

Ecological Theory, Self-Complexity, and Jewish Identity: Implications for Research and Practice.

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Abstract

Ecological theory highlights the reciprocal interaction between individuals and their environment. In this paper, we show how this theory can be useful in the exploration of Jewish identity outcomes and influences on Jewish identity. In particular, ecological theory can help us understand the experiences unique to local contexts, as well as raise questions to guide more broad inquiry. Self-complexity theory, the idea of Jewish identity as a multidimensional construct which coexists with other “identities”, parallels ecological theory and provides theory and methodology to help understand self-conceptualization of Jewish identity.

A “case study” involving ecological and self-complexity theories is discussed. Data from in-depth interviews and surveys of 41 6th and 7th grade students and their families are presented. Participants are drawn from Day and Temple Religious schools. Among the key findings are that students who show greater expectations in terms of continued Jewish participation have a broader ecology of Jewish influences and a less complex conceptualization of their Jewish selves. These results are discussed in the context of the interplay of developmental issues and environmental factors. Relevance to Jewish educational research and practice is highlighted.

The topic of Jewish identity, never been far from the hearts and minds of researchers, has been thrust into even greater focus because of the extensive public, political, and religious discussion of "Who is a Jew?". Debate about this timeless question, interestingly, does not seem quite as

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informed by research as it might be. Part of the reason for this is the growing sense that our models for conceptualizing and studying Jewish identity have not been satisfactory. Another reason for this, identified in recent work at the Rutgers-based Jewish Identity Development Project, is the relative lack of attention given to the way in which Jewish identity co-exists with a variety of other identities, the vast majority of which are secular, and including another elusive construct, "American" identity.

Our aim here is to introduce a theoretical perspective that may be useful in studying the circuitous pathways and idiosyncratic outcomes that appear to characterize many Jewish journeys of identity development (e.g., Cohen & Eisen, 1998). Mainly, we bring the perspective of the field of community psychology, which is acutely aware of the tendency of social scientists to over-generalize the implications of their findings in the search for general principles or laws. We are aware that the early history of psychology and religion was characterized by much criticism of religion on the part of psychologists. Much of this criticism was based on an attempt to apply findings from limited studies of certain populations and types of religious beliefs to apply to religion as a whole (e.g., Kress, 1998; Kress & Elias, in press).

Community psychology-based approaches underscore the need for us to be sensitive to the contexts in which we do our work (Kingry-Westergaard & Kelly, 1990). Context places great influence on what we believe, how we think and feel, how we organize our lives, and those with whom we interact. Can there be any surprise the Jewish identity in the context of a shtetl is quite different than it would be in the context of an urban, secular environment? This is not to say that the identities will necessarily be different. What is the particular structure of the settings in which people's identities are being forged? What are the setting's strengths and resources? How do individuals and groups approach the idea of Jewish identity, and how do they interact with

their Jewish and secular environments? A contextual and ecological approach to identity development can be helpful in understanding "local" variations and, through the accumulated study of such local examples, generalities will or will not emerge.

Theoretical Background: Ecological Theory and Jewish Identity Development

An ecological approach to human development is outlined and defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979):

The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded (p. 21).

As such, 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 setting with in which, the individual interacts directly (e.g., a teacher), 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. Finally, 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.

An ecological perspective requires an understanding and appreciation of the contexts children and adolescents are participants in, and how these interact and vary over the course of the child's developmental history. From an ecological perspective, we can begin to examine which settings and relationships are likely to have the greatest impact on the development of a Jewish identity in adolescents. The question of environmental influences on Jewish identity has been reviewed by a number of researchers and theorists, and their discussions are summarized below. This review will focus on the influence of educational settings, peer groups, and community climate. Additionally, the role of the family will be highlighted. While these categories of contexts are reviewed generally, Maton and Wells' (1995) findings that variation within individual contexts within the same category may have differential impact on the individual are acknowledged.

As we have discussed elsewhere (Kress & Elias, in press, 1988), an ecological approach can prove to be a generative theory in understanding Jewish identity development. Importantly, this theory stresses that influences into Jewish must be seen in a contextual light of other influences (both positive and negative) as well as individual factors. This leads us to ask a broader range of questions about such influences, how they relate to one another, how students move from one influence to another, do the influences support one another, and are they relevant to the developmental (social, emotional and cognitive) stage of the individual.

