

Sexual Orientation and the Myth of Immutability

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The belief in “sexual orientation” as a fixed, stable and immutable human construct is now widely accepted by a majority of the Western secular world. In academic and scientific communities this belief called “the essentialist lens” often contrasts with the “social constructionist lens” of sexual orientation, which sees the terms “gay, straight, bisexual, asexual” and so forth, as recent man-made inventions that some people can choose to identify with, but which is by no means a naturally occurring human construct.

Despite the fact that this social constructionist lens is more aligned with the actual scientific evidence and cultural history of these constructs, this essentialist lens of “inherent sexual orientation” has grown to become so ubiquitous in modern culture that it can easily appear *as if* it has been there forever and *as if* there were no other possible ways to see it. The popularity and assumed credibility of Essentialism, has also led to its blind and seamless adoption in many traditional and religious Judeo-Christian communities, and also very likely, within much of the Orthodox Jewish world across the full religious and hashkafic gamut.

This possibility – one which I personally see the evidence of as a psychotherapist who works with all types of Orthodox Jewish communities across the globe - should bring up some important questions: For instance, where does this belief of sexual orientation come from? Is it scientifically credible, logical and Torah compatible? How and why has such a belief become so popular and powerful? Do Orthodox communities have reason to accept or reject this belief? What are the social benefits and costs of seeing people through this lens? And might there be other potentially more accurate and Torah-compatible ways to explain what many people are being led to call “inherently gay”?

This article aims to answer these questions in a clear, thorough and sensitive manner. As I will show, the primary Essentialist belief of “fixed, stable and immutable” actually suffers with fundamental flaws in common-sense and scientific reasoning. It further lacks empirical support and even contradicts several established principles of biology and psychology. And it is also deeply incompatible with timeless Judeo-Christian beliefs about intimacy, relationships, free-will and the family blueprint that Hashem created for both Jew and non-Jew alike.

Given these flaws, how has such a belief thrived and spread so quickly? Why is no one challenging it? As I will discuss, this core belief of “fixed, stable and immutable sexual orientation” does not act alone, so to speak. Rather, it is intrinsically connected to a “family” of six other beliefs, which are insidiously designed to preempt, deflect and silence debate and disagreement.

In my opinion, it is these six supporting beliefs, which have not only led to the blind adoption of sexual orientation ideology in the broader world, but that have also kept Judeo-Christian communities – and Orthodox communities in particular - from defending its foundational family values. These six beliefs also function to psychologically block people from

learning about other theories of sexuality, relationships and identity, theories which may be much more accurate and empowering than the pat “I’m just gay” theory. It is these six beliefs that are responsible for turning this very new and radical essentialist idea into a powerful and intractable Essentialist ideology.

This article aims to familiarize readers with the full picture of this ideology. I will make all of its implicit beliefs explicit so that they can be clearly challenged and ultimately replaced with more scientifically accurate and Jewishly compatible ideas. In doing so, my hope is to help from communities better stand up for its treasured values, while giving “first-responders” like therapists, rabbis, teachers and parents more clarity and confidence when teaching young people, well before these misleading and false beliefs are internalized.

I: Essentialism’s Core Belief:

This belief states: *All human beings have a natural sexual orientation, some kind of fixed, stable and immutable drive that originates from their biology and/or early experiences and that determines who they are at their authentic core and the kind of gender with which they most desire sexual relationships.*

While I will soon challenge the validity of this belief, it is important to first consider just how radical it is in the context of human civilization and just how desensitized modern society has become to its radicalness. For example, the history of innate “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” – or the terms “gay” and “straight” is extremely short.¹ Note, for example, how common homosexual relationships and behaviors were throughout the history of mankind. Yet, no society until now has seen people with same-sex attractions as inherently “other”.

In fact, echoes of Essentialism only started to appear in popular newspapers at the end of the 19th century, which discussed heterosexual people as those who had a notably strong sex drive.² Soon thereafter, the terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual” were recast by psychoanalysts who treated same-sex desires not as just as urges and involuntary sexual reactions, but as signs of a more global and ingrained pathology requiring intensive remediation.³ These attitudes carried over into the first versions of the psychiatric “bible” called the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, or “DSM” for short, which placed “homosexuality” under the psychopathological category of “sociopathic personality disturbance”.

Then in the 1970’s, when activists fought to remove homosexuality from the DSM, they did not take a stance against this Essentialist perspective. Rather, they opposed the view of homosexuality as a sickness that can be cured.⁴ In suggesting that same-sex desires were “fixed, stable and immutable” and part of their natural gay “sexual orientation”, these groups were,

¹ H. Blank, *The Surprisingly Short History of Homosexuality* (Beacon Press, 2012)

² Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Homosexuality*. (University of Chicago Press, 2007)

³ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. (Basic Books, 1905)

⁴ Sara McHenry, “Gay Is Good”: History of Homosexuality in the DSM and Modern Psychiatry. *The American Journal of Psychiatry Residents’ Journal*, 18:1 (2022), 4-5

essentially, agreeing with psychiatry's "ingrained" conceptualization, but just spinning the label in a more positive, non-pathologizing light.

Fast forward a few decades and Essentialist in 2024 is now considered "the only possible truth" across diverse political, cultural, religious and therapeutic groups.⁵ Arguments might rage on about whether such an orientation is moral or immutable. Or about how to include gay-identified people and groups in various contexts and what kind of rights they deserve. But the presumption of its innateness is never brought to the debate.

