Toward an Understanding of Jewish Identity: A Phenomenological Study

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To begin mapping the landscape of contemporary Jewish identity from a phenomenological perspective, the authors conducted a qualitative analysis of semistructured interviews of 10 Jewish adults in the northeastern United States. Coding resulted in 6 universal themes (dynamic nature of self-identification, early formative experiences, desire to increase religious practice, generativity, feeling marginalized, and awareness of discrimination). Most of the other 18 typical and variant themes reflected a congruence between cultural identification and religious observance. Whereas only the religiously unaffiliated participants expressed shame or embarrassment about being Jewish, the observant Jews described a sense of pride, the importance of Jewish marriage, and a connection to Israel. The Conservative and Orthodox Jews were most clear about their identity as Jews; they discussed the importance of Jewish texts, heritage, values, search for meaning, and relation to God. All but the most Orthodox participants valued interpersonal relations with Gentiles; for them, Jewish identity predominates regardless of the social context.

Like many other ethnic groups, Jewish people are not uniform in their cultural identification (Langman, 1999; Osherson, 2001; Rosen & Weltman, 1996; Wouk, 1970), and Jewish ethnicity does not imply religious orthodoxy. Despite similarities among the various branches of Judaism, each is unique in principles, customs, and ritual practices (Wouk). Many people are not affiliated with any religious branch, although they have a solid sense of Jewish identity (Rosen & Weltman). Some identify strongly with Israel; others have less political interest but live traditionally as their ancestors did hundreds of years ago. Some mix traditional and contemporary values, and others, whether by choice or by circumstance, have only a peripheral connection to Jewish culture (Dershowitz, 1997). Indeed, some secular Jews appear to have rejected their identity when in fact “there was simply never anything there” (Langman, p. 281). In general, the trend toward assimilation has been attributed to a decline in societal anti-Semitism (Dershowitz; Langman). Although contemporary U.S. Jews are less fearful of anti-Semitic attacks and stigmatization than they were 50 years ago, they are also less conscious of their heritage and more prone to internalized anti-Semitism (Langman).

Conspicuously absent from the multicultural counseling literature are theory and research related to the Jewish people (Fischer & Moradi, 2001). This absence may be due to the high level of assimilation, the view of Jews as a religious sect rather than as an ethnic group, because internalized anti-Semitism discourages Jewish writers from publically expressing their ethnicity (Langman, 1999), or simply from anti-Semitism (Kiselica, 2003; Weinrach, 2002). Jews also tend to be classified as White, when in fact some people of color are Jewish (Langman). Furthermore, because ethnicity in the United States is viewed in relation to access to power and wealth, and because Jews are represented at all socioeconomic levels (Goldberg, 1996), they tend not to be viewed in the same way as other minority groups (Rosen & Weltman, 1996).

In order to begin mapping the landscape of Jewish experience, we explored contemporary U.S. Jewish identity from the phenomenological perspective of a small sample of religiously observant and nonobservant adults who were interviewed in depth about their personal experiences. Our rationale was to provide counseling scholars and practitioners with a framework with which to understand the complexity and diversity of Jewish life in the United States (cf. Fischer & Moradi, 2001). Our research questions included, To what extent do these U.S. Jews identify with both Jewish and mainstream American culture? How dynamic a process is their Jewish cultural identification over a lifetime? How does their Jewish identification influence attitudes, values, and behavior, specifically interpersonal relationships, political ideology, and major life decisions? To what degree does their cultural identification correspond with the religious observance of Judaism?

From a sociological perspective, ethnicity refers to a biological relationship between people who identify with a specific group or who share a demographic category (Jalali, 1988). Despite diverse definitions of ethnicity, it is generally understood that ethnic identity plays an important role in self-concept (Atkinson, 1983; Fischer & Moradi, 2001; Phinney, 1996), in political and religious beliefs, career choice, mate selection, and personal health care.
decisions. The terms *ethnic* and *cultural identity* are not synonymous; ethnic identification refers to identifying oneself as a member of a reference group, whereas cultural identification refers to sharing the values, traditions, and attitudes of a particular group (Friedlander et al., 2000). Thus, a person may self-identify as a Jew but have little Jewish cultural identification.

