

Infusing Community Psychology and Religion:
Themes From An Action-Research Project in Jewish Identity Development

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ABSTRACT

The authors discuss areas of infusion between community psychology and religion. These areas are organized around themes which have played a major role in the authors' work with an emerging line of action-research in the area of Jewish identity development. Among these themes is the importance of viewing religious identity development as contextually-bound, and a meaningful aspect of identity formation, coping and social competence.

Introduction

As historical overviews of religion and psychology (e. g., Beit-Hallami, 1984; Gorsuch, 1988) make clear, religion has not always enjoyed a favorable status among psychologists. However, the study of religious issues in psychology has undergone something of a renaissance in recent years. Two examples of this are an APA volume focusing on the theme of religion and clinical issues (Shafranske, 1996), as well as a special issue of the Journal of Social Issues (Volume #51).

With this special issue of JCP, as well as programs at both the 6th and 7th Biennial SCRA Conferences, Community Psychologists are joining in this exciting discussion, and have a unique and important perspective to add. These forums are an opportunity for those who have been involved in these issues to share their experiences and observations, and to provide food for thought for moving forward with action and research. Our goal here is to contribute to this discussion.

In this paper we share some of the lessons we have learned from a series of inquiries into the development of Jewish identity, an emerging line of action-research with which the authors have been involved. The Jewish Identity Development Project (JIDP) began with a survey of approximately 400 students in grades 5-7, representing the three major American Jewish denominations (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform), from both Day Schools and Temple-based Sunday Schools. Results indicated effects of both denomination and type of school on the way students cope with stressors (Kress, Elias, & Novick, 1995), and how willing students are to interact with people of different background (Kress, Elias, Novick, Schoenfeld & Zibbell, 1995).

Gaining an appreciation from this survey of the effects of constructs having to do with

Jewish identity, the JIDP progressed with an examination of a) how students conceptualize their own Jewish identity, and b) what factors influence the development of such an identity. This follow-up project took the form of in-depth surveys and interview of 6th and 7th grade students and their families. Findings highlighted the importance of Jewish communal settings and family rituals in perpetuating a sense of Jewish identity (Kress, 1998).

The action component of the project refers to implementing interventions based on our research in a variety of settings, including After-school Conservative Religious Schools, Conservative and Orthodox Day Schools, Jewish special education classrooms, and secular schools. While we are at an early stage of carrying out this work, the action component has created a clear synergy within our research. As we continue to analyze existing data and pursue our work with Religious Schools, we are also moving into studying identity development in college students (Yares, 1998, 1999). Throughout our work, we have used concepts from community psychology as important guideposts. We have organized these into four themes, which we elaborate next.

Infusing Community Psychology and Religion: Major Themes

Theme 1: There is the potential for issues of religion and spirituality to play a major role in how we define ourselves, and to have an impact on broader issues of identity.

The importance of a religious identity in forming one's larger social identity is stressed by a number of authors. Theorists as far back as William James (1890), who considered the

"spiritual self" to be a fundamental component of general personality, saw religious issues as central in identity development. Writing specifically about adolescent identity development, Marcia (see Adams, Shea, & Fitch, 1979) considers religious identity to be one of three key identity domains (along with occupational and political) which together form a complete identity. Fowler (1981), in exploring formation of religious identity, equates "faith" and "identity". The former construct is defined by Fowler as "an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions" (p. 14).

Such theorists "define identity as the point of intersection between the individual and other people, the sense of self simultaneously as an individual and as a member of a social group" (Arnow, 1994, p. 30). London and Frank (1987), building on the work of Tajfel and Turner (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986), point out that feelings about Judaism will both reflect and impact on the opinion one holds of one's self.

The primary mechanism by which this influence takes place is through face to face, small group interaction. These contexts provide the most powerful influence on our values and norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); as we observe what goes on within them, we can understand the extent to which various interpersonal behaviors and choices can be characterized as religiously linked. Further, Sarason (1993) understood that small group interactions give rise to certain sets of developmentally consistent reflections across religious and cultural groups.

Sarason (1993) posits that individuals have a basic, instinctual need for "transcendence" which leads them to seek religious experiences (including a search for spirituality and "New Age" experiences, cults and other fanatic forms). This need is seen as a response to fears of one's own mortality and the desire to see one's self as part of a greater whole, a community which will

outlast the death of the individual. While this need can be filled by a variety of structures (e.g., nationalism), Sarason points to the strong role of religion in achieving this end. Involvement in a religious community can provide an identity for an individual that will live on even after her or his death. Drawing from experiences with his own Jewish identity, Sarason (1993, cf. Sarason, 1988) points out that the identification of one's self as a member of such a community can be a source of comfort and a point of self-reference in stressful times. This is consistent with Maton and Wells' (1995) review of research on the various roles played by religious communal structures in promoting successful coping and passage of difficult life transitions. Religious identity can be seen as functioning like a lighthouse, providing guidance for navigating uncertain territory, and a beacon with which to take one's bearings when fixed points are lacking.