Given its popularity and dominance, it should be not surprising that such a belief has become adopted by much of the frum world, including among some psychotherapists and Rabbis who are widely seen as experts on the subject of Judaism and homosexuality. For example, one psychiatrist with well-known expertise in this area writes about men with same-sex desires as having a global lack of "psychosexual maturation".⁶ And in the book "Judaism and Homosexuality", some men and women are referred to as "confirmed homosexuals" - people who are so obviously and inherently different, that they are advised to stay away from heterosexual marriage altogether.⁷

With its cross-cultural dominance and assumed credibility, Essentialism's diverse flaws are often less considered. For example, on a rational level, Essentialism presents a fundamental human-nature paradigm shift that should normally require robust empirical support, of which it utterly lacks. On a biological level, researchers still have no way to objectively demonstrate the existence of a supposedly "natural sexual orientation".⁸ The most comprehensive study of its kind recently concluded that there is no gay or straight gene, a finding that is not at all surprising considering the way that scientists, in general, now understand the influence of genes on behavior.^{9 10}

The core Essentialist belief of "fixed, stable and immutable" is flawed in other fundamental ways. For example, on a psychological level, mental-health experts do not generally reduce people to just one of their feelings or behavioral patterns.¹¹ Nor do they tend to see people

⁵ Edward Stein (Editor). *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy*. (Routledge, 2013)

⁶ Joseph Berger, Why the Recent Modern Orthodox Rabbis' Statement on Homosexuality is Unhelpful. *Hakira*, 12, (2011) 55

⁷ Chaim Rapoport, *Judaism and Homosexuality: An Authentic Orthodox View* (Vallentine Mitchell, 2004).

⁸ Edward Stein, *The Mismeasure of Desire*, 191

⁹ Jonathan Lambert, No 'gay gene': Massive study homes in on genetic basis of human sexuality. *Nature*, 573:7772 (2019)14-15

¹⁰ Ilan Dar-Nimrod, & Steven Heine, Genetic essentialism: On the deceptive determinism of DNA. *Psychological Bulletin*, 137:5 (2011) 800-818. And even if a strong biological/development pathway were found, this would not necessarily indicate that such behaviors were "immutable", since many other ingrained behavioral patterns with a clearer biological and/or developmental load are still thought of as malleable given the brain's natural plasticity and the person's inherent capacities to learn and overcome psychological challenges.

¹¹ Richard Schwartz, *Introduction to Internal Family Systems*, (Sounds True Adult, 2023)

as victims of their biology or early life circumstances who are inherently incapable of controlling their desires and having the kinds of relationships that they genuinely want.¹² The fact that they suspend these core beliefs with just one population of same-sex attracted people, is therefore a reasonable good sign of potential bias.

On a Jewish ideological level, the beliefs and terms of Essentialism are nowhere to be found in our history or *mesorah*, even when homosexual acts are referenced in the Torah. If these constructs were as objective and fundamental as Essentialism claims, wouldn't we see them somewhere in our tradition? Essentialism also presents a direct philosophical challenge to the core Jewish concept of free will, which states that people can work to master their desires, even if these are strong and recurring. And finally, the idea of large groups of people being unfit to participate in the normal Jewish family structure, is a very suspicious one, which, if true, would certainly be explicitly discussed in the Torah or by Chazal.

In addition to these logical, scientific and Jewish flaws, Essentialism also comes with a significant human cost, one that I believe is causing widespread psychological and social harm in Jewish communities and possibly more broadly. Understanding this harm, should give Orthodox communities an even more urgent reason to question Essentialist ideology. After all, logical-scientific flaws can always be debated. Jewish flaws can always be rationalized through Halakhic loopholes and distorted interpretations of Chazal. Human suffering, however, cannot be as easily dismissed.

Below, I will numerically list the kinds of human suffering that I have personally become aware of through my practice. Because this harm is so vast, I will categorize it by different groupings; harm caused to people with same-sex attractions, harm caused to gay-identified people, harm caused to family and communities of gay-identified people, broader social harm including with children and adults.

Harm caused to people with same-sex attractions:

1. Among individuals with same-sex attractions – and in men in particular - the Essentialist idea itself of having an “inborn sexual orientation” or being inherently gay or SSA (same-sex attracted) can cause as much distress, if not more, than just the existence of same-sex desires alone. In my own clients, for example, this belief was directly responsible for the development of severe clinical symptoms like social anxiety, depression, substance use, addictions and self-harm. In many, it led to a pervasive feeling of self-loathing for being inherently different.
2. Among single adults, the idea of being “inherently gay” can cause people to remain stuck in their development for years and decades as they endlessly waver between the two misleading decision options that Essentialism presents: to either live a compromised religious life if they came out, or, to live a compromised romantic life if they dated and married the opposite sex.

¹² David Wastell & Sue White. Blinded by neuroscience: Social policy, the family and the infant brain, *Families, Relationships and Societies* 1:3 (2012) 397-414

3. Essentialism leads people with problematic acting-out behavior and uncontrollable same-sex urges to see themselves as fundamentally different or damaged – instead of just suffering from a treatable symptom. This can exacerbate people’s distress and dissuade them from getting the help they need. In others, these concerning symptoms can be easily and superficially labelled as a sign of “just being gay”, leading them to unnecessarily change their identity and struggle with life-long family, spiritual and psychological distress.

4. Essentialism can lead married men and women with histories of same-sex attraction to falsely believe that they are betraying both themselves and their spouses, even if their marriage is satisfying, and even if they are completely faithful.

Harm to gay-identified people:

1. Essentialism teaches gay-identified individuals to separate their minds from their bodies, and to think of themselves as mechanical victims of their urges who have no say in understanding or controlling their behaviors, a way of thinking that is often vastly incongruous with how they themselves usually reflect upon their thoughts, feelings and behaviors.
2. Essentialism teaches people with uncontrollable same-sex attractions that the best way to mitigate their shame and helplessness around uncontrollable same-sex urges is to change their identity, “come out” and begin the journey of self-acceptance and community affirmation.
3. This leads people to adopt an identity of helplessness and a global mentality of victimhood, which leads to the worsening of psychological symptoms and acting-out behavior, a connection is difficult to see once a person is already attached to the gay-identity.
4. With the ongoing shame they feel about not being in-control of themselves, they are persuaded by Essentialist ideology to “outsource” their internal feelings of self-worth by seeking this out—and sometimes even demanding it aggressively—from other non-gay individuals and groups, like their family and Jewish community. Essentialism teaches people to give up on their own pride and sense of self-esteem, and to instead, become dependent on other people’s acceptance, approval and affirmation - hence their surprise and frustration when this does not come readily, and hence the explicit complaints of LGBT groups never getting enough validation and affirmation, that there is “always more work to do”.
5. It leads gay-identified people to adopt strange and inauthentic rituals and behaviors simply to conform to society’s expectations of “gay people”.