Phinney (1996) pointed out that, unfortunately, ethnic groups tend to be viewed simply as discrete categories to which people belong. Heterogeneity, cultural blending, and continuous change make it difficult to know the extent to which people actually identify with the groups with which they associate. According to Phinney, it is important to know about ethnic identity, which is an enduring, essential aspect of the self, as well as the individual’s experience as a member of the minority group in question. These considerations guided the present inquiry.

In exploring the complexity of Jewish identity and if and how it changes over time, we found little theory or research to inform our inquiry. In fact, to date no psychology study has explored in depth the various dimensions of contemporary Jewish identity. In particular, little is known about the interplay of the religious and cultural aspects and how these aspects of identity contribute to an individual’s inner experiences.

As multicultural theory and practice emerge as a central force in counseling psychology (Helms & Cook, 1999), there is an increased need for inclusiveness across the spectrum of human diversity. We reasoned that research providing an informed understanding of Jewish identity would be a valuable contribution to the literature on diversity. As recommended by Fischer and Moradi (2001), we sought to begin constructing an infrastructure for a psychologically informed definition of Jewish identity for counselors’ and researchers’ further inquiry and exploration.

**Method**

**Participants**

A discovery-oriented, phenomenological methodology (Creswell, 1998) was used to study Jews from a single community in the northeastern United States. An available sample of 6 women and 4 men, aged 39–85 (*M* = 47.1, *SD* = 13.6), were interviewed about their “experiences as a Jewish person.” The participants, recruited by Michelle L. Friedman through personal and professional acquaintances, were selected to reflect a range of religious observance. Volunteers self-identified as unaffiliated or nonobservant (*n* = 2), Reform (*n* = 2), Conservative/Orthodox (*n* = 2), and Lubavitcher Orthodox (*n* = 2; highly observant Orthodox Jews). Individuals with specialized knowledge of Judaism or ethnic identity development (e.g., rabbis, psychologists, sociologists) were excluded.

Only adults over age 35 were included because we were interested in the experience of Jewish identity from young adulthood through middle age. We purposefully sampled participants who were White, married, and first- or second-generation Americans born of Jewish parents. All but 1 participant had either biological (*n* = 7) or adopted (*n* = 2) children. All participants identified themselves as middle class and reported postsecondary education; 5 were employed professionals (e.g., rehabilitation counselor, pharmaceutical company representative, engineer) or graduate students, and 5 were full-time homemakers.

**Interview Protocol**

The semistructured interview protocol (see the Appendix), developed from the literature and the authors’ discussion of their personal experience as Jews, was expanded and refined by two groups of male and female Jewish and non-Jewish researchers. The questions covered family life, education, occupation, religious practice, cultural identity, and interpersonal relationships. The array of issues was derived from reviews of Jewish life in the United States (e.g., Dershowitz, 1997; Osherson, 2001), which describe various domains in which Jewish identity is manifested in people’s inner experiences, interpersonal relationships, and relationships with the broader social world. Preliminary demographic questions were followed by general, follow-up, example, and experience questions. As is common in many forms of qualitative research (e.g., Fontana & Frey, 2000), native language expressions were included, that is, Hebrew and Yiddish terms. The interviewer followed the informants’ lead with prompts and encouragers in order to obtain as rich a description as possible of their lived experience.

**Procedure**

All individuals who were asked to participate agreed to do so. Participants provided written informed consent, and no incentive was offered. The audiotaped interviews, which lasted from 45 to 90 min (*M* = 60), were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Participants were invited to make additions or changes to the transcripts, but none chose to do so.

A team of auditors and coders was used, all of whom were Jewish women, aged 36–54. The inclusion of auditors was done to enhance the validity of inferences derived from the narrative data (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), as explained below. The two coders were master’s-level educators, and the two auditors (Michelle L. Friedman and Myrna L. Friedlander) were a doctoral candidate and faculty member in counseling psychology.