Theme 2. A contextual/ecological framework is useful in the discussion of the development of a religious identity.

Religion and spirituality are often discussed in terms of individual intrapsychic development. For example, several theorists have discussed the development of religious identity from a Piagetian framework. This approach sees changes in beliefs and thinking about religious issues as mirroring Piagetian developmental stages. For example, in coding Jewish children's open-ended responses to questions about what makes them a Jew, Dor-Shav (1990) found that responses change with age, moving from intuitive, to concrete, and finally to formal definitions. A child at a concrete stage may respond that he or she is a Jew because his or her parents are Jewish. A child using formal operations would define his or her Judaism based on sharing the

belief system of Judaism. Elkind (1961) found that while Jewish 5-6 year olds gave very concrete definitions of membership in their religious group (e.g., based on various physical traits), older children showed greater complexity, defining Jewishness by ritual observance and family relations.

Community Psychology adds to this discussion a developmental perspective based on contextual factors and their interaction with individual variables. The topic of religious identity development can be approached from an ecological perspective, as outlined and defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979). In ecological theory, development is seen as a reciprocal interaction between the individual and the developmental contexts relevant to the individual. These developmental contexts are defined on both a "micro" level, that is, those individuals with whom and settings within which the individual interacts directly (e.g., a teacher in a classroom), as well as more broadly, as systems that include the individual, but with which the individual has no direct contact (e.g., the local school board).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) stresses the interaction between individual and environment, seeing both of these factors as being of equal importance. To understand the development of the individual, we must look at the systems in which he or she is embedded, the roles played by the individual in these systems, and significant others who interact with the individual. Importantly, we must also examine how the individual internalizes these influences, and how this then guides the individual's actions in a particular setting. Successful development is seen as depending on the existence of multiple, and increasingly complex, roles, relationships and activities, and the degree to which there is mutual support among these. Finally, Belsky (1984) adds an ontogenic perspective to the ecological framework, stressing an individual's own personal background,

beliefs, and experiences as providing a contextual filter on environmental interactions and impact.

An ecological perspective requires an understanding and appreciation of the contexts of influence in which children and adolescents participate, and how these interact and vary over the course of children's developmental history. Findings from our own research illustrate the range of contexts and influences that come into play (Kress, 1998). When we asked 6th and 7th grade students to name the one greatest influence on their Jewish identity, they listed (in descending frequency): parents, teachers, synagogue officials (e.g., Rabbi), grandparents, and their peer group. When parents were asked to list influences on their children's Jewish identity (responses were open ended, and could include an unlimited number of influences), they listed an average of 8.4 influences, with a range of 2 to 18. The most frequent categories (in descending order) were: family members, Jewish school-related experiences, Holidays/Sabbath, peers, Temple/services, youth-groups, and experiences related to Israel. These results provide a clear illustration of the multiple arenas and contexts of influence which our participants identified from their own experiences.

Further, findings in the literature suggest that the degree of commitment to Judaism reported by individuals is predicted by involvement in Jewish identity-enhancing contexts such as the Jewish family (Dashefsky and Shapiro, 1974; Himmelfarb, 1982), educational settings (e.g., Schiff and Schneider, 1994a, 1994b), peer group (see Himmelfarb, 1982, for a review), and the general community religious climate (Horowitz, 1992, 1993). Our own research findings suggest that the level of commitment to Judaism reported by a student is predicted by the number of Jewish communal contexts and family Jewish rituals in which he or she participates

(Kress, 1998). Belsky's ontological approach provides a framework for understanding how Jewish families and communities practicing Jewish rituals can provide intergenerational contexts for the development of Jewish identity.

In summary, an ecological approach provides a broader perspective to religious development. Contextual variables, communal and familial, are considered along with individual factors. The importance of schools, places of worship, religious professionals, families, etc., is appreciated, and seen in reciprocal interaction with personal beliefs and ritual behavior.

Theme 3: There is a relationship of variables representing constructs having to do with religion and a number of positive psychosocial outcomes. This suggests that factors related to religious beliefs and/or observances are relevant to problem behaviors and the promotion of healthy outcomes.