Harm to the families and communities of gay-identified people:

1. Essentialism leads the families and communities of gay-identified people to suffer with painful and unresolvable questions about how to include their loved ones who are, on the one hand, “inherently hardwired” to be gay but who, on the other hand, are

ambassadors for a Jewishly incompatible lifestyle. How should they interact with their friends and community? How will this child's behavior impact their siblings and broader family? How should this child and family be included in a shul or community? And so on and so forth.¹³

Broader harm to children.

1. Essentialism brings unnecessary anxiety to children and adolescents who learn that a biological drive called “sexual orientation” will one day appear in their bodies and minds, and that it will cause them to be attracted to one gender or another, regardless of the type of life and relationships they want to have. In children who are prone to anxiety in general, this belief can bring on especially high and persistent levels of distress, particularly when they have not even interacted meaningfully with the opposite sex.
2. In children, the Essentialist concept of being “inherently gay” can exacerbate several types of clinical issues and prevent vulnerable populations from getting an accurate psychological diagnosis on various types of patterns:
 - a. Children who are chronically stressed or psychologically dissociated can easily pathologize their lack of interest in the opposite sex as signs of being gay or asexual.
 - b. Children who are exposed to erotic images of the same gender and unconsciously manage their shame by repeating these scenes in their heads, are also at-risk for falsely labeling these coping strategies as “gay”.
 - c. It teaches abuse and molestation survivors—who are known to unconsciously sexualize traumatic events as a tactic to manage their resulting shame, fear and helplessness—that they must forever be inextricably dependent on these coping strategies.¹⁴
 - d. It teaches insecure and socially excluded children to misapply the gay-label on unconscious coping strategies like introjection and sexualization, strategies which help to momentarily lift their distress via crushes and/or sexual feelings for people of same-gender who have the very traits, which they themselves feel most lacking in.^{15 16}

We can clearly see some of these harmful social effects in therapist's offices, where children's anxiety about the possibility of being gay has become so common and intense - even

¹³ Alarming, several Orthodox-run organizations have been recently established to support families of gay identified children, but who, themselves, are steeped in Essentialist ideology, probably without realizing. These organizations may be providing their constituents with information that could significantly harm them and their gay-identified child and they are spreading Essentialist ideology even more, instead of challenging it.

¹⁴ Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan, Yael Lahav, Sexual Dysfunction and Distress Among Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivors: The Role of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 17,11, (2020) 2267–2278

¹⁵ S. J. Coen, Sexualization as a Predominant Mode of Defense. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 29:4, (1981) 893-920.

¹⁶ Robert Knight, RP. Introjection, Projection and Identification. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 9:3 (1940), 334-341

in the general culture, that it has led to the serious consideration of a new psychological diagnosis called Homosexual OCD.¹⁷

Broader social harm:

1. Essentialism leads to increased levels of bullying and exclusion in schools—rather than fostering a climate of inclusion—since “gay” can easily be weaponized by bullies to isolate and denigrate children who seem different.
2. The ideology makes males avoid and stifle their creative natural talents and aesthetic interests, fearing that this will be perceived as a sign of “being gay”, and equally leads them to artificially exaggerate their masculine traits and interests.
3. It teaches males to be paranoid about how others will judge their clothing, posture, speech, body type and hobbies.
4. It leads the parents of boys to become hypervigilant about their child’s behaviors and interests. What if their son likes pink or wants to watch a Broadway show? What if they don’t have crushes on girls? What if they are interested in the creative arts? And so forth.
5. It introduces unnecessary awkwardness with healthy male-to-male affection between peers, a teacher and student or father and child,
6. It teaches people to prioritize sexual lust over and above other relationship values and needs.
7. For men and women dating for marriage, Essentialism teaches that all healthy human beings should have some kind of immediate arousal to a stranger of either the same or opposite gender, causing people to quickly consider superficial sexual orientation labels and to judge, compare and make important life decisions based on their immediate arousal reactions alone—or their lack of having these reactions.¹⁸

One irony of Essentialist ideology is that it markets itself as a compassionate vehicle for people who are struggling with same-sex attractions. But as I’ve shown, this ideology is not just harmful to people with same-sex attractions and to gay-identified individuals, but much more broadly and comprehensively - and especially to vulnerable populations and children.

II: The Six “Wings” of Essentialism:

In addition to the core Essentialist belief in the existence of a “fixed, stable and immutable sexual orientation”, I have been able to also identify six interconnected but implicit beliefs or “wings of Essentialism”, which act as supportive players to the core belief, cementing its dominance and squashing potential disagreement. It is these wings that have led to the

¹⁷ Manjeet S. Bhatia and Jaswinder Kaur, Homosexual Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (HOCD): A Rare Case Report. *Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research*. 9:1, (2015)

¹⁸ Interestingly, the belief that normal people should feel immediate arousal to one gender or another, is sometimes also held by frum men and women who grow up in communities that are overly harsh about intergender interaction, which they interpret as an indication that these interactions are supposed to be strongly and immediately arousing. When they begin dating for marriage, their lack of this reaction on first dates can then bring on unnecessary concern.

creation of Essentialism as an ideology that many people become seamlessly indoctrinated by, without even realizing.

In this discussion, I will present these six beliefs in their purest “black and white” form to reflect the extreme way that they can be communicated and internalized, though each can also exist in more nuanced and flexible forms. The six beliefs include:

1. The Binary Attraction Belief
2. The Authenticity Belief
3. The Gay-Theory Belief
4. The Informed Consumer Belief
5. The Gay Personality Belief
6. The Affirmation Belief

1. *The Binary Attraction Belief: This belief states that gender preference is binary as in “either men or women”, which means that same-sex attracted people will never be able to have sexually fulfilling relationships with the opposite sex. The belief goes further to state that it would be useless, immoral and harmful for a same-sex attracted person to even attempt to have a heterosexual relationship, and if they do, are entering a risky situation for themselves and their spouse. Included in this belief is that people who are attracted to the opposite sex can never possibly feel any kind of attraction, interest or curiosity in the same sex.*

This premise is problematic, first, because it bundles all people with same-sex attractions into one category, when there tends to be much more diversity in people’s sexual and relationship interests and often much more flexibility. There is even much sexual diversity in people who already identify themselves as gay. This belief also ignores the sexual fluidity of many people, who are attracted to both the same and opposite gender depending on the time, person and relationship. And it discounts the many people with long histories of same-sex attraction who develop satisfying romantic and/or sexual relationships to the opposite sex.

