

Discursive Agency and Collective Action among Lubavitch Hasidic Women

Rebekah Sims
Indiana University

Analysis of discursive agency in the writings of Lubavitch Hasidic women reflects complex collectivities that are simultaneously group and “serial” (the latter a concept created by Jean-Paul Sartre and further developed by Iris Marion Young). Agency and identity negotiation, as inherently communal, complicate collective action and thus complicate the nature of collective discursive action. I present a theoretical intervention that enables discourse theorists to place collective action in more than two categories and that offers alternate ways to read collective action—particularly action related to religious rituals and religious discourse.

The man “goes out” in search of G-dliness, the woman cultivates G-dliness. The man provides the seed to create life; the woman bears life. The man teaches his children how to live; the woman is life.
—Proverb from the Chassidic Masters

I would describe myself as a Chassidic feminist. The two terms are not mutually exclusive, though their combination is not without tension.
—Rivkah Slonim

Each Friday night, eighteen minutes before the sun sets, Orthodox Jewish women and girls light candles and recite a blessing that ushers in the Sabbath. This short ceremony is a time set apart specifically for conversation with God (Daum and Rudavsky). According to Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the leader of the Lubavitch sect, the primary purpose of the candle-lighting mitzvah is to “emit a spiritual light that permeates the home and indeed the world” (Klein 27) and thus overcome the state of spiritual darkness that currently envelops the world. Hasidic communities believe that all women desire to fulfill the commandments given specifically to them (25), which leads to the most fulfilling and satisfying life. The keeping of the candle-lighting mitzvah is an exceptionally powerful expression of agency: its importance and communicative power is recognized not only by members of the community, it is also believed to be recognized by God. Women thus have agency in their communities and also with God. Religious actions such as this one are agential on a number of levels: personal, communal, and spiritual. Discourse from this community written by women emphasizes the potential for holiness and goodness that comes from embracing the female Hasidic identity, and it also underscores that women in this group have a particular spiritual and religious exigency with God.

In this article, I demonstrate how an intertextual reading of women’s writing from the Lubavitch community reflects complex collectivities that are both group and serial. More specifically, I argue that agency and identity negotiation, as inherently communal, complicate collective action and thus complicate the nature of collective discursive action. In “Gender as Seriality,” Iris Marion Young notes that Sartre defines collective action as action resulting from a group’s conscious collective efforts towards an agreed-upon end (723). According to Young and Sartre, only groups are capable of this sort of collective action. Young writes, “Unlike a group, which forms

around actively shared objectives, a series is a social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented” (724). Serial collectivities are formed based on a common outside variable: people are part of a serial collective based on the outside environment. People in a serial collective are not assumed to have any sort of identification with one another, and so these groups do not engage in intentional collective action. Collective action is powerful, and it gains that power as a result of the collectiveness of the action: individual actions do not hold the same power or potential for change (735). Thus, collective action is the result of groups, not serial collectives, because it involves members being conscious of both their group membership and the group’s conjoined efforts. I argue that collective action, and specifically collective discursive action, is not limited to groups whose members are conscious of their combined, intentioned action. The actions of serial collectives, collectives whose members are not conscious of their combined action, can be just as powerful and collectively agential. In fact, writings from this community demonstrate that individuals can be acting on an individual, serial, and group level simultaneously. Examining discourse from this community is one part of developing theories of agency and discursive action that includes but looks beyond writing that arises from the need to fulfill a class assignment, a degree requirement, or a job and seeks also to account for and understand writing that comes into being because someone believes that there is an organic need that creating a piece of writing or contributing to a strain of discourse can fill.

Lubavitch Hasidim are ultra-Orthodox Jews; that is, the community is strictly Torah observant and somewhat cloistered. Hasidic Judaism arose out of an eighteenth-century pietistic movement in eastern Europe that emphasized individual holiness and personal connection with God. The Lubavitch Hasidic community originated in Russia, although because the community has a high rate of new members, known as *ba’al teshuva* (“returners to the faith”—nonobservant Jews or non-Jewish people who become Orthodox), Russian Jewish heritage is no longer emphasized. Of the many Hasidic groups, the Lubavitch are the most liberal and open to the outside. They are the only Hasidic group with a web presence, and the only one that actively evangelizes. Although education, child-rearing practices, and written texts from the Lubavitch community celebrate separate and divinely ordained male and female roles, the texts also reflect diverse interpretations of this universal feminine identification and demonstrate agency and spiritual authority exercised by Hasidic women. This dissonance between stated and interpreted role allows for theorizing about agency and collective action as it is at work in the world of Hasidic women. I will draw on theories of agency and collective action to demonstrate how plotting discourse aids in analyzing the individual and collective discursive action of women in this community.

The texts on which I base my analysis include issues of the *N’Shei Chabad Newsletter* published in 2010 and 2011 as well as Chabad.org web articles published in the last decade. The *N’Shei Chabad Newsletter* is a five-issue per year publication by the women of the Brooklyn Lubavitch Hasidic community, though it includes articles written by Lubavitch women from around the globe. This magazine is now in its thirty-eighth volume. The first issues were published in 1974. Each issue is almost one hundred pages long—it is a glossy, professional-looking, full-color magazine that appears more like a professional, mainstream magazine than a community newsletter. The articles in the *Newsletter* range in length from short, two-hundred-word letters to the editor to pieces several pages long. Topics include religious observations, family life and parenting, community events, biographies, book reviews, and an etiquette column. While the *N’Shei Chabad Newsletter* circulates mainly (although not exclusively) among Lubavitch communities, the Chabad.org website, an extensive Internet presence, is written for both community members and outsiders, and is one of the primary ways that people outside the Lubavitch community first encounter the Lubavitch world. The web presence extends the community’s discourse far beyond its physical and religious boundaries: a web presence is theoretically accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. Topics

discussed on the website often overlap with those discussed in the *Newsletter*, although the website articles, unlike those in the print publication, tend to be written with the non-Hasidic or non-Jewish reader in mind. The website also includes large sections focused on detailed information on all facets of Jewish life, from birth to death, intended to introduce the unfamiliar reader to Hasidic life.