This theme covers perhaps the most well-researched area of psychology and religion. Early theorists posited that religion would actually have a negative impact on psychosocial functioning. However, a change toward a more positive view of religious issues, based more strongly on empirical studies, is exemplified by a meta-analysis conducted by Bergin (1983). He found religious variables to be related to negative outcomes in only a small portion of studies, with the majority of findings pointing to positive outcomes in a variety of areas.

Further, research has demonstrated a role for religion in promoting positive outcomes. The work of Jessor and colleagues (Jessor, 1987; Jessor, Donovan, & Costa, 1991; Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Rohrbaugh & Jessor, 1975) points to a negative relationship between religiosity

(measured by church attendance and self-reported feelings of connectedness to religion) and anti-social behavior, and points toward religion as a factor promoting "conventionality".

According to these authors (Jessor et al., 1991; Rohrbaugh & Jessor, 1975), religion can act as a control on behavior in a number of ways. First, involvement in religion can have the effect of involving the child or adolescent in socially sanctioned organizations and activities, thereby reducing the opportunities for antisocial behavior and providing alternative prosocial opportunities and peers. Second, religious laws and prescriptions, which are usually explicitly and repeatedly stated by religious authorities, provide a clear and consistent message regarding what comprises socially sanctioned behavior, and what behavior is disapproved. As such, religion is hypothesized to influence behavior by affecting perceived environmental norms and providing opportunities to observe adults modeling sanctioned behavior in structured settings. Jessor et al. (1991) also point to religiosity as a factor related to increased self-reported life satisfaction in adulthood.

An interesting line of research has explored the interplay of religion and physical health outcomes. For example, McFadden (1995) discussed the role of religion in the health of aging individuals. While the literature she reviews does not point to a definitive unidirectional relationship, there is evidence that many in the aging population find social and emotional support in religion. Perhaps even more complex are the findings of Jenkins (1995), who reports areas in which religion and spirituality may have a positive impact on the well-being of people with HIV, even in the face of perceived messages of rejections. Dull and Skokan (1995) suggest that cognitive variables such as illusions and perceived meaning may mediate between religion and health outcomes.

Another frequently studied area is the relationship between religiosity and coping with stressors. Although this relationship will take different forms in different religious settings, Pargament (1990) outlined a theoretical framework for the range of functions which religion can serve as both a mediator and a possible outcome of the coping process. Among these are religious institutions ability to provide opportunities for intimacy, growth, release, and problem-solving. Further, Pargament et al. (1990) explored the specific nature of religious beliefs as mediators of coping. These authors found that belief in a just and benevolent deity, the belief in a deity as a partner in coping, involvement in religious rituals, and religious based social support were all related to positive outcomes in coping with negative life events. Further, evidence suggests that a religious orientation may impact on more general coping processes such as behavioral coping skills and perceived efficacy for coping and anger management (Kress, Elias, & Novick, 1995). This study suggests that skill differences may be important in mediating the role of religion in coping. Further certain religiously-based teachings explicitly provide coping information and strategies, such as being slow to anger (Neusner, 1984).

The relationship among hope, optimism, a positive future orientation, and positive mental health and lower rates of problem behaviors is emerging to an increasing degree (Goleman, 1995). Under the broad rubric of emotional intelligence, data from diverse studies converge to show that both problem- and emotion-focused coping skills are linked to a broader sense of ourselves and where we think we are in the world. Religious identity is, for many, an important source for shaping that view, especially with regard to the future. One finding in the adolescent mental health literature that appears repeatedly is that young people who feel they have no future, that they will not live past age 20, that they have no sense of hope or optimism, are at

higher risk for suicide, violence, and other high-risk behaviors; religiosity, either on their part or on the part of their parents, serves as a protective factor (e.g., Hechinger, 1992).

There are the dangers involved in rootlessness -both on an individual and societal level - that come with the failure to form a stable pro-social identity. Given the centrality of religious issues in identity development, as discussed in Theme 1, there is potential to have problematic outcomes should there be difficulties in developing a religious identity. Sarason (1993) suggests that current social structures do not provide an adequate outlet for the need for "transcendence and community". The breakdown of community in society in general is mirrored by a de-emphasis of community as a focus for mainstream religion. As trends in mainstream religion toward individual religious orientation ("finding one's own way") leave the need for transcendence and community unmet, alternative groups, movements, and cults have begun to provide outlets for the need for transcendence and community.