But even more fundamentally, this belief is problematic because it ignores a simple, basic principle of human attraction: any two human beings—regardless of their gender, race, appearance or age—can feel physically and sexually drawn to one another when there is both a “chemistry bond”—as in an unmistakable “meshing” of personality types—and a “romantic context” where there is, at least, an implicit desire to develop an intimate relationship.¹⁹

According to this theory, all humans – even those with very recurring arousal reactions to very specific types of people and even people with very specific fetishes - have the potential for this kind of attraction in an actual relationship, a phenomenon that many of my clients

¹⁹ Madeleine A. Fugère, Jennifer Leszczynski, Alita Cousins, *The Social Psychology of Attraction and Romantic Relationships* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017)

experience when they feel desire and arousal with their opposite-sex spouse, even if they have a history of very specific fetishes.

Given this theory of human nature, the Binary Attraction belief must be referring to involuntary arousal reactions or sexual urges for strangers that one sees in public or in the media, which is well-known among experts in sexual behavior to be based on each person's individual "sexual script", or "arousal template" developed in childhood or adolescence and often persisting throughout one's adulthood.^{20 21}

This means that one person might have a very specific involuntary arousal reaction toward certain kinds of strangers from the same-sex – such as specific physiques, body parts, personalities or interactions - and others may have specific involuntary arousal reactions toward specific types of strangers from the opposite-sex. But that these involuntary reactions to strangers, are entirely based on childhood circumstances and have nothing to do with one's core nature or potential to have a satisfying romantic and sexual relationship with an actual person in an intimate relationship.

Knowing this, the question can then be asked of the Binary Attraction belief and to Essentialism more broadly: should human beings determine their identities, long-term relationships and life-futures based on their automatic lust reactions to strangers and not on their voluntary, thoughtful choices and actual relationship chemistry bonds? Essentialism seems to think "yes".

Aside from this flaw in logic, the Binary Attraction Belief also incurs two types of specific harm to individuals and communities. First, it causes young men and women to prematurely "lock themselves" into a gay-identity if they happen to have same-sex interests or experiences growing up before they have opposite-sex interactions. As I have seen repeatedly in my practice, this belief is leading many from men and women to unnecessarily worry that they are incapable of having sexual feelings for the opposite gender, if they happen to have had some kind of romantic or sexual feeling toward the same gender while growing up in their single sex schools or summer camps.

Second, the Binary Attraction belief also leads those who adopt the Gay Identity for any number of reasons to summarily close themselves off from even the possibility of being attracted to the opposite sex in the future. For example, in my practice, several from gay-identified clients reported having strong crushes on some of their female friends from time to time. But they would never take any action on this. Why? Because they had already concluded that they were "Gay". To behave otherwise would then go against this ingrained cognitive schema.

²⁰ J. Park, *Imprinted Sexual Fantasies. A New Key for Sexology* (Existential Books, 2008)

²¹ Money, John. *Lovemaps: Clinical concepts of sexual/erotic health and pathology, paraphilia, and gender transposition of childhood, adolescence, and maturity*. Ardent Media, 1986.

2. The Authenticity Belief: *According to this belief, a person's involuntary sexual arousal responses or sexual urges for the same or opposite gender is an expression of something natural and authentic.*

The Authenticity Belief is highly attractive to modern sensibilities, because of how much emphasis our culture puts on “being true to ourselves” in general. But the belief is biased because it prioritizes the lust part of a person more than any other part, such as their free will, long-held religious values, cultural beliefs, and aspirations to marry. This specific belief teaches people to relate to their “immediate arousal for strangers” feelings as a significant personal value that they should actualize more than other parts of themselves. That they should then publicly define themselves by their strongest sexual urges and live their life pursuing these. And further, that they should also expect their family and community to equally prioritize this over and above any other value, interest or personality trait.

The Authenticity Belief also contradicts a core belief in the professional psychology discipline, which generally views people as more than just their biological drives and are never wholly defined by just one of their single traits or patterns, no matter how ingrained and biologically influenced these may be.²² The field of psychology is, generally, not Essentialist friendly. Yet, with this one issue alone, it is strictly Essentialist driven.

The Authenticity belief goes a few steps further in its self-assuredness by identifying those who do not come out as cowards who live “in the closet” and who are too afraid to embrace their “real self”. This characterization has become such a popular way of describing certain people that we have become desensitized to just how disparaging it sounds. We do not even notice how casually the term is used to judge people who are actually embracing their authentic self and working to minimize their distressing involuntary reactions and unwanted sexual urges for very specific types of people or situations. People may choose to keep these struggles a secret, but they are certainly not living inauthentic lives.

This disparagement tends to even go along with an implicit warning: that if these “in the closet” unactualized people do decide to marry the opposite sex, they will end up betraying and harming their spouse when their true “authentic self” can no longer bear to be hidden, or when their “true” desires can no longer be contained. But this implicit warning only seems to apply to men with same-sex desires and no one else. The high risks of extra-marital affairs, marital discord and divorce in other populations, such as among people preoccupied with heterosexual arousal, are not discussed quite as much.

Populations of people who suffer with severe clinical issues like anxiety, self-esteem issues, anger-management problems, addictions, PTSD, narcissism or borderline personality disorder – they too are never dissuaded by families, Rabbis and the media from getting married. This singling out of men with same-sex attractions as more vulnerable to marital tragedy than anyone else, therefore, sounds suspicious.

²² Richard Schwartz, “Introduction to Internal Family Systems”

From what I have directly heard many times from many clients, the popularity of this one-size-fits-all catastrophizing accusation has had the harmful effect of unnecessarily scaring men and women away from heterosexual dating and marriage, even if they are emotionally and sexually ready, and even if this is what they truly want in life, lest they become another sad statistic. This, in my opinion, is one of the most harmful social side-effects of the Authenticity Belief.

