Measuring Jews in Motion

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Jewish educators are expected not only to imbue their students with Jewish knowledge but with Jewish feelings and Jewish actions as well—in short, with Jewish identity. However, in spite of a growing understanding among researchers that identity is fluid and dynamic, many of the traditional methods for assessing Jewish identity reflect essentialist concepts of identity that assume Jews and their Jewishness remain unchanging across various contexts. Our intention in this article is to review briefly some of the ways in which traditional methods of studying Jewish identity reveal problematic conceptualizations, and to suggest an alternative that seems to us more in keeping with constructivist concepts of identity.

In this article we attempt to critique from a theoretical perspective the concept “identity” and how it has shaped the methods by which “Jewish identity” has been assessed and measured. We challenge the generalized psychological approaches that have held sway in many studies of identity, and suggest that supplanting the categories typically used with social activities and contexts is a better way to describe human behavior. We present a pilot study—a kind of limited experiment—that offers a method of examining the activities and relationships through which people identify themselves as “Jewish,” thereby revealing in place of “identity” new conceptualizations that warrant researchers’ attention. Finally, we explore the implications of these findings for Jewish education. Throughout this article, we have approached critically “identity” as a useful construct in the social sciences, and in Jewish education particularly; nonetheless, we find it difficult, given its long tradition and influence, to abandon the term altogether. Our study is meant to be illustrative rather than a complete model, a beginning rather than an end.

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Lee and Anderson (2009) state, “In educational contexts, questions of identity are especially critical because the development of educational practice and policies are grounded in different ways of understanding *who learners should be*” (p. 181, emphasis added). The expectations as to whom, or what, Jewish learners should be become higher with every perceived threat to Jewish continuity, and Jewish educators are expected to do more and more as the hazards mount from every side (Hartman & Hartman, 2003; Kress & Elias, 2001; Sasson & Sasson, 2009; Scholefield, 2004). Even more than imbuing their students with Jewish knowledge, schools are expected to imbue students with Jewish feeling, Jewish actions—in short, with what is called “Jewish identity”; indeed, Jewish educators are held responsible for the very future of the Jewish people. With such a heavy responsibility, it behooves Jewish educators to examine closely the assumptions they make about identity in general, Jewish identity in particular, and the impact of these assumptions on Jewish education—or, as Bekerman (2001) more accurately (if facetiously) puts it, “Education for people who as a result of it will become active and creative co-participants in the next moment of Jewish history” (p. 468).

The term “identity” has traditionally been viewed as a static and internal state of being, relatively stable across time and contexts. Erikson’s (1970) description of identity as “a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the same-ness and continuity of some shared world image,” and used as the basis for structured interviewed purporting to measure stages of identity (e.g., in Marcia, 2002), represents an “essentialist” view, described by Lee and Anderson (2009) as occupying one end of a dichotomy, opposed to the “constructivist” view, which is “fluid, social, and variably related to contestable and constructed categories and contexts” (p. 186). Researchers have suggested that identity more accurately reflects the way people understand and shape their world when it is viewed as actively and continually constructing meanings through interactions rather than as a state of being that one ought to acquire or achieve (e.g., Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005). However, despite the growing acceptance of the assumption that people actively and continually construct identities through interactions across various contexts, methods of assessing and measuring identity are frequently at variance with a dynamic conception of identity; they are often, as Lee and Anderson (2009) state, “enmeshed in an existentialist paradigm” (p.188). If we take seriously the idea that identity is best understood as a verb, as in people who are actively identifying themselves or being identified by others, then we must find alternatives to the comfortably familiar way of examining something that is fixed and changeless. In other words, we not only need to examine closely *who* we want our learners to be, but how, where, and with whom we want our learners to be.
We will now review briefly some of the ways in which the methodologies of some recent research on Jewish identity reveal problematic conceptualizations, before presenting one alternative method, using examples drawn from our work in Jewish identity and education, that seems to us to be more consistent with and appropriate to a constructivist model of identity.

LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT METHODOLOGIES

Much of the recent research on Jewish identity perpetuates one or more of the following methodological shortcomings:

- the attempt to gain access to the participant’s internal state of mind, reflecting a view of identity as an essentially internal state of being;
- the attempt to separate out the various facets of identity as though they exist and have meaning in isolation from each other, reflecting a view of identity that admits multiplicities without interdependency;
- the use of methods that measure something fixed, unchanging, and isolated from all social contexts, reflecting a view of identity as static, a-contextual and a-historical;
- the use of categories for behavior or identification that are determined apart from their meaning for the participants, reflecting the view that identity is meaningful from a positivist perspective.

We will examine each of these practices in greater detail below.

Identity as an Internal State

The conceptualization of identity as an internal state of mind or being—the “self”—has its roots in Marcia’s (1980, 2002) operationalization of Erikson’s concepts (1968, 1975) but is prevalent among more recent researchers of identity as well. Phinney and Ong (2007) state that “an ethnic identity is an internal structure that can exist without behavior” (p. 272). Kanagwa et al. (2001) point out that “In Western cultures . . . the self is viewed as a more-or-less integrated whole composed of abilities, values, personality attributes, preferences, feeling states, and attitudes” (p. 91), and that these states “. . . are assumed to be relatively invariant over time.” These researchers contrast this construct with the Japanese view of “the self as relational, contextual, and as constituted by important roles and relationships” (p. 91). Research on Jewish identity also frequently rests on the claim that rituals are an outer reflection of the person’s true, inner self, and the job of investigators is
to strive to uncover the essentialized self that will be revealed if only the obfuscating elements of place, time, and activity are removed (e.g., Cohen & Eisen, 2000). In their study of Jewish ethnic identity, Altman, Inman, Fine, Ritter, and Howard (2010) explain that their goal is to understand what certain Jews “define as essential parts of their Jewish identity” (p. 163, emphasis added), and they seek to accomplish this through a method that “allows the researcher to understand the inner ethnic experiences and motives underlying the experiences of individuals” (p. 164). There is no mention of the social context in which these experiences occur (including, most notably, the research process itself) nor of the relationships that might provoke their onset or determine their form and progression. Thus in much of the research on Jewish identity, the reported behavior becomes a measure of an internal element (such as commitment, importance, or salience) of identity rather than a unit of analysis within its specific active context. We wish to point out here that these approaches assume that the very existence of identity can be taken for granted. We are including in our critique this assumption that “identity” exists in a nonempirical—i.e., unobservable—form.

Identity as Multidimensional but Divisible

One of the ways in which researchers have sought to accommodate the inherently social nature of the concept “identity” is by describing people as having multiple identities, or multifaceted identities, that are manifested in different social settings or according to different social requirements. As Phinney (2008) states, “Accompanying recognition of the complexity of group identities is a growing interest in studying them in ways that acknowledge and attempt to deal with the multifaceted and changing nature of multiple identities over time and context” (p. 98). Yet within some studies of Jewish identity that “highlight the dynamic nature of Jewish identity, with critical incidents and experiences influencing its formation” (Altman et al., 2010, p. 171), there exists a desire to unite the various elements into “one cohesive structure, to provide a picture of what this identity may entail” (p. 171). In their study of Jewish identity and gender, for example, Hartman and Hartman (2003), though conceding that “Jewish identity is multi-dimensional,” go on to explain that they view Jewish identity as “a set of facets” within which religious and ethnic identity are separable and, moreover, manifested through different activities, which are in turn separated into public and private activities, thus negating the possibility that for some Jews, public and private might overlap (such as praying in a synagogue) or that the religious and ethnic aspects of an activity might be intertwined (such as keeping kosher).