The importance of developing a stable identity and community connections can be understood in relation to the social world of the adolescent as outlined by Perry, Kelder, and Komro (1993). Changes in family demographic and work patterns are leaving adolescents without stable relationships with their parents. Increased family instability and mobility have weakened the influence of communal structures such as synagogues (London & Frank, 1987). As a result, adolescents are increasingly turning to their peer group to set behavioral norms. Traditional community-based norm-setting structures are failing to fill this void. Schools neglect the social and affective needs of many students (cf. William T. Grant Foundation, 1993). Adolescents are exposed to media portrayals of sex and violence in which high-risk, anti-social behavior is the norm. The picture described by Perry et al. is one of a community to which an

adolescent is unable to turn to be shown prosocial norms and be provided with needed structure. The ability of religious institutions to provide these crucial factors has been noted (Maton & Salem, 1995; Sarason, 1993). Fowler (1981) discusses religious faith and values during adolescence as structuring the increasingly complex environment with which the adolescent is beginning to come into contact. Religious conventions are seen as providing a stable base for entrance in the adult world, especially useful for providing perspective as adolescents begin to question adult norms.

Issues concerning religious identity development, and individual and communal difficulties which both lead to, and result from, the lack of such an identity, are a matter of great concern within the Jewish community (London & Chazan, 1990; London & Frank, 1987). These issues take on particular importance in the case of Jewish identity because the development of individual Jewish identity is seen in the light of the survival and continuity of the Jewish community as a whole. Personal Jewish identity is inseparable from national and ethnic consciousness (London & Frank, 1987). As such, Jewish identity development provides a clear case-example of issues relating to the creation of a stable, individual and communal identity in a time of competing, and often conflicting and unclear, influences.

The urgency of this issue, as encapsulated by the discussion of Jewish continuity, is of particular importance to the topic of adolescent identity development. Without fixed structures to guide such development and to set pro-social norms and values, adolescents face their own "crisis of continuity", their own risk for rootlessness. Lack of environmental stability can lead adolescents far astray of desired positive outcomes (cf. Garbarino, 1992). The potential for religious structures to provide such guidance must be recognized.

In summary, a variety of findings point to the relationship of religious variables and positive psychosocial outcomes. The areas of coping with stressors and substance abuse are exemplars of this relationship. Community psychologists will benefit from increased appreciation and understanding of the potential strength of religion as a key aspect in the promotion of positive, healthy psychosocial outcomes.

Theme 4: Community psychologists must work to develop an understanding of the subtle differences in the nature of religious belief systems, and in the ecological make-up of religious settings. We risk misinterpretation when we try to generalize too broadly across belief systems or settings.

The importance of understanding the specific structure, needs, and resources of particular settings is a key element to the ecological approach central to community psychology (e.g., Kelly, 1986), and seen as vital to successful consultation (Kress, Cimring, and Elias, 1997). Our work has shown us how important such an understanding is in the realm of religious contexts, and how easy it is to neglect such nuances. Certain distinctions seem fairly simple to make. For example, we can easily classify people as Catholic and Jewish. However, even this distinction seems like an oversimplification when it is understood that subgroups of the Jewish population - Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Hassidic, Secular, Zionist, Ashkenazic, Sephardic, American, and Israeli Jews (to name just a few, not-necessarily-mutually-exclusive categories) differ in their definition of Judaism, and form distinct sub-populations within the broad religious category. As mentioned above, the definition of what it

means to be Jewish has itself been subject to empirical research (e.g., Dor-Shav, 1990).

Further, nuances in differentiating religious groups and settings can be even more subtle. For example, we refer above to the importance of "Jewish educational settings" as contexts for identity development. However, even within this relatively narrow heading important distinctions exist which can have ramifications for the psychosocial outcomes of the students involved. For example, our survey results suggest that Jewish educational settings vary by denomination (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox) and by school-schedule (Full Day, Afternoon/Sunday School) in their impact on student's coping with stressors, as discussed previously. Further, there is some evidence from our research that even when such subclassifications are considered, denominational and school variables may have differing impact on boys and girls in terms of coping with stressors (Kress, Elias, and Novick, 1995).

These examples illustrate the difficulty involved in appreciating differences among settings. While some distinctions are more blatant (e.g., differences between religious groups, say Christian vs. Jewish), some are more subtle (such as that mentioned above between sub-groups of Jews, or types of Jewish schools). In fact, there may be certain similarities when differences may be more glaring. For example, the effects of "fundamentalist" religiosity are often discussed without regard to the actual religion to which the "fundamentalist" belongs (there are, after all, fundamentalists of all religions). Certain typologies, such as the often-discussed "intrinsic/extrinsic" dimensions, cut across religious groups.