Essentialisms' disparaging attitudes toward same-sex attracted people who do not come out have especially infiltrated the professional world of mental health, where therapists are taught that it is somehow unethical and harmful to help just these types of people accurately name and clarify their patterns, a basic clinical service called "differential diagnosis".²³ Learning to understand and control one's preoccupations or compulsive urges is another essential task of psychotherapy. Yet, here too, with just this population of men who do not wish to lead a gay lifestyle, this type of service is depicted as harmful.

In these two ways, psychotherapy organizations are recommending discriminatory practices because they are advising therapists to withhold essential clinical services from just this population alone. And more broadly, these organizations are also responsible for creating a superficial and repressive clinical atmosphere, where only one opinion can be valid, and where therapists are not allowed to help clients understand and control their unwanted and overpowering feelings - unless they have uncontrollable sexual urges for the opposite gender, which is then considered a vital and realizable clinical service.

The Authenticity belief is implicitly attached to another popular, but rarely challenged, belief: that people with same-sex desires—no matter where, when or how these desires originate—cannot possibly change, nor can they have successful relationships with the opposite sex unless they fundamentally change. In this belief, Essentialism implicitly defines "change" as "changing one's sexual orientation", which presumes that there is actually an objective thing as a "sexual orientation", of which there is still no evidence.

Essentialism also implicitly defines "change" as "utterly eliminating a person's strong, recurring desires for specific types of people" altogether and even "switching" their immediate arousal reactions to the opposite sex, two goals that are quite far-fetched and also unnecessary for men and women with unwanted same-sex attractions. Both of these unchallenged beliefs about "change in therapy", however, brainwashes the public to see people with same-sex attractions as utterly incapable of heterosexual relationships, unless they go through some kind of highly intense remediation process.

Most harmfully, these implicit definitions of change trick same-sex attracted people themselves – along with their therapists - to presume that they have to rid themselves of these

²³ Nancy McWilliams. *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis: Understanding Personality Structure in the Clinical Process* (Guilford Press, 2020)

attractions entirely before considering heterosexual dating and marriage. These problematic definitions of change distract people from understanding that many people with same-sex attractions do not need change at all, but rather reassurance that they are not inherently different and accurate education about what is happening inside of them and why.

For example, if their same-sex attractions are more about “lust for strangers” than desires for same-sex intimacy and connection, then they may need information to help them understand the mechanics of these two very different experiences and how their “lust-patterns” were created in childhood and why they are still getting triggered as adults.

If a same-sex attraction complaint comes more from a lack of comfort with the opposite sex, the client can be reassured that they will be of course feel romantic and sexual interest when a bond develops with their chosen partner because these are the rules of human nature. Of course, sometimes people need guidance and skills in actualizing this but there is no such thing as a person who utterly lacks this potential.

And if there is an issue of same-sex preoccupation, compulsion or addiction, then the therapeutic methods for reducing this are exactly the same no matter the desired “object” involved, whether for the same or opposite gender or even inanimate object.

3. The Gay Theory Belief: *This belief states that “gay” is not just an identity label but is an adequate theory that explains why people have recurring histories of strong same-sex attractions.*

This belief, first of all, suffers from the problem of circular reasoning: Since no biological entity or process has yet to be found, the Gay theory is essentially saying: “people want sex with the same gender, because they want sex with the same gender.” This theory is also illogical because it bundles together a very wide variety of people with different types of same-sex interests, and different qualities and intensities of feelings, and different levels of interest in the opposite sex, all into one superficial pat label, simply on the basis of their gender preference alone.

Similar to the impact of the Authenticity Belief, The Gay Theory’s assumed credibility in Western society is socially harmful because it prevents people from even considering whether there are other more individualized and accurate theories to help explain powerful same-sex attractions. It is as if there could be no other explanation for their sexual, social or personality patterns.

In my experience, for example, people’s powerful same-sex urges have nothing to do with their fixed nature or deeper developmental and personality issues. These experiences can always be logically explained using well-known psychological theories and they are often much more controllable than people realize. But the Gay theory, with its self-righteousness and assumed credibility, prevents people—including caregivers, therapists and other first-responders—from even thinking about these other possible terms and explanations.

The Gay Theory is also responsible for arbitrarily singling out same-sex urges as unexplainable and unchangeable. In the meantime, therapists are encouraged to apply their usual theories and interventions to help understand and reduce any other recurring and powerful

involuntary arousal reaction to any other kind of specific person or object. If therapists do not use a “straight theory” to rationalize a client’s uncontrollable sexual preoccupations for the opposite sex, why should it be different for the same sex?

How does such a theory become so popular even though it lacks specificity and even though “a homosexual orientation” cannot be objectively tested or proven to exist? My own best guess is that many people –both religious and secular – cannot relate to the idea of being attracted and aroused by members of the same-gender. When they hear about such patterns, it is therefore convenient to have a quick and easy term available to label such individuals and experiences, similar to other kinds of interests and behaviors that people like to label when it is unrelatable. In that sense, calling a group of people fundamentally and inherently “gay” may not be as progressive and compassionate as society teaches us. It may actually be a disguised form of alienating and “othering” people with experiences that we judge to be strange and unusual.

4. The Informed Consumer Belief: *This belief says that if a person, including a child maintains that they are gay, they must have some prescient ability to know who they are on the inside, even if they are still developing, even if they cannot provide objective evidence and even if they have limited romantic or sexual experience with either the same or opposite gender, or both. This belief maintains that once a person says they are gay, they cannot possibly be missing information or misreading something. They also cannot possibly have any biases or hidden motivations in arriving at this conclusion.*

This belief lies at the heart of the gay-affirming psychotherapy approaches which, in this one issue only, gives immense power and self-knowledge to clients so that therapists, who are typically seen as the more objective expert, must silence their curiosity to explore, for example, how their client knows for certain that they are gay, and whether there is more relationship flexibility than they think. Have therapists turned their fear of asking direct, challenging questions to their clients—lest they are guilty of seeming “not nice” or politically incorrect—into a clinical philosophy of care called gay-affirmative therapy? It sometimes seems that way.

The Informed Consumer belief is also problematic because it relies on the false assumption that gay-identified people must have extensive knowledge on the science of sexuality and relationships and must have achieved a high level of self-awareness. The belief further assumes that even if a gay-identified client read up on psychological theories of sexuality and identity and consulted with experts, that none of these sources can possibly be incomplete, outdated, flawed or biased.