Because discourse that arises from a community has particular meaning for the community as a collective as well as for the individuals who comprise it, I read texts written by Lubavitch women as communally created. This approach reveals not only the workings of individual agency, but also the negotiations of collectivity based on gender and collective agency. Agency, as articulated by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, is the ability to speak, write, or act in ways that are heeded and understood by the individual's community (3). Women in this community act and write in ways that express individual and collective agency simultaneously. The experience of spiritual agency and its written expression cause a situation in which group and serial collectives occur simultaneously. In "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective," Iris Marion Young, drawing on concepts of collective action developed by Jean-Paul Sartre, defines a "group" as a collective in which people intentionally identify with one another for a specific group purpose. A group is "a collection of persons who recognize themselves and one another as in a unified relation with one another" (723). Groups are also united by a common project or action that its members take together. "Women" do not form a group because they do not necessarily share a common identity or common project with all other women based solely on gender (723–25). Instead, they form a serial collective, which is made up of people who are passively unified around material objects or situations. The unity of a serial collective "derives from the way individuals pursue their own individual ends with respect to the same objects conditioned by a continuous material environment"; their collective action is not the result of a conscious identification and assent (724). These two types of collectives can occur simultaneously. For example, because spiritual actions are believed to be both prescriptive and generative, they confirm community membership while having spiritual results for the individual, the community, and the world. Authors write about these happenings concurrently. In order to examine the collective action and agency that results from these concurrent community-confirming and spiritual acts, a different way to look at groups and series beyond distinct rubrics that categorize collective action is needed.

Agent/cy: Writing and Publishing as the Spirit Moves

A discourse community is made up of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved and regulated channels, and who share assumptions about which topics are appropriate for examination and discussion (Porter 38–39). Women in the Lubavitch Hasidic community form a discourse community as they write and publish in multiple genres intended to be read by other Jewish women, both Hasidic and non-Hasidic, as well as those outside the community who are curious about Hasidic beliefs and practices. While both of the main regulated channels of communication, print and web based, demonstrate intertextuality, the intertextuality demonstrated by the website is different from that of the *Newsletter*, and it is much easier to see. Because the Internet allows for instant commenting and very fast response to writings by website and blog authors, multiple voices can combine to create a piece of community discourse that is updated nearly constantly. People outside the community may also comment on the blogs and web articles, causing a slight fragmenting of the borders between insiders and outsiders in this community. Though both the *Newsletter* and the website contain examples of iterability, or the "traces" of pieces of other texts which help to construct a given text's meaning (Porter 35), those textual fragments are often contributed by multiple people on the website, while in the *Newsletter* one person has gathered the textual fragments into an article. The intertextuality of the discourse on the website and in the *Newsletter* reveals the link between spiritual agency and written agency. Specifically, in the

Newsletter, intertextuality demonstrates the process by which a woman comes to have the authority to write on behalf of the community in a formal print publication. Authority and formal recognition for writing are conferred differently, in what Anne Ruggles Gere calls the “extracurriculum” of composition outside of academia (89): examining the agency reflected in intertextual writing reveals how this happens. On the website, intertextual reading demonstrates, among other things, the process by which community members negotiate roles and identity.

Because these primary texts negotiating gender, spirituality, religious texts, and daily life written by Hasidic women reflect ongoing communal conversations, attributing these works only to their listed author is too reductive. Because of the complexity of these communal conversations, if these texts are studied as simply the work of a single author, the workings of collective agency and groupness can be simplified or completely missed. In order to analyze the spiritual and nonspiritual, the individual and collective agencies reflected in Hasidic women’s writing, I read these texts as intertexts. That is, rather than reading them as the work of a solo author, I focus on the social contexts that surround these writers and from which the writers’ discourse arises (Porter 34). The writer is “a participant in a community of discourse that creates its own collective meaning,” rather than the singular originator of a text (34–35). Reading texts as intertextual conversations, rather than as the work of a single author, brings to light complications of agency and identity present in these texts. It allows for a much richer discourse analysis that takes into account the effects of complex religious actions on the discourse of this community. I read these texts in particular as intertexts because I observe ongoing conversation surrounding issues of the collective action of religious practice and what it means to be a Hasidic woman that extends throughout multiple publications and genres. Furthermore, I examine these texts specifically not only because they are the primary texts published by Lubavitch women, but also because these texts are produced and constructed by desire. Gere notes in “Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition” that such a text, written outside the realm of academia and schooling, “posits writing as an action undertaken by motivated individuals who frequently see it as having social and economic consequences, including transformations in personal relationships” (80). Writings on the website and in the *Newsletter* not only recount acts of personal transformation, the authors also articulate that they hope their own recounting of the events will inspire others’ personal or social transformations.

Agency is inherently communal (Campbell 3), and so viewing expressions of agency such as written works, and even religious actions, as purely individual in nature is reductive. Campbell notes that a major issue in examining agency is to consider the forces of external constraints, such as subject-positions, and see how subjects may resist or mediate these formulations (4). Reading texts as intertext reveals the interactions between expressed agency and subject-positions constructed by a culture and placed on certain members of that culture (such as the seemingly prescribed role of the Orthodox Jewish woman). This allows us to see the ways in which members of this culture resist, negotiate, and redefine this subject-position. It is easy to read Hasidic Jewish literature and assume that all women in this community accept the role of Orthodox homemaker in the same way. Reading this literature as intertext requires that a more complex view of gender roles and identity be taken. While there may be no static, universal female gender that informs identity, atomizing identity must also be avoided as it stifles the possibilities for understanding collectivity and community. Writings on what it means to be a woman and Hasidic are in fact part of an ongoing academic and practical conversation about the roles of Hasidic women in community life. Reading not only literature but also religious and spiritual actions as intertextual indicates that the mitzvot, or commandments, kept by women are both individual and collective in nature. Articles and blogs about the keeping of the female commandments—such as lighting the Shabbos candles, baking challah, and ritual bathing in mikvah baths—expound on both the personal and communal spiritual benefits of these activities. These actions are understood to be both prescribed and gener-

ative—that is, while they confirm membership in the community and fulfill religious obligation, they also challenge the idea of serial and group collectives as separate entities entirely, because the actions of the collective are simultaneously group and serial in nature. Thus, they are useful sites for examining how discursive collectivity can make individual agency more or less obscure.