An ecological understanding requires us not only to understand the structure of the individual's environment, but also how the individualizes conceptualizes his or her self vis-a-vis this environment. To understand this latter side of the equation, we have made use of psychological self-complexity theory, which involves exploring how an individual relates to

various aspects of themselves. The development of the idea of the "multiplicity" of identity is seen as a major transition in the way the self is conceptualized (Rosenberg & Gara, 1985). Current research focuses on the structure and relationships among the various "selves". Self-structure is defined by Robey, Cohen, & Gara (1989) as "the hierarchically organized interrelationships among the several selves in terms of their separate and overlapping features (the self-perceived traits, feelings, etc.)" (p. 436). Key concepts of the self-structure include the elaboration of individual selves, and the pattern of relationships among selves (e.g., that certain selves are considered to be more prominent than others, Markus & Wurf, 1987). Also, the comparison of the "self" to the conceptualization of significant others is seen as significant (Gara & Rosenberg, 1979). In research with adults, findings suggest that a more elaborate and complex self-structure contributes to greater mental health functioning and self-esteem. (e.g., Campbell, Chew, & Scratchily, 1991). It should be noted that such an approach was clearly articulated in the field of Jewish identity development by London and Frank (1987), who spoke of an overall personal identity and various social identities. For this study, we conceptualized Jewish identity as consisting of behavioral, cognitive, social, and affective aspects (for a full review, see Kress, 1998).

The goals of this study were to use ecological theory and related self-complexity theory to help understand the Jewish identity development experience in a sample of students. This study will highlight key issues and themes in using such theories to guide research and practice.

Methods

Participants were drawn from two types of Conservative Jewish educational settings: Day Schools and Supplemental Religious Schools. Preliminary research conducted with students in similar settings (Kress, Elias, & Novick, 1995; Kress, Elias, Novick et al., 1995) has suggested

that significant differences exist between students enrolled in Conservative-affiliated Day Schools and Religious Schools on a wide range of variables related to the topic in question.

Students from the 6th and 7th grades are targeted because this age-group is often seen as the major focus of contemporary Jewish education. Also, students who remain in Jewish educational settings post-Bar/Bat-Mitzvah cannot be seen as a representative cross-section, as the majority of students - estimates vary between 75% and 90% - leave the Jewish educational system at this point..

The student participant was asked to complete his/her part of the measures in an area of the house in which they felt comfortable, but away from the parent(s). A trained research assistant provided assistance and encouragement to the child as needed. Concurrently, parental interviews and surveys were administered by the Principal Investigator. The assessment procedures took approximately one hour to complete.

Measures and Variables

1.Student Assessment: A survey was administered in order to assess the student's present and expected future degree of commitment to Judaism. This five-item questionnaire addressed issues of current centrality of Judaism (Item 2: "The fact that I am Jewish plays an important part in my life"), expected future centrality of Judaism (Item 3: "When I imagine what my life will be like after High School, I imagine that Judaism will play an important part in my life"; Item 4: "When I imagine what my life will be like as an adult, I imagine that Judaism will play an important part in my life"), and expectations around continued Jewish education (Item 1: "I hope to continue my Jewish education after my Bar/Bat Mitzvah"; Item 5: My parents expect me to continue my Jewish education after my Bar/Bat Mitzvah"). The survey is included in Appendix C. Factor analysis revealed that all of the items fell in the same factor, so a summary score was

used. The variable Student Jewish Expectations was used to indicate the sum of the items from this scale.

In addition, a measure of self-complexity was used to assess the degree of self-elaboration of Jewish identity. The self-complexity approach to the investigation of self-concept involves an assessment of participants' descriptions of various target aspects of themselves and significant others (for a full explanation of this methodology, see Gara, 1990 and Neilsen, 1998). In order to achieve this, participants were presented with questionnaires in which they were asked the extent to which various descriptors apply to a particular target aspect of themselves or others. This methodology calls for preliminary work in which each participant generates targets and descriptors that apply to him or herself. These would then be combined to create a set of target and descriptor forms that are unique to each individual participant. Due to limited access to participants, and because this study investigates a narrow range of self/other targets, modifications were made in this procedure. Here, all participants were provided with an identical list of targets.