In qualitative studies, research teams should be knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest, and their expectations should be bracketed prior to the analysis (Hill et al., 1997). Accordingly, before the analysis began, each member described her view of Judaism and ethnicity, her knowledge and personal experiences of Jewish identity, and her expectations for the study. The team had varying levels of affiliation with Judaism, religious beliefs, and Jewish education. Generally, team members expected to find themes about oppression and the Holocaust, pride versus a sense of “being different,” intermarriage, multigenerational family history, politics, and changes in religious observance in relation to important life events.

**Analysis**

Open coding of blocks of data is recommended for discovery-oriented, phenomenological research because it yields the broadest understanding of the data (Creswell, 1998). To begin, a list of initial domains (i.e., categories of information) to orient the search for codes was used. Using constant comparison, the coders continually reviewed transcripts that had been previously coded whenever a new code appeared. Thus, when a code did not fit clearly into a domain, a new domain was created, and other similar codes were included. In this process, patterns are allowed to surface from, rather than being imposed on, the data, and multiple perspectives are anticipated.

Michelle L. Friedman trained the coders in qualitative procedures by (a) reviewing written materials on qualitative analyses, (b) coding one narrative together for practice, and (c) discussing the group’s dynamics as related to the coding task. After training, the coders independently coded each block of data from all 10 transcripts, meeting with the primary auditor to discuss the codes and domains after every 2–3 interviews. The auditor reviewed the ambiguous codes, outliers, and difficult segments and made suggestions and adjustments throughout the process.

In developing themes inductively from the domains, consensus and minority views were taken into account. The secondary auditor, who did not take part in the initial analysis, worked closely with the primary auditor to identify, refine, and describe the themes. The coders commented on the
auditors’ definitions, reviewing the narratives to be certain that all blocks of data were accurately represented in the thematic descriptions. In this way, the analysis was iterative, with the coders working independently, as a team with the primary auditor and with feedback from the secondary auditor.

In qualitative studies like this one, repetition of themes across narratives provides evidence of reliability (Stiles, 1993), and validity is assessed by dependability, credibility, and coherence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To assure dependability, an audit trail was maintained. Daily notes were kept in a reflexive journal by Michelle L. Friedman as the study unfolded. Furthermore, any themes that came to mind during the interviews or the analysis were noted, a process called memoing (Creswell, 1998). These memos, along with rough drafts, feedback, and process notes, substantially aided the auditors’ theme development.

**Feedback From Participants**

To assess the credibility and testimonial validity of the results, participant feedback on an initial list of themes was solicited in person ($n = 3$), by e-mail ($n = 2$), and by telephone ($n = 5$). Of the participants, 9 of 10 responded to the request for feedback.

Participants’ responses were uniformly positive, and no additional themes were suggested. Many commented that the list seemed comprehensive and that the themes were inclusive of their views and reflected their degree of religious observance or affiliation. Some participants wanted to discuss the wording of a couple of the themes, and in one case, a new description was added. (In the themes described below, all participant feedback is incorporated.)

**Results**

In the first stage of the analysis, the research team located 437 codes within 19 domains, from which 24 themes were inductively derived. In some cases, a domain (e.g., intermarriage) had contradictory codes, resulting in two themes (importance of Jewish marriage and spouse’s identity as a Jew not important). In other cases, two domains were combined into a single theme. The codes within the domain Religious practice changes over the generations, for example, included (a) siblings vary in observance, (b) family reflects the current state of Judaism, (c) watering down in rituals, particularly because of being a parent. For some participants, (d) mother initially fearful of [participant’s] family reflects the current state of Judaism, (c) watering down in traditions, along with rough drafts, feedback, and process notes, substantially aided the auditors’ theme development.