In order to examine the intricate interactions between discursive collectivity and individual agency, close reading of texts from this community using iterability, a type of intertextual reading that focuses on repeated textual fragments, including citations, quotations, allusions, traditions, and unannounced sources, is helpful (Porter 35). “Chana: The Grace of Woman,” an article in the September 2010 issue of *N’Shei Chabad Newsletter* (Klein), outlines the spiritual purposes of the three mitzvot specifically observed by Jewish women: baking challah (as a part of keeping kosher), ritual cleansing in a mikvah, and lighting the Shabbos candles. The content of this article articulates the immense spiritual power entrusted to women through these three commandments. Yiddish and transliterated Hebrew words throughout this article speak to the expectation that people who read this magazine will be familiar with these terms, although the meaning of many is explained by context. The article refers to Jewish customs and practices, and appeals to the sayings and writings of the Lubavitch Rebbe to emphasize the importance of its topic. Often, in these texts, the references to the Rebbe’s writings or sayings are not explicitly cited: that the Rebbe said or wrote something is enough—exactly where he did so is not always important. The ethos of the Rebbe is strong enough to evade the need for citation. These “traces” of discourse—the allusions and references to the Rebbe, Yiddish and Hebrew transliterations, mentions of community celebrations and community members—in the *Newsletter* articles such as “Chana: The Grace of Woman” show the communal creation of the text: the author is a gatherer and organizer of the fragments to construct an article with meaning inside and outside the community. The author is certainly expressing individual agency, but she is also reexpressing communal agencies found in other texts.

The content of “Chana: The Grace of Woman” demonstrates levels of agency as well. This article emphasizes the spiritual power that women have through keeping the three commandments of baking challah, lighting Shabbos candles, and bathing in the mikvah. The commandments are kept not only because they are divinely ordained, but also because through keeping them, women have the power to profoundly impact community life and the world. “Fulfillment of [mikvah laws] is vital for . . . the eternity of the Jewish people, allowing us to bring sacred souls into this world in the purest way possible” (Klein 26). Klein also writes that keeping these mitzvot fills the world with spirituality and blessing—not just the lives of those who keep these laws. At these moments, it is believed that the gates of heaven open to the prayers of the women enacting the commandment (27). These moments are agential at several levels: the personal, the female, the communal, and the universal. This is where we begin to see the intersection of personal and communal discursive agency, and of serial collectives and groups. Klein writes about women who engage in the individual actions of the commandments: they are oriented around religious practices and objects while simultaneously confirming group identity and upholding the spiritual purpose of the group.

Discursive agency can also demonstrate how those who take religious actions and then write about them invent unique subject-positions within broader categories such as “Hasidic women.” As agency is the invention of personae, subject-positions, and collectivities, this means that some writers invent personae or subject-positions that are somewhere between secular and perfect Jewish observance, and these subject-positions are accepted and even to some extent celebrated in the community. To have agency is to be able to communicate with one’s social groups in a way that is valued and understood (Campbell 3, 5). Expressions of agency place agents in particular positions as individuals, community members, and people of faith. They also create temporary collectivities around particular faith practices. “A Head Full of Blessings,” from the September 2010 issue of the *N’Shei Chabad Newsletter*, demonstrates female agency within community and family. The author

of this article, Nikki Leib, elected to begin wearing a wig, as is the Hasidic female convention. Wearing a wig in and of itself is an expression of agency, but as a result of this decision, the author had new opportunities to express agency in writing opened to her. She was able to write and publish an article about this transformative experience in the *N'Shei Chabad Newsletter*. This article is an example of a piece of writing believed by the writer to have the potential social consequence of transforming a reader's relationship with both God and the Lubavitch community.

Leib's written description of her adoption of a wig marks her formal, published "entry into ongoing cultural conversations" (Campbell 3) about the spiritual and practical merits of covering one's head and confirms her place in the community. "A Head Full of Blessings" demonstrates the author's careful balance of her own ethos and spiritual positioning with two communities: the observant Hasidic community and the "outside" secular world, including readers who may be considering undertaking an observant life. Unlike other articles on wigs in the *Newsletter*, Leib's piece emphasizes how recently she began wearing the wig (six weeks at the time of the writing). She mentions her secular background and, unlike most other writers for the *Newsletter*, she has kept her secular first name (Nikki) rather than choosing to write under a similar Hebrew name. Leib is of course firmly in the Hasidic camp in terms of beliefs, but she retains enough of her secular persona that her writing is highly accessible, and possibly even attractive, to the interested reader who has not quite made the jump to observant Jewish life.

Identity: I Am Woman . . . and So Are You!

Reading texts as intertext reveals complex interactions between individual and collective agencies, and this allows us to see the interactions between the identities and subject-positions created and claimed by Lubavitch women as complicating notions of collective action. While tracing agencies reveals much about the workings of collectives among Lubavitch Hasidic women, considering how identity is articulated and how identification works within community reveals how gender is understood and how gender-based collectivities are constructed.