The wide adoption of this belief seems to have bolstered the Transgender movement’s popularity, which implicitly sees people – and even children at times - as so well-informed and self-aware that they can just know and feel their true gender, or be confused about “which gender they really are”, even if this information is biological fact.

We can more directly challenge this Informed Consumer belief by considering (a) that many people who lack access to scientific theories of sexuality can easily confuse “being inherently gay” with several other normal behaviors and abnormal psychological conditions and,

(b) people might call themselves “gay” not because of their powerful abilities to “know who they are” but because they have conscious or unconscious agendas to actively and happily embrace this identity.²⁴

In my practice, I have seen several types within each category, which tells me that people who identify themselves as “gay” *are often missing vital information*, both about their own psychology and/or about theories of attraction, sexual desire and relationships. These clients are no different than any other person who can easily mislabel a behavioral or personality pattern with a culturally popular term or who can easily take-on inaccurate beliefs about themselves because they are lacking access to some information.²⁵

Other clients who I worked with were not missing information as much as they were strongly motivated to come out for social and emotional reasons. The idea of identifying as “gay” gave them an initial feeling of relief and belonging, not distress or conflict, even if they were religiously observant.

This pattern was especially evident among young religious women in my practice, who took on the gay identity for social reasons only, since they had no prior romantic or sexual experience whatsoever with either gender. Some of these women struggled for years with feeling different and “weird” among their peers. Others pathologized their lack of being “boy-crazy” as clear signs that they were gay or asexual. Feeling alone, different and socially alienated, they became attracted to the gay identity and to the idea of an unconditionally accepting and non-judgmental LGBTQ community, even if they did not find same-sex relationships to be particularly appealing.

These examples demonstrate how the gay label has turned into a kind of “wastebasket diagnosis” for young vulnerable people with a very wide variety of social and emotional challenges. When young people struggle to construct an identity and stable sense of themselves, the gay identity is now there to help them.

In previous decades, young people facing a similar predicament of identity confusion would gravitate to popular but poorly differentiated psychiatric labels like ADHD, Borderline Personality or OCD, as a way of constructing their identity, even if these labels were inaccurate. Many young people proudly wore these psychiatric terms like a badge of honor. It made them feel as if they had a name to describe their challenges. It validated that, indeed, they are actually different from others. And it made them feel a sense of belonging to a larger group.

So too here, in 2024, the gay identity has become yet another poorly defined label that young people are quickly latching onto as a way of belonging and strengthening their sense of

²⁴ In 2023, I conducted a two-part therapist training workshop attended by 250 Orthodox therapists called “Issues Confused with a Gay Identity”, which provided common examples within each of these two categories.

²⁵ This means that the primary role of the therapist who works with such individuals is to sensitively inform them that they may not have all the knowledge they need to make such a determination, while providing them with more alternative information about sexuality and relationships that will help them to become more informed consumers.

self, when other identity terms and social affiliations don't "stick". Different than other psychiatric labels that young people might gravitate to, however, calling oneself "gay" can often be a lifelong choice difficult to walk back from later in life, even if it is a source of consistent distress.

Concerningly, the Informed-Consumer belief does not only give young people the power to invent their core identity based on hunches, biases, limited-experiences and misinformation. It also arms them with guilt-slogans to deflect their caregiver's natural questions and concerns. I am often hearing from frum parents about their teenage or young adult child, who tries to guilt and intimidate his or her parents, rabbis and therapists with accusations like: "You are so homophobic!" or "Why can't you just accept that I'm queer?". In my opinion, this classic groupthink-style tactic of shaming non-conformers has become one of Essentialism's most powerful tools of suppressing thought and dissent.

In reality, these individuals, just like anyone else, are not imbued with special powers to know their core drives and to claim these as objective and unchangeable. Just like anyone else, these individuals can easily confuse an understandable and solvable problem with a popular cultural label. And just like anyone else, they too can have any number of agendas in wanting to adopt a fashionable label.

The Informed Consumer belief harms young men and women by giving them the power to adopt identity terms and limiting self-beliefs before they even have a chance to collect more information and before they are even mature enough to comprehend the true life-long consequences of taking on such terms and beliefs.

5. The Gay Personality Belief: This belief says that since same-sex urges are caused by biology, there must be other visible signs of "gayness" caused by this biology, which can include various opposite-sex tendencies, such as feminine traits in men or masculine traits in women.

The ability to point to something visible in "naturally" gay men and women has an important advantage to Essentialist ideology because it helps to offset its most glaring flaw: that scientists cannot find anything physical or biological that is intrinsically associated with people who develop same-gender or opposite-gender interests. If science can't find something inside the body, at least there is something visible on the outside.

This belief is now so seamlessly woven into the fabric of society that it has managed to trick myriads of people into believing that there are those who are involuntarily speaking, walking, grooming and dressing in stereotypical gay or lesbian ways, simply because of their drives and biology. Essentialism helps intelligent people forget that these behaviors are all voluntary, and sometimes exaggerated or "put on" to signify membership with a group and lifestyle and sometimes to attract a same-sex partner.

Another logical flaw of the Gay Personality belief is that it neglects to account for the many people with same-sex attractions who *do not have* any of these other stereotypical qualities. It further neglects to account for those people who do have these tendencies and interests but who are not erotically interested in the same gender.

As discussed earlier, The Gay Personality belief is also socially harmful specifically for men, because it makes them feel as if they have to suppress their natural behavior, dress, hobbies and interests, so as not to arouse suspicion that they are “naturally gay”. After all of Essentialism’s talk about “actualizing one’s true self,” it turns out that the movement is pressuring people to stifle their natural interests and abilities, but in much higher numbers.