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**General Themes**

**Dynamic nature of self-identification.** All participants noted the fluidity of their Jewish identity over the course of their lives and described times in which their identity was stronger or weaker. These fluctuations occurred particularly during developmental milestones, such as having children or after the death of parents. Some participants identified themselves by the branch of Judaism to which they were affiliated, although others expressed reluctance to use a label for fear that it would not accurately represent their present Jewish identification. As an example, Participant 3 reflected on changes over time in his self-definition:

> I think it has become more . . . positive over the years. As I have said, when I was a kid, it made me feel a little bit different in certain situations, but now I would sound very proud to be associated with Jewish people and to be Jewish. I would say it has gotten stronger, and although we don’t go to synagoge all the time . . .

Still another participant (Participant 5) noted that although her identification as a Jew went through many changes, her sense of being Jewish was constant: “I think it’s [Jewish identity] fluctuated. I think it’s kind of gone up and down; there is no straight line . . . it’s the dips and valleys in my life . . . it is pretty much a constant, but it does go up and down a bit.”

**Formative early experiences.** All participants spoke of the importance of childhood, adolescent, or young adult experiences as precursors to their present interest in Judaism and religious practice (or lack of practice). Experiences mentioned by participants included attending family gatherings for Jewish holidays and eating in a Kosher dining hall at college. Participant 9 noted, for example, that his parents’ encouragement to bring some useful Jewish artifacts to college was significant in his becoming an Orthodox Jewish adult:

> Looking back, I will say this now that my parents did send me off to college with my tallis (a prayer shawl) and tefillin (phylacteries). They did not tell me to wear it, but no one ever told me to wear it, but it was there. I had it. It was in my drawer. I mean, I didn’t really take it out and use them . . . until later on going to the Chabad house . . . looking back, I did have it [a desire to grow in a Jewish direction].

Another participant was the child of a Holocaust survivor, and knowledge of her father’s experience had a strong impact on her Jewish identity as well as her lack of religious practice:

> Growing up Jewish kind of meant to be different . . . more than having a different language, different foods, a non-American father versus anything religious. It also meant having the threat of a repeat Holocaust hanging over your head . . . my head. Especially when I was younger, I would have dreams sometimes of being . . . being threatened to be harmed because I was Jewish, in . . . in a Holocaust sort of way, not being harmed by somebody walking down the street, but somebody . . . maybe taking me . . . just . . . just like the Holocaust . . . that’s what happened to my father. I guess . . . this must affect who I am today. (Participant 1)

**Desire to increase religious practice.** All respondents described striving to incorporate more Jewish observance into their lives, and some participants explicitly reported feeling guilty because they did not regularly practice religious customs and rituals, particularly because of being a parent. For some participants, the feeling of needing to be more observant accompanied life events. Participant 3, a new mother, described her parent role as influential:

> I guess I want to get more focused on what I do Jewishly. I guess, I mean having [daughter] . . . we would like to join a synagogue. I think in addition to teaching her about Jewish education, I would like to meet more people who are Jewish, who I could become friendly with and help me feel more a part of the community.

**Generativity in practice and culture.** All participants stressed the importance of passing down their religious and cultural heritage to the next generation, particularly to their own children:
I think I have the responsibility to carry on Judaism and to have a strong Jewish identity that I hope I can balance this so that my children don’t feel trapped by it and rebel and go outside of the religion. (Participant 4)

Feeling marginalized. All respondents mentioned at least one incident in their lives in which they felt inferior and, consequently, “bad” about themselves. Sometimes this sense of marginalization was experienced in the company of other Jews (e.g., “Jewish people who aren’t observant are more . . . have a harder time with us than a non-Jewish person”; Participant 10), but marginalization also occurred when no other Jews were present. One participant felt different from other Jewish children she knew because she was raised in a non-Orthodox household:

So even though I never felt quite comfortable in that crowd because I wasn’t like the other kids. Most of them came from, I think or I assume, came from religious families, even though I found out later that they really didn’t at all. I always thought they did and [if they] found that we didn’t keep kosher and stuff . . . I think it left an impression on me. . . . It was a little hard, and I always felt like I was struggling. I didn’t quite know enough. (Participant 10)

In another case, an unaffiliated Jew felt hurt when he could not find a rabbi to perform his interfaith marriage:

