah's Witnesses who have every right to be considered real WTS members, as most if not all would have preferred to stay in WTS with their families and loved ones rather than becoming apostate. The idea that these dissent voices are not important parts of the totality of the WTS experience is, once again, to privilege the corporate and ignore the negative, real-life consequences of religiously based intolerance toward homosexuality. Additionally, while some scholars (Bromley, 1998; Wright, 1998) discredit former member testimonies as apostate "atrocious tales," deeming them unreliable, other scholars (Balch & Langdon, 1998; Lulich, 2001; Zablocki, 1996) attest to the reliability and the value of information gathered from former members. In this vein, B. R. Wilson (1988) notes that leaders and current members may be uncooperative and tend to withhold and distort, thereby limiting "*what* can be discovered and *how* what is discovered is understood" (p. 230).

4. As recently as 2005, an article in *Watchtower* magazine stressed that higher education has no place in the lives of devout Witnesses (see <http://www.religioustolerance.org/anon03.htm>). Yet, some JW's do attend college; in fact, JW student organizations are active on a number of campuses throughout the country. This is a notable recent development, whereas higher education was quite rare among Witnesses during the time when most of the narrators in this study were in the organization.

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