A multidimensional definition of Jewish identity was used in our work, including behavioral, social, cognitive, and affective components. This conceptualization led us to base the analyses reported here on a multi-component Jewish "self" consisting of the following self-targets: Self as a Jew (a general assessment), Self when doing most important Jewish behavior, Self when learning about Judaism, and Self with Jewish friends. The affective dimension can be seen as infused throughout all of these selves, as it is contained within the adjectives used as descriptors. When appropriate, specific content of these "selves" was left open ended, to most accurately assess the student's Jewish environment. For example, rather than assuming that the school is the place where the student learns the most about Judaism, the student was asked to

provide the information. Also, a list of descriptors was provided for participants based on an original version that had been field-tested previously.

The “H-Comp” statistic (Nielsen, 1996; Nielsen & Fultz, 1997) was used to analyze the data in the self-complexity measures. This statistic compares the adjectives used to describe the 4 Jewish self-aspects and measures the redundancy of descriptors used. Higher, H scores indicate more differentiated and complex, and less redundant, thinking about these self-aspects.

2. Parental Assessment: The survey that was administered to parents had several foci. First, there were items to address parents' opinions regarding the valence and centrality of their Jewish identity (e.g., "The fact that I am Jewish plays an important part in my life"; this methodology is similar to Herman, 1977). Second, parents were asked to rate a series of ritual observances in terms of how important it was for them that the family perform these rituals together. Drawn from previous surveys of Jewish ritual involvement (e.g., Horowitz, 1993), these rituals were picked to include those which have been found by previous research (Horowitz, 1993) to be relatively highly observed (e.g., "Attend Passover Seder") as well as those less frequently observed (e.g., "Attend Purim celebration"). Further, the list includes rituals that recur regularly throughout the year (e.g., "Light Shabbat candles"), as well as those which are more time delineated (e.g., "Light Hanukkah candles"). Finally, parents were asked to list the various Jewish contexts in which their child participates, and to rate the degree to which they encourage and support their child's participation in each of these contexts. Parents were asked to fill out the survey together. When major discrepancies existed between the accounts of parents, this was noted, and scoring was based on the average of the two. When only one parent was Jewish, both parents still were invited to join the discussion, as both parents may play a part in structuring the child's Jewish environment. When an adult other than a parent was responsible

for the primary care of the student, this adult was interviewed.

It should be noted that in addition to the Parental Survey, the Principal Investigator conducted an in-depth interview of the parents. Results of this interview are not included in the set of analyses to be presented here.

The Parental Survey resulted in the following variables:

- A. Family Rituals: A summary score of reported ritual practice.
- B. Contexts of Influence: The total number of influences. Based on the degree to which the parent indicated support, or lack thereof, for a particular influence, each influence was categorized as either “Positive” or “Neutral/Negative”, and separate variables were created for Positive and Negative Contexts. However, since parents listed very few neutral/negative contexts (only 6% of responses) these were excluded from further analyses.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Forty-one families participated in this study. The sample characteristics are given in Table. Supplemental School students comprised 48.8% of the sample, while 51.2% were enrolled in Day School. Students ranged in age from 11 to 13 years old at the time of this study. Males comprised 51.2% of the participants, 48.8% were female. Interestingly, 90.2% of the participants had never attended a type of school (i.e., Supplemental vs. Day School) other than the one in which they were presently enrolled.

No significant differences were found for age, gender, or grade between the two school-types. Differences between genders were not found for Student Jewish Expectations, or Jewish Self-complexity. Further, no differences were found for School Type (Day vs. Supplemental) in

any of the key variables in the study.

Students' Jewish Ecology

In this section we report statistics, both descriptive and inferential, which relate to the variety of influences on student outcomes. We will begin with data from the open-ended questions presented to the students and parents regarding influences and identity.

Students were asked to name the person who has had the most influence on how you think and feel about Judaism. Results are shown in Table 1 for the overall sample, as well as for each type of school. Students' responses to the question "What is the most important Jewish thing that you do on a regular basis?" are shown in Table 2. Students were also asked to name the place where they learn the most about Judaism, and responses are given in Table 3. The categories and relative frequencies for contexts of influence listed by parents are listed in Table 4. Parents listed an average of 7.9 contexts, with a range of 2 to 16.