. . . the fact that I couldn’t get anyone [Jewish clergy] to stand with me just because I wasn’t a member of a congregation, or, you know, maybe in their eyes I’m not a practicing Jew, so maybe I’m a lower class Jew. . . . ‘Hey, if you can’t extend your hand to me, then I’ll just go away.’ (Participant 2)

Aware of discrimination to other Jews. Although only some participants personally experienced discrimination, all participants witnessed or were informed of it by other Jews. In particular, participants spoke about hearing others called derogatory names:

. . . there were remarks from time to time, but no discrimination . . . but I did have friends and cousins who wanted to go to medical school and couldn’t because there was a quota for Jews. . . . I was living my own life in my own way, and none of that infringed on my personal experience. (Participant 6)

Typical Themes

Experience of discrimination. Upon reflection, most participants reported having experienced discrimination and prejudice from Jews as well as from non-Jews. At times, discrimination was experienced when the individual was in a non-Jewish environment, such as in public school (“I was very much in the minority, and I can remember being called a ‘dirty Jew.’ I can remember being called a kike; Participant 5). In some instances, participants wondered whether the discrimination was imagined or misconstrued, and 1 participant (Participant 3), fearful when yelled at by a non-Jew, wondered whether her appearance accounted for the incident (“Uh, this is a little bit scary”). The following excerpt exemplifies how some participants minimized prejudicial incidents:

I think there was one incident, where I think the neighborhood kids beat me up. Whatever, it wasn’t that bad, but it was definitely because I was Jewish. . . . I wasn’t that strong of a person, I mean, I basically was without resistance. Actually, now that I think about it more, I think in the neighborhood, maybe sometimes some of the kids did make fun certainly. . . . Regarding discrimination, I think it helps us retain our Jewish identity. (Participant 9)

Cultural identity is environment-sensitive. Many participants described themselves as having two cultural identities, with one identity (i.e., as a Jew or as an American) more salient than the other, depending on the situation (e.g., traveling abroad) and at different times in life. As in the following excerpt, many participants gave a great deal of thought to their shifting identities:

I would say I am more an American, and I happen to be a Jewish American. I would say American first. I mean, when I look at if I had to classify myself in this world, I would say I am an American who is Jewish. That’s what I would say. But I’m thinking about when I was traveling in Europe, I remember like just being very aware when I was in certain places. Like not only of being American, which obviously Europeans noted, but being Jewish, I did notice, like I did think about that. Especially when I was in Austria, I just remember thinking . . . looking at people and thinking, ‘Oh, I wonder what they thought of me years ago,’ and so I guess in that sense, I did consider myself more Jewish, because I sort of worried about it, and I did think about the Holocaust. (Participant 3)

Conversely, another participant described feeling strongly that his American identity is secondary:

I think that first of all, it is good to be a Jew in America, because in America, you are free to do whatever you want. . . . I would certainly consider myself a Jew in America. If there is ever a conflict, you know, I would go to the Jewish side, and, you know, I see that America is secondary for me. First, I am a Jew. (Participant 9)

Sense of pride. Most participants expressed pride about being Jewish and about seeking experiences that would instill pride. The sense of pride tended to be experienced when participants found themselves in a group with other Jews. Other participants frequently mentioned feeling pride in Jewish history and heritage:

. . . it’s a lot of pride to think that Judaism goes back . . . you know, officially 5,000 years . . . we’ve come . . . that there’s a long line of tradition, . . . I’m very comfortable in the traditions, the holidays, the observances, the rituals. . . . Most of it probably is pride and, you know, and in belonging to, you know, such an ancient tradition. (Participant 8)

Cultural identity and religious practice are congruent. For many participants, the strength of their cultural identity and the extent of their religious practice were consistent. That is, some participants reported little cultural affiliation and few religious rituals or customs; for some, it was a moderate amount of each; others were strongly identified as Jewish in both culture and practice:

Well, I would have to say that the religious practice is more important but, I think when you think about all the commandments of all the religious practice, it becomes very cultural. You know what I mean? You really can’t separate them. (Participant 9)

