A Multidimensional Model of American Jewish Identity

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Dedication

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Why this matters...
Antisemitism vs. Anti-Semitism

- Anti-Semitism first coined by Wilhelm Marr in 1879 to express anti-Jewish feelings
- Many now use “antisemitism” to prevent co-opting of this word for anything other than its original intent: Jew-hatred
- For example, some Arab groups claim they cannot be “anti-Semitic” since they themselves are Semitic
- Hence, eliminating the hyphen takes the focus away from the term “Semitic”
American Jews vs. Jewish Americans

- Emphasizes the primacy of being Jewish through use of *American* as a descriptor of *Jew*

- Acknowledges the nomadic heritage of Jews as a Diaspora people who often needed to flee when antisemitism reached dangerous levels

- Of course, within-group differences exist, and some may prefer Jewish American
Jewish Semantics 101

• Some Jews omit the “o” in spelling G-d
  • This is done because of prohibition against erasing or destroying any Hebrew name of G-d
  • This is not a typo

• Shoah: “Catastrophe” from Hebrew, referring to the catastrophic destruction of European Jewry during WWII by Nazi Germany (i.e., the Holocaust)
Put yourself in our shoes…

• Imagine that we are having a discussion on diversity and culture. You are asked about your religion – both the religious tradition in which you were raised and your current identification (if it is different).

• For those of you who are Christian, you are told that this identity is all that matters. If you talk about any of your other identities as a person of color, woman, and/or LGBT individual, you are told to stop skirting the issue of Christian privilege – all that matters is your Christianity. Other identities are only offered up in a defensive posture to owning up to your privilege.
Jews in Cultural Discourse

• American Jews often experience marginalization during discussions of race and culture

• Although many American Jews enjoy White privilege, identity is often proscribed for Jews with White skin – with White as primary and everything else as defensiveness

• Neglects Jews as a distinct cultural group who have endured centuries of oppression and discrimination – and inappropriately categories Jews as all being universally financially successful
20th Century American Jews

• Jews were seen racially as non-White prior to World War II

• Tikkun Olam – Jews have been and continue to be involved with progressive movements

• Jews fought side by side with people of color for Civil Rights
A Multidimensional Model of Jewish Identity

Religious & Ethnic Identity Status

Religious & Cultural Dimensions

Contextual Factors

Jewish Identity
Religious Dimensions (Friedlander et al.)

- Degree of adherence to Jewish religious Orthodoxy
- Observing Sabbath and keeping Kosher
- Reading Hebrew and attending religious services
- Celebrating all Jewish Holidays
- Fasting on Yom Kippur
- Following dietary laws of Pesach
- Observing Jewish rituals (e.g., mourning, Mikvah)
- Keeping head covered for religious reasons
Cultural Dimensions (Friedlander et al.)

- Reading Jewish literature and/or newspapers
- Having pride in being Jewish
- Importance of marrying a Jew
- Listening to Jewish secular music
- Endorsing Jewish values (e.g., *Tikkun Olam*)
- Having a strong connection to Israel
- Contributing to Jewish causes
- Having a *mezuzah* or *ketubah* in the home
- Being active in a Jewish organization/community
Religious and Ethnic Identity Status

- Lack of awareness of one’s Jewish identity
- Emerging awareness of Jewish identity
- Assessment of Jewish identity vis-à-vis Christianity and other dominant groups
- Moving toward/from Jewishness
- Integration of Jewish and other identities
## Contextual Factors

- Antisemitism
- Christian Privilege
- The invisible nature of Jewish identity
- Geography and Critical Mass
- Jews' relationship with other Jews and with non-Jews
Two Jews, Three Opinions

• Jews may disagree with each other for individual differences:
  • Views on Judaism
  • Political views
  • Feelings about and involvement with Israel
  • Views on religious pluralism

• Legitimacy Testing – What constitutes a normal Jew?
  • If you do more than me religiously, you are a zealot
  • If you do less than me religiously, you are a heretic
The Jewish Double Standard

• In 1921, Albert Einstein presented a paper on his then-infant Theory of Relativity at the Sorbonne, the prestigious French university.

• "If I am proved correct, the Germans will call me a German, the Swiss will call me a Swiss citizen, and the French will call me a great scientist.”

• “If relativity is proved wrong, the French will call me a Swiss, the Swiss will call me a German, and the Germans will call me a Jew.”
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