Inter-correlations of the variables Student Jewish Expectations, Family Rituals, and Influential Contexts are shown in Table 5. Ecological theory would predict that both the number of family rituals as well as the number of contexts of influence would each be independent predictors of the Student Jewish Expectation variable. To check this, both of these variables were entered into a regression model. Results indicate the significance of the overall model ($F=23.44$; $df=2, 38$; $p<.001$) with each variable contributing significantly to the outcome.

Self-Complexity

Nielsen and Fultz (1997) applied self-complexity theory to the study of religious identity in a study comparing college students with churchgoers. Their discussion and results pointed to higher degrees of self-complexity with those with greater degrees of religious involvement. This is consistent with research in the area of self-complexity in general and in mental health, as

mentioned earlier. For this reason, we initially expected to find self-complexity to be positively related to Student Jewish Expectations. However results indicated that these variables were inversely related – the higher the degree of complexity of Jewish Self-concept, the lower the score for Student Jewish Expectations ($r=.488$, $p<.001$); the positive correlation here actually indicates a negative relationship due to how the variables are score

One possible explanation for this unexpected finding may have to do with the age of the participants in this study. As mentioned, research using measure of self-complexity to assess identity in general, and religious identity in particular, have focused on older adolescents and adults. Individuals in these age groups would be cognitively more able to process a multiplicity of roles and identities. However, the participants in this study are at an pre- to early-adolescent stage of development. From a Piagetian perspective, it is possible that the participants are coming at self-conceptualization from a concrete, rather than formal perspective, thereby giving stronger weight to a more narrow conceptualization. This is consistent with Elkind (1961) who found that students at age 11 were becoming increasingly more complex about their thinking about Judaism, but still defined Judaism as specific ritual practice. Also, from an Eriksonian perspective, these students may be grappling with “Industry” or a narrowing of focus of self. The work of Fowler’s (1981) “Stages of Faith” is helpful in bringing these issues together. These students would fit within Fowler’s “Mythic-Literal” stage, increasing in complexity, but still trying to fit new conceptualization into simpler established spiritual categorizations.

Discussion

To summarize, those students who reported stronger expectations for continued Jewish involvement had families with more participation in Jewish rituals and themselves participated in a greater of positive contexts of influence. However, these same students showed lower levels

of complexity in their Jewish self-conceptualization.

These findings suggest that students at this age may be struggling to create an individual self-definition of what it means to be Jewish. They may be a process of paring down various influences and finding experiences that are meaningful to themselves as individuals. They are at a point where their experiences and influences are expanding. Some may be moving into a Middle School where they come into contact with a more diverse range of students and teachers. Our work with students of this age has shown us that this time often represents a flowering of extra-curricular interests in the schools (and parents can attest to growing mileage on their cars!). At the same time, however, the focus of many Jewish educational settings is narrowing, with a growing emphasis during this time on the Bar- and Bat- Mitzvah experience. Ecological Theory sees the individual and the environment as meeting half-way. What if the students interests, where they are focusing their “industry” in their work toward “concrete” and non-complex Jewish self-definition, does not mesh with the opportunities available for them at these times through their schools?

Our data point out that Jewish educational settings are very strong influences at this point, both on Jewish self-conceptualization and Jewish knowledge. However, neither education nor Bar-Bat-Mitzvah preparation are seen as particularly meaningful activities for the students in our studies. This puts Jewish educational settings at risk of losing this influential foothold as student’s self-definition narrows. Jewish schools must start to examine the role they play in providing a variety of opportunities for self-definition, and to allow students to create an identity without having to leave the structure of the school setting. When this is not possible, educators must ask how to bridge the educational setting with external influences. In particular, our results regarding the importance of prayer and synagogue attendance suggest that Jewish educational

settings consider their relationship with the synagogues that these students attend. The housing of a school in a synagogue might not be sufficient for this task. Rather, we must examine the bridges between the synagogue and synagogue personnel and the school.