Iris Marion Young offers an understanding of gender-based collectivity that emphasizes the process of identification with respect to collective action. She defines a group as "a collection of persons who recognize themselves and one another as in a unified relation with one another" (723), united by a common project or action they take together. "Women" do not form a group because they do not necessarily share a common identity or common project with all other women based solely on gender (723–25), but are instead a serial collective whose unity "derives from the way individuals pursue their own individual ends with respect to the same objects conditioned by a continuous material environment" (724). However, the Lubavitch community's construction of gender-based collectivities seems to be in direct conflict with Young's: texts from the *Newsletter* and Chabad.org routinely encourage women to become observant by appealing to an innate sense of womanliness. Writers emphasize that women identify with other women primarily because of a shared gender. Lubavitch Hasidic publications—by both men and women—construct a sort of universal female identification that fits under Young's definition of "group" and supersedes even religious identification. This universal female identification is essential for the Hasidic mission: it functions to establish a bond between reader, writer, and community, particularly when it is unlikely that there are any other shared characteristics (for example, in conversion attempts towards gentiles) or when the author wants to underscore the clarity and holiness of the Hasidic lifestyle and contrast it with the almost unlimited gender roles of modern secular America. However, the women in this community write about and live out a multitude of feminine roles and subject-positions even while claiming a universal feminine discursive identity.

Defining one's subject position, especially in a stringently religious, cloistered group, is some-

thing of a constant negotiation of roles. In addition to understanding agency as the invention of personae, subject-positions, and collectivities, agency (alongside subjectivity) can also be understood as how individuals accept, reject, or negotiate subject-positions available to them at given moments in a particular culture. The identities constituted by these subject-positions are shifting, not fixed (Campbell 4), and they affect how collectivities are created. In particular, writings from this community invite all women—Jewish or otherwise—to join in a collectivity created at birth by virtue of gender. Only by embracing Orthodox womanhood will women be fulfilled. However, even though this idea of Orthodox femininity is constructed as universal, the ways in which those in this collective play out the role of “Orthodox/Hasidic Jewish woman” are actually quite diverse, which suggests that identification is complex. Women are not expected to live out their role in one single identical way. Many writings from the Lubavitch community (such as “Chana: The Grace of Woman”) involve women accepting and negotiating observant, Jewish subject-positions and rejecting perceived secular subject-positions. However, occasionally articles involve redefining or negotiating seemingly secular subject-positions so that they will fit into the Orthodox female subject-position. An ordering of separate roles is also a way that community members combine Jewish identity with other, more secular roles.

Such an ordering of roles is demonstrated in an interview with Rebbitzin¹ Leah Kohn on the role of women in the Lubavitch community, published on the Chabad.org website. Kohn stated, “When you speak to [Lubavitch women], they’ll tell you that the real meaning of life, as important as their job is, is not their job but their role as a Jewish woman in Jewish society” (Kohn and Jacobson). Outside, powerful jobs are acceptable as long as the primary focus is on raising the family and fulfilling Torah. Discourse from the community encourages women to find out what it means to be a woman and specifically to be a Jewish woman (Crispe, “I Am Woman”). Here, the idea of a “role” that is played is less emphasized, and the idea of inner being, something that is innate and not a choice, is highlighted. Playing “roles” outside of the Jewish community is acceptable so long as the primary identity and inner being that is Hasidic is embraced first and foremost.

A second and more complex way that identities are negotiated is presented in “Chassidic Feminist,” an article in “The Jewish Woman” section of the Chabad.org website. “I would describe myself as a Chassidic feminist. The two terms are not mutually exclusive, though their combination is not without tension,” writes author Rivkah Slonim. She notes that she is grateful for the feminist movement because it has brought the rest of the world up to Hasidic standards regarding the treatment of women. Slonim marries the Hasidic female identity with the label “feminist” by reframing feminism as not only compatible with Hasidism but reflective of the very essence of Hasidic female life. However, feminism becomes dangerous when it gets in the way of an individual’s relationship with God. Slonim constructs feminism as cautiously compatible with Hasidic femininity—though she articulates the firm belief that “we women *are* different, biologically, psychologically, intellectually, spiritually and in every other way,” which does not reflect mainstream feminist thought. Parts of her identity (Jewish, female) she believes are inborn, but the feminist part is claimed and the resulting negotiation demonstrates powerful female agency. Interestingly, she does not suggest that feminism is a universal identity for women, nor that it should be. She merely suggests that it is one she chooses to claim and that it is a compatible one other Hasidic women may choose as well. Amid much discourse on embracing identities conferred at birth, “Chassidic Feminist” complicates the identity discourse of the community by demonstrating how, through discourse, a “hybrid” identity as both Orthodox and feminist can be achieved. It is not unusual to find articles from this community that selectively co-opt secular feminism and apply it to Hasidic life to argue that modernism is at work in Hasidic Jewish life. Hasidism is not a relic of the past; this limited use of some feminist principles is meant to demonstrate that Torah rule is inherently modern and even ahead of secular gender reforms. Similarly, anthropologist Ayala Fader wrote that

Bobover² Hasidic women aimed to be very “with it,” and to take secular culture and bend it to fit with Hasidic standards, rather than to reject it outright and substitute old-world eastern European standards (147). So although it may seem to outsiders that this community is a relic of another era, to those in the community, their life is both contemporary and Torah-centered.