The idea that dimensions of identity could be, as Phinney and Ong (2007) explain, “distinct aspects that need to be considered separately” (p. 271) is particularly problematic because of the practical and theoretical
impossibility of dividing what is intrinsically connected. Aspects of “identity,”
we argue, are neither formed nor manifested separately from each other
but exist only in conjunction with the complex, multidimensional reality in
which we all live. Attempts to isolate parts of a system are doomed to failure
methodologically, as we shall see, but even if these attempts were success-
ful, they would not result in knowledge that helps anyone understand how
people locate themselves in real social groups in the world because they do
not reflect anything that exists in the real world.

Researchers on Jewish identity have an additional problem in that what
counts as Jewish identity differs from place to place, from community to
community, from Jew to Jew (something true for all groups, not just Jews).
Respondents to surveys asking about the strength of their Jewish attach-
ment cite community and family ties (Sasson & Sasson, 2009), national ties
(Hartman & Hartman, 1999), religion (Kress & Elias, 2001), and culture
(Cohen, 2006). Some have attempted to modify a unified (that is, unidi-
menional) model of identity by explicitly acknowledging that people have
multiple, often competing “identities.” Kress (as cited in Charme, Horowitz,
Hyman, & Kress, 2008) states that “Multiple selves are seen as being context-
dependent, with roles and relationships ‘activating’ different identities . . . ”
(p. 130). But referring to “different identities” within a “multiple self” seems
like attempts to stretch an outworn paradigm past its limits. “Activating dif-
ferent identities” in accordance with particular contexts does not bring to
mind the normal state of affairs for anyone who leads of a life of normal
complexity. The phrase “different identities” implies that each identity is sep-
ate from the others so that people are composed of a series of unrelated,
mutually independent selves that are trotted out on the appropriate occasion.
“Activating” connotes a deliberate act of choosing on the part of individu-
als, again acting independently, as to which of their many “identities” they
deem most appropriate for the particular situation, a description that is again
at odds with a world in which people are possessed of constitutional com-
plexity. Thus we see, that in spite of rhetoric that makes mention of the
social context, these approaches still focus on individuals as independent
units that have meaning outside of their relational frames of reference.

Identity as a State of Being, A-contextual and A-historical

Rattansi and Phoenix (2005) state that “the prevalence of conventional
approaches to identities has frequently resulted either in the individualiza-
tion and decontextualization of young people’s identities, has tended to omit
their subjectivities, or has failed to grasp the multiplicity, fluidity and context-
dependent operation of youth identities and identifications” (p. 98). These
are arguably the two most pervasive problems in the research on Jewish
identity: (a) the tendency to view identity separately and removed from the
contexts in which it is evidenced and (b) the failure to acknowledge the
research framework itself as a context in which people’s Jewish identity is made salient.

One example of the way in which identity is often separated from its social contexts can be seen in a study by Stryker and Serpe (1982, p. 210; as cited in Ashmore, Deaux, McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). In an attempt to separate and prioritize “components” of collective identity, they asked respondents “to imagine meeting someone for the first time and to indicate which piece of information (collective identity) about self would be told first, second, and so on” (p. 88). Surely a natural response is “Whom am I meeting? Under what circumstances? For what purpose?” Wouldn’t the specific conditions determine—not even to a large degree, but wholly—that piece of information deemed most appropriate to be told first? And even if those conditions were provided, the response does not necessarily indicate the level of “importance” (or “salience”) to the respondent, compared to all other aspects of his identity, assuming we could even separate these aspects from each other. All we know is what the respondent reported to us under certain conditions. She may well have tried to produce the aspect she thought would most please the person she was meeting. She may have provided what seemed to her the most innocuous so as not to appear controversial or conspicuous. She may have chosen what would, in her opinion, sound the most impressive. As Baumeister and Muraven (1996) put it, “Individuals actively choose, alter, and modify their identities based on what will enable them to get along best in that context” (p. 405). Moreover, individuals do not act alone but always in concert, colluding with other interactants.