An interesting case involves the issue of religion and prejudice. Hunsberger (1995), in a review of literature on this topic, points out that it appears that the dimensions of fundamentalist and quest are particularly useful in explaining potentially contradictory

findings in the relationship between religion and prejudice. Specifically, fundamentalism (particularly when paired with right-wing authoritarian views) tends to be related to prejudice, while quest (an approach to religion which involves asking existential questions, and being open to change), is not related to prejudice. As Hunsburger (1995) observes, ignoring such nuances in the nature of religious beliefs may lead to drawing erroneous conclusions.

Relatedly, findings from our own work (Kress, Elias, Novick et al., 1995) suggest that the extent to which Jewish communal settings (e.g., religious educational institutions) bring members into contact with members of different groups (denominations as well as different religions) may mediate relationships between religiosity and inter-group attitudes. For example, students in Sunday/Afternoon Hebrew Schools, who attend public schools with diverse populations, report more willingness to interact than do students in Day Schools (with classes made up entirely of Jewish students). An appreciation of the ecology of these settings is important in gaining an understanding of how contextual variables come into play. Further, in order to create successful collaborations with religious institutions, Community Psychologists must show an understanding of, and respect for, such settings (Kloos, Horneffer, & Moore, 1995).

Understanding the nuances among religious settings is vital to the study of religion from a Community Psychology perspective, but difficult to achieve. Our work has shown us some suggestions for developing such an understanding. First, we enlisted the help of "experts" (cf. Rosado, 1986). Before undertaking the empirical study, we consulted local Rabbis and Jewish educational professionals (including, of course, the principals of the participant schools) and gave them the opportunity to review all materials and methodology. Further, project personnel have had personal experience with Jewish educational settings, and were able to bring

observations from these experiences to bear on the project.

Finally, a key aspect of our work has been to ask participants to describe their own Jewish "contexts". The array of Jewish rituals, educational settings, and influences listed by our participants, parents and students alike, far exceeded anything we could have anticipated from any amount of background reading or discussion. While trends certainly exist, the individual's description of his or her religious world provides rich and often idiosyncratic information, and there is no substitute for this.

Conclusion

The previous themes have pointed out the broad effects of religious communal structures. One of the most notable achievements (or, some say, the most vexing ongoing struggle) of Community Psychology has been to span levels of analysis. That is, "intrapyschic" and "individual" outcomes are understood in terms of their reciprocal interaction with "communal" and "environmental" variables. Examples of this are discussions from a "Community Psychology perspective" of problem behavior as it is related to communal functioning (e.g., Hawkins, Catalano, & Associates, 1992), or student and faculty functioning as related to classroom and school variables (e.g., Sarason, 1971). Both of these examples see outcomes traditionally defined as "internal" as a function of contextual issues.

It is here that Community Psychology may have the most to add to the discussion of religion and psychology. Religion is often viewed solely as an "intrapyschic" variable. Religious identity is usually discussed in terms of the beliefs a person holds, the practices in which a person engages, or the affect one has for his/her religion. While these are, of course, crucial dimensions in the study of religion, it is the unique and vital perspective of community

psychology to appreciate factors "external" to the individual, as well as the interaction of the individual and his or her context.

The discussion in Theme 4 regarding the importance of appreciating sub-group differences is relevant here as well. Specifically, we must remember that although we have reviewed literature as to positive relationships between religion, well being, and healthy identity, this positive relationship is not always the case. Examples from current (and not-so-current) events abound pointing toward the potential of religion to serve as motivator for negative outcomes such as hatred, murder, and even war.

This discussion suggests a number of key questions for pursuit by Community Psychologists. These include, but are by no means limited to: What are the religious setting in which an individual participates? What aspects of religious settings make them more/less effective at promoting healthy identity? What factors, particularly ecological factors, differentiate between settings that promote pro-social as opposed to negative behavior? What factors (in the individual, the setting, and the interaction between the two) make it more or less likely that one will become involved in such settings? To answer these questions, Community Psychologists must gain an understanding of these powerful settings, how religious communities go about organizing the contexts in which youth participate, how these contexts change throughout an individual's development (e.g., when a student leave his or her home community and goes to college), and what the impact is of various continuities and discontinuities.

Theorists within the field of community psychology have emphasized the importance of norms in a setting (e.g., Hawkins et al., 1992), of participation and empowerment (e.g., Maton & Salem, 1995), and of socialization of skills for competent interpersonal functioning (e.g., Elias et

al, 1997). In all of these instances, the overall role of religion as a belief system, as a guide to behavior, and as a vehicle around which to establish a sense of community and belonging, fits clearly within the scope of interest of community psychology. The field appears to be recognizing that omitting religion from an understanding of identity and competence is hampering our understanding of human wellness and other attributes, such as transcendence.

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