By examining traditional and cloistered groups’ unusual embrace of feminism, scholars can better understand what the interpretation of feminism within the cloistered group means for the role(s) of women in the community and also for the community’s *perception* of its own gender roles. The Lubavitch community (including the Rebbe) espouses a sort of modified feminism, and sees it as compatible with the coming Messianic era of redemption. “[F]rom a *spiritual* perspective, these changes [in society as a result of the feminist movement] are a result of the coming era when feminine principles and ways of being will come clearly to the fore” (Tzukernik). Shimona Tzukernik emphasizes in one of her web articles that “not only are women at the forefront in *bringing about* the Redemption but they will be so too in the *era of Redemption itself*. At this future time, the unique superiority of the mystical source of womanhood and its associated receptive and feminine principles will be revealed.” Tzukernik writes that the Hasidic version of feminism is one that is devoid of ego, instead focused on changing the world to make it “a wonderful place for everyone.” The power of the Hasidic feminist comes not from feminism but from Torah. General feminist aims as perceived by the community are framed as in line with Hasidic life, and in fact in line with the Messianic era. In practice, this sort of framing of feminism shifts the outsider’s perception of static and perhaps antiquated gender roles and causes the community to seem both Orthodox and modern at once. Communal identity, not just personal identity, is at stake here. In Andrea Lieber’s “A Virtual *Veibershul*: Blogging and the Blurring of the Public and Private among Orthodox Jewish Women,” she notes that Orthodox women bloggers “are not seeking to overturn the conventional gender roles that structure their lives or to challenge the patriarchal order in any way” (627). While it is true that the authors of the Chabad.org web articles and blogs are not seeking change within the community, many of the articles challenge outsiders’ perceptions of gender roles in the community. Slonim’s “Chassidic Feminist” is one such article that attempts to overturn outsiders’ perceptions of community-sanctioned gender roles rather than changing the actual structure of those roles within the Lubavitch community. While Lieber’s article discusses work written by non-Lubavitch Orthodox women who blog mostly anonymously without the community encouragement and sanction that are provided by the Chabad.org website host, her assertion that “blogging is not about breaking down conventional boundaries of communication, but rather extending traditional ones” (632) holds in the Lubavitch community as well. The web, although it is a public space available to anyone with an Internet connection, can be sanctified in a sense, as it is yet another tool that the Lubavitch community can use to reach out to other Jewish people. It can also be used to facilitate connections with others based on gender, as demonstrated by the Jewish Woman section of the website.

This community assumes a need for identification with others of the same gender in order to fulfill religious obligations. Statements about what all women want, whether or not they are aware of this desire, abound in multiple print and web publications by the Lubavitch community. Although in practice these groups are far more specifically defined than only by gender, the discourse does not more specifically name the group as “Orthodox women” or “Hasidic women” or even “Jewish women.” When writing or speaking about gender in general or about keeping commandments in particular, writers refer simply to “women.” “Take away the external differences, the outer shell as it were, and you will find that we [women] are very much the same” (Klein 24). Hasidic female writers encourage their audience to embrace being female *because* in the discourse of the community embracing one’s gender is linked to keeping the commandments. While written discourse by both men and women formally acknowledges one role for women with respect to

Jewish tradition, discourse from this community clearly demonstrates that multiple subject-positions are actually in constant negotiation. Certain identities are seen as desirable to fulfill, while others are claimed and joined with those conferred at birth through discourse negotiation. Still, all identities are believed to fall away when the agent is most engaged in spiritual agency and her soul is joined with God's.

Looking at the process of identification alongside the workings of agency in Hasidic women's writing reveals the most direct challenges to group and serial collective theory as enacted by Young in "Gender as Seriality." Young offers seriality as an alternative to understanding the collectivity of gender as a group, based on Sartre's theory of group and serial collectives (723). Thus, gender is a serial collective because women do not necessarily identify with all other women on the basis of a shared gender, nor do all women share a common project. Instead, the gendered serial collective is one in which individual women are positioned as feminine by activities and biological structures classified as female (728). In order to understand collective action that involves gender in Hasidic communities, it is necessary to see serial collectives and groups as overlapping and complementary. By examining the workings of agency and identification in Hasidic women's writing, it is possible to complicate and extend theories of serial collectivities and groups: they are not mutually exclusive but can be interdependent. Collectives can be group or serial, both, or mostly one or the other. Further developing the concepts of group and serial agency helps to avoid misreading group or collective intention, and thus to avoid misreading or essentializing gender roles in traditional/cloistered religious communities.

Collectivity: Absent from Each Other, but Still Together

Rather than viewing seriality and groupness as two distinct rubrics which can be applied to collective action, we see instead multiple levels of identity and identification as well as more options for kinds of collectives. Studying the keeping of mitzvot in the Lubavitch Hasidic community demonstrates that applying both group and serial collective theory to the actions of collectives reveals a more nuanced understanding of the many levels of agency at work in the ritual activities of religious collectives and challenges the assertions such collectives make about innate identification based on gender. While Young's primary purpose in developing serial collective theory is to construct a gender-based collective by describing cultural positioning instead of using essentializing labels to describe gender, I draw on her theory of serial collectives to understand collectives based not only on gender but also on religion. Young identifies female bodies and feminine activities as the objects around which women are culturally positioned (728). Thus, women form a serial collective because they are culturally positioned around feminine objects and activities. However, this idea that women form a serial collective rather than a group is complicated in religious communities that emphasize differences between men and women and preach a universal female identification. Certainly, the Lubavitch women are individuals positioned as feminine by activities surrounding certain structures and objects. However, their discourse claims women as a group, as it articulates a broad, lifelong group purpose for Jewish women (and women in general) that is separate from that of men. To avoid essentializing Lubavitch women, a simultaneous understanding of group and serial collective is needed. The unity of a series is too loose, the unity of a group too tight. Members of a group "mutually acknowledge that together they undertake a common project" and that they are "united by the action that they undertake together" (723–24). In contrast, members of a serial collective are united by external situations or actions rather than by mutual acknowledgment of a common purpose. Thus, gender is a serial collective, as one belongs to a gender collective because of biological sex and socially assigned gender definitions rather than because one has elected to be part of a group with a common project. Young sees these two collectives as generally separate, though groups may arise out of serial collectives. I understand group and serial col-

lectives differently: seriality can apply to collectives whose members are not physically present with each other, and among those who are engaged in seemingly individual action. In addition, serial and group collective action can happen concurrently.

Figure 1: Discursive Action of Collectives

Group action is made up of individual actions that have a conscious, group-wide result and that are motivated by inherited or claimed identification with a group.

Serial action is collective because it is oriented around common objects, beliefs, or cultural positioning. It is made up of individual actions motivated by the perception of individual benefit.