Search for meaning. Many participants expressed a need to better understand their Jewish identities and heritage, their belief and relation to God, and the meaning or importance of being Jewish. Several participants expressed opinions about the structure
and role of the synagogue or about other Jewish organizations. One participant, a Conservative woman, was particularly thoughtful:

Somewhere along the line, I began to question, ‘Is there or is there not a God?’ And much later on I started seeking. . . . I don’t believe in Christ. I don’t believe in the Messiah, but neither do I believe in that part in the Jewish religion either. So I fell somewhere along the line again, and I read a book about the destruction of the second Temple. . . . I feel a very strong lineal tug toward the very beginning of Judaism. (Participant 6)

Another participant (Participant 5), also a Conservative woman, shared a different perspective:

For me, it’s a set of family traditions being carried down, and it’s a cultural association . . . and it’s also a spiritual link that’s a spiritual link to God, you know . . . it is how, you know, a lot of the center of my beliefs and . . . I’m the person that I’ve become . . . I think I’m more of a Jew . . . and I think Judaism is first for me, and the spirituality comes along with it.

Connection to Israel. When asked, most participants had a strong opinion about Israel and Israeli politics (‘To actually live in Israel, I mean, that’s, I mean, that seems like an indescribable experience, you know, a Jew to actually live in Israel’; Participant 8). Some expressed an unconditional love for Israel, and some participants said that moving to Israel would be an expression of their belief, a dream for the future. One participant specifically mentioned Zionism. Another participant visited her daughter in Israel frequently, even during periods of war. She described her deep affection for Israel:

I have a huge love for Israel! In fact in ’84, when I was on my way home, I got on the plane, and I was crying because I said, ‘Why don’t they leave my beautiful country alone? Look what they are doing to it.’ (Participant 6)

Valuing interpersonal connections with Jews and Gentiles. Relations with other Jewish people were described as extremely important. Some participants wanted to live in close proximity with other Jews and deliberately sought them out when moving to a new location. Others volunteered in Jewish organizations. For some, relations with non-Jews were equally important. One participant described an appreciation for her Jewish community, although she longed for diverse friendships for herself and her child because diversity was an important part of her own childhood:

Like, I met my best friend that I made in [city][who] is not Jewish. I was so excited, and then she moved away. Oh, now I’m stuck with all these Jews again, and obviously from our interview, you know that I love Jews and I loved Judaism, but it gets a little oppressive when that’s the only people you know. And basically almost everyone I know in [city] is Jewish, and I’m like dying to make some Black friends. (Participant 7)

Importance of Jewish marriage. Many participants were raised with the thought that their life partner should be Jewish. Although they may have dated non-Jews, they only considered Jews as potential mates. Choosing a partner with the same level of religious observance was of less importance. For some participants, their spouse’s conversion to Judaism was necessary or an acceptable way to marry someone who was not born into a Jewish family. One participant felt confident that, in marrying a person who converted to Judaism, he would be able to carry on the traditions about which he had always dreamed. Some participants were always secure in their knowledge that they would marry another Jew; it was a “given.” For one Orthodox participant (Participant 10), this knowledge strengthened as she became more observant.

Variant Themes

Clarity about the meaning of being Jewish. A few participants had little hesitation in describing their identity, expressing certainty about their beliefs or cultural identification, and their difference from non-Jews. Judaism was described as an integral part of themselves.

Jewish identity predominates regardless of context. In contrast to the typical theme of cultural identity being environment-sensitive, for a few participants the environment had little influence on their sense of being Jewish. In other words, their identity was experienced as constant regardless of the company they kept or the situation they found themselves in.

Jewish identification stronger than in the family of origin. One participant (Participant 7) described being more strongly identified than others in her family. This individual reported feeling isolated in the family yet was delighted to nurture the Jewish identification and practice of a parent.