6. The Affirmation Belief: *This belief maintains that it is a great act of care and compassion not just to respect a gay-identified person as a human being, but to agree with the terms that they have chosen to identify themselves by, and “affirm this” without question. According to this belief, affirming their identity can reduce judgment and discrimination from society and open the door for more rights and accommodations, such as in their workplace or religious community. It can reduce their depression and shame, especially if they cannot find a way to control their urges. It can preempt a whole host of mental health problems, including suicidality. And it can help foster a greater sense of a gay community, as they would be more motivated to seek connection with similarly labelled people with similar sexual interests, personal struggles and life goals.*

The inverse of this belief maintains that since same-sex attraction is biologically determined and immutable, it would actually be unethical and harmful to *not* unconditionally affirm a person’s self-chosen gay-identity and lifestyle. After all, this would be denying who they really are and preventing them from actualizing their true nature.

As an extension of this belief, to respect and accept a person as a fellow human being but not affirm their chosen gay identity, would be like colluding with those who judged, excluded and hurt these individuals in the past. It would be an expression of homophobia and discrimination, because, similar to other disadvantaged minority groups, they were obviously born with this identity and with these sexual desires. Not affirming them, according to this belief, could even create a risk for major clinical symptoms including suicidality.

From what I can see, this Affirmation Belief has been one of the most influential forces behind Essentialism’s rapid adoption among the intellectual elite of both secular and religious communities because of how elegantly it latches onto other *two specific secular values*.

First, it latches onto secular society’s strange view of sexual pleasure as a kind of “right” for everyone to pursue to the max. This view says, that if a person strongly desires stimulus “x, y or z”, how can we as a society deny them this? After all, this is how they were born and this is what maximizes their pleasure? Why should only “straight people” be allowed to fully pursue their sexual lust? This pleasure-forward view folds on itself when considering many people’s utterly strange and even illegal sexual lusts. But more importantly, it is completely at odds with the Torah’s understanding of sexual pleasure.²⁶

The Affirmation belief also latches onto a “root for the underdog” cultural imperative. In that sense, gay-identified people are often bundled into a broader group of disadvantaged minorities, all of whom require extra rights and advocacy efforts. Cementing this belief in the collective

²⁶ Manis Friedman, *The Joy of Intimacy* (It's Good to Know Publishing, 2018)

unconscious of Western society, is the media, and Hollywood in particular, who continue to celebrate the suffering “gay male hero” who - with the support of his true friends - takes on his homophobic family and society to achieve emancipation and to actualize his true self.

This narrative is constantly reinforced by the media, who also seem to relish in the shaming of therapists, clergy and religious institutions who do not blanketly affirm each of their members self-diagnosed gay identity, even if “gay” is not a term or identity that these religions recognize. It is not enough to celebrate the culture’s acceptance and inclusion of gay-identified people. The story must go on to the next step of villainizing those who don’t participate in these affirmations. In this way, the Affirmation Belief is responsible for spreading much anti-religious fervor, which has even infected many pockets of the Orthodox community, from Modern Orthodox to Chareidi.

The Affirmation belief is also responsible for creating a repressive and intimidating atmosphere in many mental health communities. Professional psychology institutions and associations worldwide – and in Israel especially - are now known to regularly go out of their way to fine, admonish, penalize and even de-license those therapists who are not willing to blanketly affirm their client’s decision to adopt the gay identity, even if it is based on misinformation and is causing psychological pain. This “witch-hunt” seems to even apply to those therapists who work with people who explicitly ask for help in reducing their same-sex urges.²⁷

In this environment, conversion and reparative therapists (whose theories and methods I personally disagree with and have little in common with) are singled out as dangerous people with sinister agendas, even though they are actually aligned with and respectful of their religious clientele’s values and goals and even though the history of psychotherapy is littered with much more questionable practices, many of which continue to this day but without the same level of scrutiny and public awareness.^{28 29}

The Affirmation belief contains another implicit, but rarely challenged, assumption: that religious gay-identified people’s distress is a direct result of being judged, pathologized, shamed and excluded by others. According to this belief, this group’s distress must be a result of having internalized the homophobic attitudes of their community. But it cannot possibly be related to their *own internalized heterosexual values* and desires to have a normal religious marriage and family. And since, the reasoning goes, these same-sex attracted people are still targeted – or potential targets – of this negative treatment, communities must work hard to preempt these attitudes by going in the opposite direction to be especially affirming.

²⁷ Christopher Rosik, “Researching Against the Cultural Tide”

²⁸ D. Jenkins, & LB Johnston, Unethical Treatment of Gay and Lesbian People with Conversion Therapy. *Families in Society*, 85:4 (2004) 557-561.

²⁹ R.S. Pepper, Treatment with Unethical Practitioners; Caveat Emptors. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* 27, (1997) 215–223. This article, which deals with major boundary violations in therapy training institutes, captures just one example of ethical issues that go unaddressed. Merrily Walton, Sex and the Practitioner: The Predator. *Australian Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 34:1 (2002) 7–15. This article discusses the behavior of therapists who sexually exploit their patients, which is not given nearly the same public attention as reparative and conversion therapy in the media and in the professional literature.

Putting this belief's manipulation aside—that people should summarily affirm their loved one's identity and lifestyle, even if they don't agree with it, because they will otherwise become psychiatrically compromised—it is factually wrong because it neglects to consider how a gay-identified person's emotional distress is more often a direct result of having feelings and behaviors that are out of synch *with their own* values and life aspirations.

Furthermore, in my experience, a gay-identified person's distress is often a result of Essentialist thinking itself: as I previously argued, to believe that one is an “inherently different type of man or woman,” trapped and defined by their non-chosen sexual orientation, in my professional opinion, is much more likely to create an overwhelming sense of victimhood and helplessness, which sets in long before they get to the stage of outwardly coming out and being included or excluded by their community.

Indeed, the Affirmation belief is responsible for leading many gay-identified people to actively take on this victimhood mentality when coming out, almost as if this attitude itself is another necessary part of “the gay uniform”. As many families and Rabbis have reported to me, the adoption of this mentality can, on its own, transform ambitious and responsible people overnight into resentful victims. In my professional opinion, it is these victimhood feelings that can foster a deep sense of anguish and frustration. And it is these victimhood feelings that can motivate people toward extreme acts of psychological escape like substance-use, sex-addiction, self-harm and suicidality, even when their community explicitly affirms their gay identity.