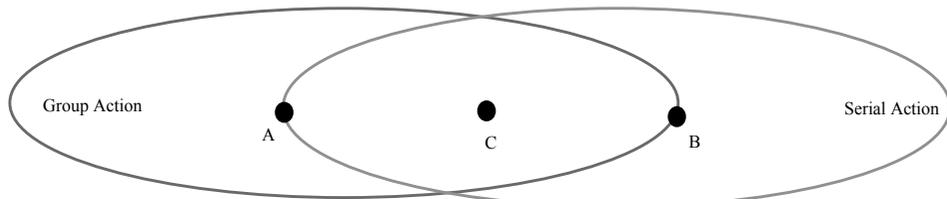
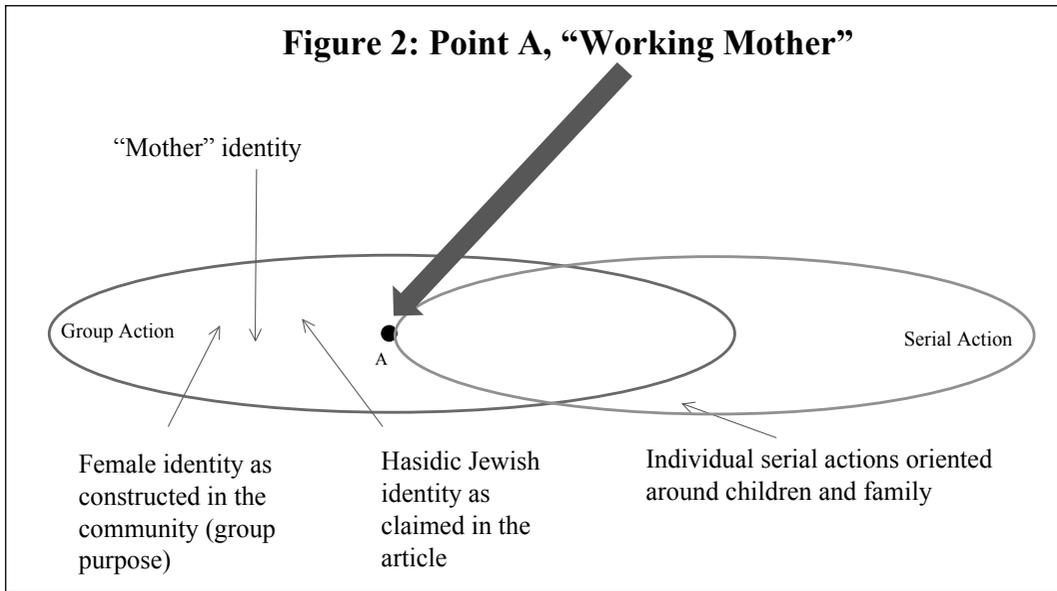


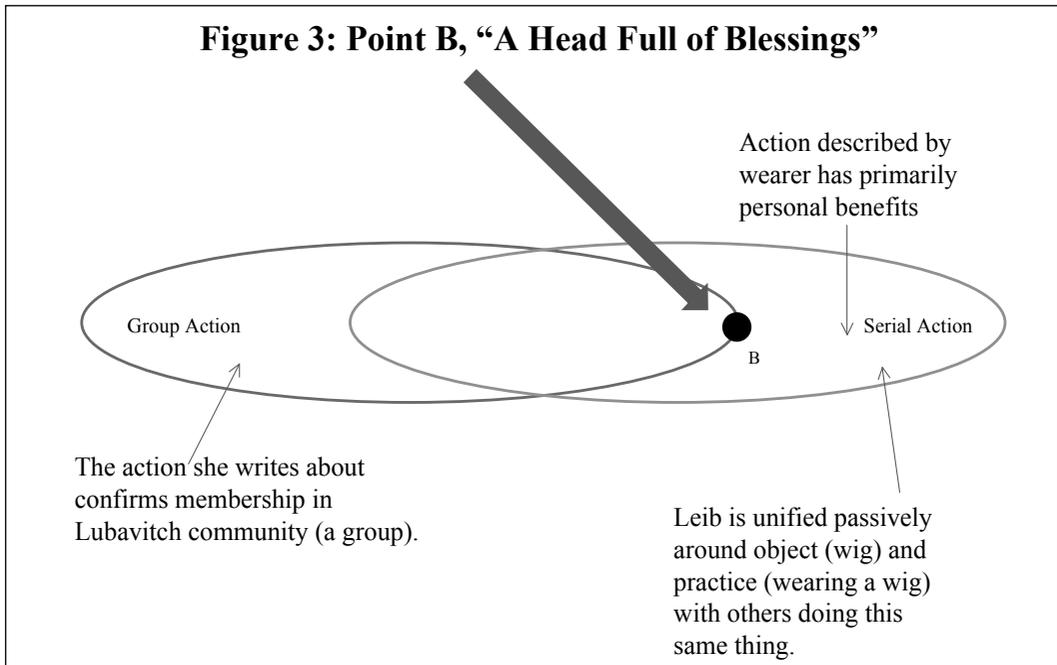
Figure 1, “Discursive Action of Collectives,” demonstrates visually how to plot discourse about religious practices with respect to collectivity. At the far left, I plot discursive action that is completely group in nature, and at the far right, I plot action that is completely serial. In the exact middle where the two ovals intersect is action that is equally group and serial in nature. Sara Crispe’s blog post “The Working Mother,” which I have indicated as Point A (Figure 2), lands squarely in the middle of the “group” sphere, but touches the edge of the serial collective sphere. Using Hebrew terms and Torah references, the author translates words and phrases concerning women to mean that the woman *is* the home, not that she necessarily must be *in* the home. Simply by being a Jewish woman, she is the home for her family wherever she is. “The Working Mother” argues that women may legitimately choose to work outside the home full-time, part-time, occasionally, or not at all and still be faithful Jewish mothers. Such articles demonstrate that being a Lubavitch Hasidic woman is more about subscribing to a set of attitudes, beliefs, and religious actions (such as putting family first when making decisions and keeping the commandments) and less about every woman living the life of a traditional stay-at-home mother. This discourse constructs “Jewish mothers” (and even mothers in general) as a group with a universal feeling: “I don’t think there is a mother in this world who doesn’t question if she is doing the best for her children.” However, the action taken by the mothers as a result of being in this group is more serial. As the blog post states, women choose to act differently with respect to work and their children. The action is oriented around their children, and the purpose of motherhood itself is not necessarily a uniform group purpose. This blog post is plotted as more group than serial because it represents the shared group intention, which is wanting what is best for one’s family. This group action results in the serial action of doing what is best for the family, and it is determined by the family itself, not by the group. Thus, the discursive action of “The Working Mother” is mainly group in nature but has elements of seriality. Applying both kinds of collectivities to this situation brings to light the individual decisions, identifications, and agencies that make up collective discursive action.