Shame or embarrassment. In contrast to the typical theme of pride, 2 participants reported a constant feeling of shame or awkwardness because of being Jewish. This feeling persisted even when they did not disclose their identity to others. One participant (Participant 1), who is unaffiliated and whose father had been a Holocaust survivor, expressed exquisite shame about her Jewishness, saying, “A part of me is crap; part of me is embarrassed about being Jewish.”

Cultural identity and religious practice are incongruent. For a few individuals, the extent of religious practice was not a reflection of the strength of their Jewish identity. Participant 3 expressed a strong cultural identity as a Jew (“Well, I think of it as a positive thing. I mean, I look at it as a sort of honor”). This participant, who is Reform, does not observe Jewish rituals but expressed a deep connection to her Jewish ancestors.

Relation to God defined by Jewish teachings and heritage. A few participants described their relation with God as directly connected to their ancestry or to their understanding of Jewish texts, traditions, and mysticism. One participant spoke of a significant mentor, who inspired him to explore Judaism through Jewish texts.

Spouse’s identity (as Jewish or Gentile) not important. In contrast to the typical theme of attributing importance to the spouse’s identity, a few people stated that they did not search for a spouse who identified either religiously or ethnically as a Jew. Rather, their primary consideration in finding a mate was to “fall in love.”

Living Jewish values. A few participants described maintaining their identity as Jews by following Jewish commandments, doing “good deeds,” and following the Torah. One participant, for example, described leading a life that is closely linked to daily Torah study and practice:

Being Jewish, I think, is following a strict religion to, you know, focus on the commandments, and the world. That’s really what Jewish
people were given, commandments, and I guess there is a favorite Jewish phrase like, ‘Be the light of the nations,’ but you know that certainly, I don’t think that is always the way. Basically, ‘Do all the things it says. Do all the commandments you can to the best of your ability.’ And that’s what it is to be a Jew. (Participant 9)

Discussion

Consistent with the literature (Dershowitz, 1997; Fischer & Moradi, 2001; Langman, 1999; Osherson, 2001; Rosen & Weltman, 1996), most of our participants have dual templates through which they view the world. The typical theme behavioral identification is environment-sensitive suggests that 8 of our 10 participants view themselves as bicultural, that is, all but Participants 1 and 2, who described themselves as secular or religiously unaffiliated. These unaffiliated individuals appeared somewhat conflicted about their Jewish identity, expressing shame or embarrassment as well as a desire to increase their religious practice and pass their heritage on to their children.

Indeed, a clear correspondence was evident between Jewish cultural identification and religious observance. The 2 highly Orthodox participants saw their Jewish identity as more salient than their identity as Americans; the converse was the case for the 2 participants who described themselves as less affiliated or unaffiliated. Thus, future researchers should investigate whether Jewish ethnic identification influences attitudes and behavior in a linear way, such that the more an individual identifies with Jewish values, spirituality, and culture, the more central a role Judaism may play in the individual’s life.

We expected that participants who were clear about their Jewish identity would have a greater, or less conflicted, commitment to Judaism and to the practice of Judaism. This expectation was borne out in that the search for meaning, relation to God, connection to Israel, and clarity about Jewish identity themes were only present in the narratives of participants who affiliated with the more conservative branches of Judaism. However, the desire to increase religious practice was a theme expressed by all participants, even the most Orthodox.

According to Phinney (1996), an individual’s experience in society as a member of a given culture significantly affects the strength of his or her identity. Rosen and Weltman (1996) emphasized “the prevalence and impact of anti-Semitic persecution” in relation to Jewish identity (p. 616). Several of the present themes reflected this point, such as the themes about discrimination and valuing connections with non-Jews versus the self-imposed isolation from non-Jews. Although all participants were aware of discrimination against Jews, only some had experienced it personally, and many seemed reluctant to label it as such. Participant 1, the child of a Holocaust survivor, described both shame and a strong cultural identity as a Jew. Most participants expressed pride but also a sense of being “less than” from Gentiles as well as from Jews when they felt criticized for their secular or their Orthodox lifestyle.