Given the powerful influence of this Affirmation belief, however, it is important to identify three of its fundamental flaws. The first is a slippery slope flaw. For once people can use biology alone to rationalize same-sex desires, the door is opened to do so for other strong desires and urges - including illegal and violent ones. If communities believe that biology compels people in such a way as to feel helplessly under control of their sexual desires, where does such a belief stop? This slippery slope is especially dangerous when the biology behind these patterns cannot even be shown to exist.

The second flaw in this Affirmation Belief is the double standard in only caring about the emotional wellbeing of the person coming out, but not the religious family or community of this person who can suffer with prolonged distress on account of their loved ones' choice to transform into someone unrecognizable, with new beliefs and behaviors and who often insist that this is how they are going to always be.

The Affirmation Belief does not just implicitly ignore the suffering of this child's family and community. It goes even further to disparage them as “homophobic” and unenlightened. So if family members are having an intense and prolonged distress reaction to their loved one's coming out, it must be *they* who need to change or who need psychological counseling. In that sense, this belief's concern about avoiding emotional suffering only seems to apply to the person breaking tradition, but not toward a tradition-respecting entity. Similar to the Authenticity Belief discussed earlier, which picks and chooses the parts of a person that are authentic, the Affirmation Belief is also guilty of picking and choosing whose suffering is more valued and “real”.

The third flaw of the Affirmation belief is that it incorrectly assumes that it is always good for a person's mental health to have their coming-out affirmed, when that may not at all be the case, especially if they are young and/or still connected to their religious laws and values. Considering gay-identified people's well-documented life-long rates of high depression, spiritual struggles, religious conflict, helplessness and suicidality,³⁰ what is touted as "affirm in the name of compassionate" may actually be more like "placing a stumbling block" in front of them.

Even if affirming a person's self-diagnosed gay identity can be shown to bring some short-term mental-health benefits, it can come with significant long-term problems, all of which I have directly seen in my own clients:

- a) It creates an underlying sense of disempowerment and victimhood, a catalyst for many kinds of psychological and behavioral problems.³¹
- b) It short-circuits the potential for a heterosexual relationship later in life if they are dissatisfied with the gay lifestyle and wish to reconsider.
- c) It leads to a global sense of shame and of feeling like an outsider.
- d) It creates persistent sexual-religious conflict, which can lead to recurring symptoms of anxiety, depression, rage, social isolation, spiritual frustration and suicidality.
- e) It fosters endless indecision and existential angst about one's family future and how they will continue to live as a Jewish gay person.
- f) It leads to hopelessness about being able to get more control over sexual compulsions and addictions, even if they settle down and partner with a same-gendered person.

The Affirmation belief also misleads society to pity people with same sex attractions as if they are so much worse off than any other type of person with a religious conflict or behavioral urge. The belief implicitly assumes that people who struggle with temptation, guilt and shame around other prohibited actions, like keeping Kosher or Shabbat, or honoring one's parents—or with other recurring feelings like hatred and jealousy toward one's fellow Jew, or even sexual compulsions for opposite sex situations—cannot possibly be struggling as intensely as these people.³²

A person who comes out and defines themselves as gay, is thus seen as a tragic victim of their biology; a person whom G-d has "dealt a bad hand"; a person without any good options. And for that reason, these individuals must require extra attention in the Jewish community and

³⁰ Sara McHenry, "Gay Is Good"

³¹ Rahav Gabay, Boaz Hameiri, Tammy Rubel-Lifschitz, Arie Nadler, The tendency for interpersonal victimhood: The personality construct and its consequences. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 165 (2020) 110-134

³² Koby Frances. The Tightrope of Desire: A Qualitative Study of Sexual Conflict in Single Heterosexual Orthodox Jewish Men. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*. 35:1 (2018) 31–37. This study I conducted showed the significant existential and emotional distress that single heterosexual Orthodox men could experience on account of their sexual-religious conflicts. Yet it is unlikely that a religious authority would issue a public statement of empathy and acceptance for individuals who are pursuing or succumbing to their sexual feelings with women. And it is unlikely that a religious authority would tolerate an official Orthodox group that actively opts out of the premarital sexual prohibitions, because of their emotional difficulty in keeping these laws.

extra expressions of empathy and inclusion. Making this implicit belief more explicit can hopefully show just how patronizing our attitudes have become while living under the unchallenged dominance of Essentialist ideology.

Conclusion:

The Essentialist lens on sexual orientation has quickly grown from a single radical idea proposed by a persistent group of gay activists, into a larger ideology of thought, and now into a popular social movement staunchly supported by many Western cultural, medical, academic and religious institutions. As I've shown, the movement includes a "family" of interconnected but implicit beliefs, which uses well-known group-persuasion tactics³³ like the repetition of misinformation (sometimes referred to as "the exposure effect"), gaslighting, guilt, shame, attractive celebrity ambassadors, symbols of peace and unity, and the illusion of consensus, all to insert and cement its beliefs into the imagination of advanced societies while stifling curiosity and dissent.³⁴

Hopefully, by clearly seeing the ideology's fundamental flaws and the widespread social harm it causes—as well as the clever ways that this harm is covered-up and deflected—communities will feel more emboldened to step away from it and familiarize themselves with other more accurate, nuanced and Jewishly compatible terms and theories, such as those that I've suggested throughout this article and that I will continue to share with the broader Orthodox community.

If we can become more skeptical of the idea of "being inherently gay or straight" or a homosexual or heterosexual "person", young people and their helpers will be more open to discovering the more accurate and individualized term and theory for whatever it is that bothers them so that they can get the right kind of support.

My experience tells me that a silent majority continues to feel bullied by Essentialist ideology, even today—and they feel helpless to challenge it. From my research, this majority also exists in the secular world and, perhaps surprisingly so, among many *secular* mental-health professionals who feel pressure to keep their private "non-PC" thoughts to themselves.

Essentialism and its "family of beliefs" tells us that it is not safe to speak the scientific truth and to defend our most cherished values and way of life. I believe differently. I believe that if the frum community stood up a little taller for its beliefs and values, people from within our world and well beyond it, are likely to feel a greater sense of clarity, compassion and hope.

³³ Philip Zimbardo, "Influencing Attitudes and Changing Behavior"

³⁴ Bornstein, Robert F., and Catherine Craver-Lemley. "Mere exposure effect." *Cognitive illusions* (2022): 241-258.