Figure 2: Point A, “Working Mother”

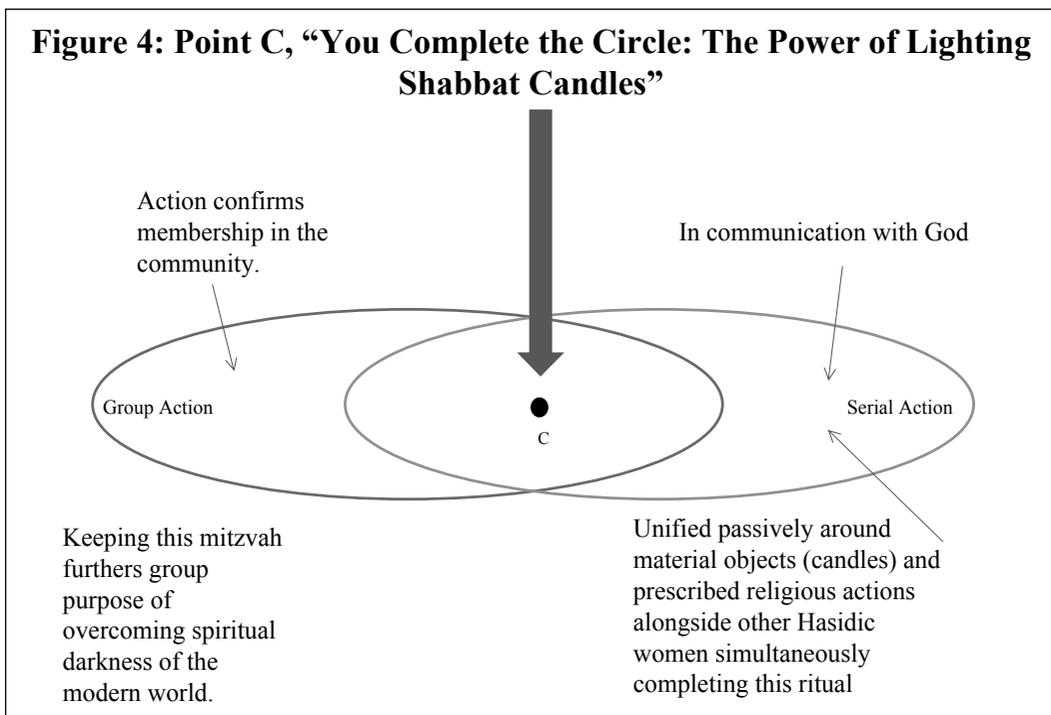


In contrast, Leib’s “A Head Full of Blessings,” which I have indicated as point B (Figure 3), is plotted as mostly serial and only slightly group. In this case, the writer notes that wearing a wig was her personal decision and benefits mainly herself and her family. This is serial action because although most Hasidic women wear wigs, this particular mitzvah’s benefits are limited to the wearer, unlike the candle-lighting mitzvah, which is believed to have group (and worldwide) results. Leib’s writing constructs her actions as oriented around a practice. This practice confirms group membership, but this is secondary to the serial nature of wig wearing. Thus, Leib’s article demonstrates a mainly serial but slightly group collective action.

Figure 3: Point B, “A Head Full of Blessings”



The most equal simultaneous group and serial discursive action is demonstrated in articles about the lighting of Shabbos candles. Although this ritual appears to be an individual one, instructions on how to complete this ritual as well as articles like “You Complete the Circle: The Power of Lighting Shabbat Candles” (Bryski) emphasize the community and worldwide results of this action. Although the women who engage in this act are individuals carrying out a deeply personal spiritual act, they are aware of other women in their community doing this same action. Furthermore, the group achieves a purpose that cannot be achieved by only one woman lighting these candles. There is a group spiritual agency, which exists intertwined with individual agential actions and a serial awareness of others keeping this commandment. Women across the community are simultaneously engaging in the same action with the same intentions and results—fulfilling religious obligations, affirming community membership and identity as a Jewish woman, communicating with God, and hastening the coming of the Messiah. These women are in a serial collective and a group and are acting as an individual *at the same time*. They are united by an electively performed religious action which has both individual and group purposes. The women as individuals and as a collective exist on the three planes simultaneously. Because this action is simultaneously and equally group and serial, and because discourse on this action emphasizes the co-occurring individual and corporate results of lighting Shabbos candles, I plot this discourse as Point C (Figure 4), directly in the middle of the group and serial spheres.