Conclusions

This study serves as an illustration of the type of questions and recommendations that can be raised using an ecological model and self-complexity theory. A few important themes emerge from this methodology.

1. The authors acknowledge that the small sample size, and homogeneity of the participants can be seen as a shortcoming of this work. However, this approach can also be understood as a “case-study” in a delineated sub-population. Given the often-idiosyncratic definitions of Jewish identity across individuals and sub-groups, in-depth study of small samples may yield fruitful in understanding larger phenomenon. As we accumulate such case studies, their comparison can help generalize beyond the study population.
2. Can we develop an assessment that would let individuals map the ecological structure of their environments? Such a map would include forces toward and away from Jewish identity, and how these forces interact. This would be an interesting and important exercise for Jewish educational professionals in that it would allow them to see where their particular organization (e.g., a Religious School) fits within the more global range of influences. Also, such an activity if completed by students may help them to understand the influences they face. Vygotsky (1978)

talks about “bootstrapping”, or coaching cognitive development through guided exploration. Can Jewish identity be “bootstrapped”?

3. How might children’s Jewish self-complexity be different if we used a completely “open ended” methodology? How might they weigh the behavioral, social, affective, and cognitive aspects of their identity? How might results be different if we asked the students these same question in High School? College? Beyond?
4. Might we be able to look at the complex interplay between individual and environment as a “portfolio” that students develop over time throughout their lives? Might different self-structures and ecological settings move in and out of the forefront at different times?
5. Finally, ecological theory can play a role in organizing research on different influences on Jewish identity. No one experience can stand alone as a “defining” moment for all children. We must start to ask, what is it about particular children that they are impacted by a particular experience and what it is about a particular experience that it impacts particular children.

Table 1: Biggest Jewish Influence for Student

	Temple School	Day School	Total
Jewish School Teacher	8 (40%)	5 (24%)	13 (38%)
Rabbi/Synagogue Official	3 (15%)	5 (24%)	8 (20%)
Grandparent	4 (20%)	5 (24%)	9 (22%)
Parents	1 (5%)	3 (14%)	4 (9.8%)
Siblings	3 (15%)	1 (5%)	4 (9.8%)
Friends	1 (5%)	2 (9.5%)	3 (7.3%)

Table 2:
Student's Most Important Jewish Activity

	Temple School	Day School	Total
Prayer/Synagogue Attendance	8 (40%)	12 (57%)	20 (49%)
Shabbat Observance	1 (5%)	2 (9.5%)	3 (7.3%)
Learning/Jewish School	5 (25%)	5 (24%)	10 (25%)
Keeping Kosher	1 (5%)	1 (5%)	2 (4.8%)

			5 (%)
Kadimah	1 (5%)	0	1 (2.4%)
Bar/Bat Mitzvah Prep	1 (5%)	0	1 (2.4%)
Jewish Holidays	2 (10%)	0	2 (5%)
Being a Good Jew	1 (5%)		1 (2.4%)
Belief in God	0	1 (4.8)	1 (2.4%)

Table 3: Place Where Student Learns Most About Judaism

	Temple School	Day School	Total
Home	2 (10%)	3 (14%)	5 (12%)
Israel/Jerusalem	3 (15%)	4 (19%)	7 (17%)
Temple	3 (15%)	1 (5%)	4 (10%)
School (Jewish)	9 (45%)	13 (62%)	22 (54%)
Other	3 (15%)	0	3 (7%)

Table 4: Frequency of Categories of Contexts of Influence Listed by Parents

Family Member	29%
School-related	15%
Holidays/Shabbat	11%
Peers	9%
Synagogue/Services	8%
Youth Group	7%
Israel	6%
Bar/Bat Mitzvah	All following less than 5%
Cultural Activities	
General Home Environment	
Holocaust Related	
Charity	
Keeping Kosher	
Other	

Table 5: Correlations (All N=41)

	Student Jewish Expectations	Parent Rituals	Contexts of Influence
Student Jewish Expectations	--	.645 (p<.01)	-.543 (p<.01)
Parent Rituals	.645 (p<.01)	--	-.294 (n.s.)
Positive Contexts of Influence	-.543 (p<.01)	-.294 (n.s.)	--

Note: Negative correlations involving Contexts of Influence indicate positive relationships.

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