Taken together, the thematic results suggest that an American Jew’s ethnic identity is complex, multidimensional, and highly personal, its strength depending on the individual’s identification with both the cultural heritage and the faith. Although some of our themes seem central to Jewish identity (e.g., intermarriage, generativity) and are congruent with the literature (e.g., Rosen & Weltman, 1996), there is great variability. Because of the duality in Jewish experience (e.g., shame vs. pride, Jewish identity of mate important vs. not important, cultural identification and religious observance congruent vs. incongruent), Jewish counselors should be wary of making assumptions about their Jewish clients on the basis of their own sense of identity and knowledge of Judaism. Like other minority groups, the Jewish experience involves awareness of discrimination, marginalization, and shame versus pride, but in other ways, Jewish identity is unique. Non-Jewish counselors who have little personal experience with Jews or little professional experience with Jewish clients may think of Judaism only as a religion and fail to consider the far-reaching influence of Jewish cultural identification on their clients’ self-concept, personal choices, and formative childhood experiences (cf. Kiselica, 2003).

Strengths of the study include repetitions in the narratives expressing the same themes, supporting the trustworthiness of the results, the testimonial validity of the participants (Stiles, 1993), and the internal coherence of the findings and its coherence with the literature. However, our use of a start list of domains may have unduly constrained the coding process. Moreover, as with all small sample qualitative studies, inferences need to be made cautiously. Although we purposefully limited our sample to White, married participants, first- or second-generation Americans born of Jewish parents, we selected individuals from the spectrum of Jewish religious observance. This heterogeneous aspect, reflected in the large number of variant themes, suggests that we may not have achieved theoretical saturation; a larger, more heterogeneous sample is needed to maximize variation.1 We also recommend future research on homogeneous samples (e.g., Reform Jews, secular Jews) and samples from geographic areas where Jews are more abundant (e.g., New York City) or scant (e.g., the rural south). Despite its limitations, this study begins a process of documenting the psychological experience of Jewish people, building a knowledge base for an inclusive and affirming approach to understanding and counseling members of this unique minority group.

References


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1 We thank an anonymous reviewer for sharing this observation.


### Appendix

#### Semistructured Interview Protocol

Please think a bit about how your sense of Jewish identity may have changed over the course of your life or stayed the same. How do you understand either the changes or the sameness of it?

1. **GENERAL:** Tell me, what has it meant to you to be a Jew? How do you see yourself as both a Jew and an American? To what extent does one sense of identity predominate?

2. **FAMILY:** In your extended family (parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, etc.), how similar or different are you from other family members in terms of religious observance and in terms of maintaining a Jewish identity? Do you see any patterns in your family over generations in relation to being Jewish? To what extent does/did your Jewish identity affect your choice of a romantic partner?

3. **MILESTONES:** Tell me about milestones in your life and their effects on your Jewish identity. (Helpful prompts: Bat/Bar Mitzvah, college or other activities, sexual experiences, marriage, other romantic partnerships, losses, children)

4. **EDUCATION:** Describe all parts of your Jewish and secular education. Describe their effects on your Jewish identity.

5. **WORK:** Are you presently working inside or outside the home? How did you come to your choice? To what extent did your Jewish identity affect your choice of occupation? In what ways has being Jewish affected your opportunities in your work life?

6. **SOCIAL:** Describe your community of friends. How important or unimportant is it to you to have friends that are Jewish, to live near other Jews?

7. **DISCRIMINATION:** How do non-Jews respond to you? Have you experienced discrimination either from a Jew or a non-Jew? Share any experiences you have had with any of the following: intolerance, prejudice, or unpleasantness in relation to another person who was either Jewish or non-Jewish. Has being Jewish ever affected your opportunities in life?

8. **RELIGIOUS PRACTICE and CULTURAL HERITAGE:** How much do you practice Judaism? For example, how often would you say you go to services/shul (synagogue), light candles, give tzedaka (charity), etc.? Also, to what extent do you identify with the oppressed, do good deeds, etc.? How important is your cultural heritage? Is one more important for you, or are these equally balanced: your Jewish cultural heritage and your religious practice? What are your thoughts about Israel?

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