As part of a serial collective, these women are “brought together by their relation to a material object” (Young 725), the candles. As a group, they acknowledge a shared identity, membership, and purpose behind their actions, and as individuals, they each pursue a personal relationship and conversation with God. The discourse about this act, both that which describes the ritual and that which reflects on the ritual’s significance, notes that it is simultaneously personally and communally beneficial, but that it is an intimate personal action oriented around ritual objects and practices. Like radio listeners, these women are isolated but aware of others who are not immediately

present but are participating in the same activity. The constraints of serial existence, however, do not necessarily hold in this situation. Young's assertion that "we are all . . . unable to alter the collective results of these individual choices" (726) is untrue for the spiritual serial/group collectives in this community. Members are not powerless to alter the material milieu. Rather, embracing this divinely ordained "material milieu" is the way to effect spiritual change on a personal, community, and world level. In embracing this action, they are participating in a group-wide effort to bring light, peace, and the Messiah to the world. In the Chabad.org web article "You Complete the Circle," author Shula Bryski writes,

We are one big, beautiful world of millions of Jewish women, united in our sameness—bringing light to the world with our candle-lighting, always on Friday evenings, always with a blessing. And yet, we are each, independently, an *entire* world—comprised of our unique emotions, talents, and ways of thinking; serving G-d with our unique flavors; connecting, doing, feeling and experiencing with our own unique ways.

This quotation demonstrates the negotiation of the simultaneous embrace of universal womanly identification and limited secular individualism recast in a Jewish light. It also demonstrates the level of individualism and group purpose that exist together: united in sameness, aware of others, positioned around material objects, but also unique individuals engaged in personal conversations with God. These women who identify as Jewish are engaged in seemingly identical action. However, this action has a group project, and although each action is individual and personalized, no action is quite equivalent to any other. The article ends, "The circle is not complete without you." Her writing demonstrates the particular flavor of coinciding groupness and serial collectivity. Bryski's invitation constructs women who are engaging in this mitzvah as a group: the reader is invited to engage in the action of a "circle" of women in order to complete the group. However, the invitation she writes also includes this:

G-d is yearning for *you*, the precious world that is you, dear reader, to invite Him into your home. To talk to Him about your gratitude, perhaps your confusion, even disappointment in Him. This Friday afternoon as the sun sets, He is yearning and waiting . . . for you, to light the Shabbat candles on Friday night, completing the unique weekly time cycle of you, your world, in your unique way.

Although her writing invites women to be part of a group, a "circle" of women lighting candles, Bryski still upholds that this is an innately individual, deeply intimate personal action, and that the actions of Jewish women doing this will never quite be group in the same way that students create a group project and supporters join a political campaign. Thus, capturing this action as simultaneously a group and serial endeavor not only reveals the workings of agency and collectivity but also demonstrates how multiple identities are negotiated and maintained during such actions.

Conclusion

A way of thinking about groups and series beyond two discrete and separate options is required to understand collective discursive action within this community. The theoretical intervention that I diagrammed gives us the ability to place collective action in more than two categories, and it offers alternate ways to read collective action—particularly action related to religious rituals and religious discourse. Two discrete options (group and serial) limit the collective and individual agencies and actions that can be seen. Options for different levels of simultaneous group and serial collectivity bring to light the complex nature of collective discursive action. Plotting discourse or discursive action leads to ways of thinking about the author in relationship to others in her community, and it also tells us about how the individual interacts and sees herself, her actions, and her writing as part of not only her own community but also the outside world. As such, labels such as

“Chassidic Feminist” can be seen not merely as naming identifiers but as ways in which women construct a subject-position and claim agency within certain communities. Thus, text may be read not only as intertextual discourse but also as intercommunity discourse.

Many thanks to Professor Tarez Graban for her teaching, mentoring, and kindness throughout the research and writing of this article.

Notes

¹“Rebbitzen” means “respected Rabbi’s wife.”

²The Bobover sect is a somewhat more conservative Hasidic sect. They do not actively evangelize.

Works Cited

- Bryski, Shula. “You Complete the Circle: The Power of Lighting Shabbat Candles—First Person & Stories.” Shabbat. *Chabad.org*, n.d. Web. 20 Feb. 2012.
- Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. “Agency: Promiscuous and Protean.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2.1 (2005): 1–19. Print.
- Crispe, Sara Esther. “I Am Woman—Understanding Who We Are—Celebrating Jewish Womanhood.” *The Jewish Woman*. *Chabad.org*, 25 Apr. 2006. Web. 9 Jan. 2012.
- . “The Working Mother.” *Musing for Meaning*. *Chabad.org*, 8 Jan. 2012. Web. 9 Jan. 2012.
- Daum, Menachem, and Oren Rudavsky. *Hasidism in America*. 1997. VHS.
- Fader, Ayala. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2009. Print.
- Gere, Anne Ruggles. “Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition.” *College Composition and Communication* 45.1 (1994): 75–92. Print.
- Klein, Chaya M. “Chana: The Grace of a Woman.” *N’Shei Chabad Newsletter* Sept. 2010: 24–27. Print.
- Kohn, Leah, and Simon Jacobson. “A Woman’s Role—An Interview with Rebbetzin Leah Kohn—Celebrating Jewish Womanhood.” *The Jewish Woman*. *Chabad.org*, n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2012.
- Leib, Nikki. “A Head Full of Blessings.” *N’Shei Chabad Newsletter* Sept. 2010: 66. Print.
- Lieber, Andrea. “A Virtual Veibershul: Blogging and the Blurring of Public and Private among Orthodox Jewish Women.” *College English* 72.6 (2010): 621–37. Print.
- Porter, James E. “Intertextuality and the Discourse Community.” *Rhetoric Review* 5.1 (1986): 34–47. Print.
- Slonim, Rivkah. “Chassidic Feminist—My Personal Experiences—Celebrating Jewish Womanhood.” *The Jewish Woman*. *Chabad.org*, n.d. Web. 20 Jan. 2012.
- Tzukernik, Shimona. “Catalysts of Change—The Power of the Jewish Woman—Celebrating Jewish Womanhood.” *The Jewish Woman*. *Chabad.org*, Feb. 2009. Web. 9 Jan. 2012.
- Young, Iris Marion. “Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective.” *Signs* 19.3 (1994): 713–38. Print.