One example of research creating its own unique context is Charme’s (2006) study of gender and Jewish identity. Charme observed that “the salience of gender effects within children’s Jewish identity is determined in great measure by the kinds of questions children are asked” (p. 25). Indeed, the underlying assumptions of the gender-related questions the children were asked in Charme’s study were that gender is relevant to particular areas of Jewish life (Bible stories, ritual observance, clothing), that gender equality should be the norm, that the absence of one gender or the other is significant. Our point is not to take issue with any of these assumptions, only to point out that the researchers created a context in which these assumptions existed and mattered, and then imposed that context on the children. While the focus of Charme’s study was to uncover what he calls “the real impact of egalitarianism on the Jewish experience of children,” one message for our subject is that researchers, whatever their intentions, construct social contexts that have real effects on how people respond.

If we take seriously the assertion “that how an individual experiences and enacts his or her collective identity in any given situation depends on the contexts surrounding the person in the situation” (Ashmore et al., 2004, p. 104), then what we see when we read participants’ responses to questionnaires, surveys, and the like, is in fact the product of a context that...
might not resemble the participants’ responses in other contexts, let alone be transferred and applied in a recognizable, predictable form elsewhere. This means, for example, that in studies of Jewish identity, we can no longer ask about people’s “Jewish identity” as though it has a life of its own outside of social interactions. Indeed, we ought not even assume that our participants conceive of “Jewish identity” (or any other kind of group identity) as it has been depicted in the literature; we cannot discount the possibility that people don’t even think of having a “Jewish identity” unless some researcher asks them about it. As Deaux (1993) has said, “concepts do not have a reality independent of those who create them” (p. 12), to which point we add that concepts do not have a reality independent from the context in which they are created.

Identity as Meaningful When Determined From a Positivistic Stance

When researchers adopt a positivistic stance, treating themselves as objective observers outside the context they are studying, and imposing their own terms and meanings on their respondents’ speech and activities, they throw a blanket of uniformity over a multiplicity of forms and meanings. Again taking an example from the literature on Jewish identity, we see that Hartman and Kaufman (2006) note that while “... the Passover seder traditionally includes a structured recitation of the story of the Jews’ exodus from Egypt ... some Jews have seders today that consist primarily of a social (or ethnic) gathering. ... For some, it is either a religious celebration or primarily an ethnic one; for others, it is both” (pp. 370–371). Yet in surveys that purport to measure participants’ Jewish identity by asking about ritual observance (overt behavior), all these gatherings fall under the umbrella term “Passover seder” and all acquire the meaning ascribed them by the researchers, that is, an accurate measure of the person’s ritual behavior that is, in turn, an accurate measure of his/her Jewish identity.

Horowitz (2002) has pointed out that traditional measures of Jewish identity examine “only a narrow set of traditional Jewish ritual, religious and communal practices, without allowing for a wider range of variations in Jewish practice” (p. 20), which point we will examine in more detail later. Hartman and Kaufman (2006) note further that assigning a singular, universal meaning to an activity “may obfuscate ... the more social, communal and even political functions such practices may also serve” (p. 371). How do we differentiate between a person who attends cultural events because they are part of his/her cultural identity, for example, a Jew who goes to the seder because that’s what she’s always done, or because her family expects her, or because her parents are forcing her; and a person who attends a cultural event because he’s exploring and wants to learn? Yet traditional research on identity gives the right to determine the significance of the event only to the researcher and does not acknowledge that of the participants.
For example, several studies on Jewish identity have pointed to a disparity in the way women and men accord meaning to various Jewish experiences. Hartman and Hartman (2003) note that although Jewish women receive, by many measures, less of the “socialization agents”; that is, those experiences that are said to foster a stronger identity—such as religious schooling and non-formal experiences such as youth groups and camps—they nonetheless exhibit ties to Jewish identity that are equal to or greater than men’s. This is significant to educators because one of the main claims of Jewish education, formal and informal, is that it correlates to a stronger sense of Jewish identity. Clearly men and women are constructing vastly different meanings from their respective experiences, whatever the surface similarities may be. What may be counted by a researcher as a certain number of years in a Jewish school—with a concomitant measure of strength of Jewish identity—may be experienced by the person differently, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Finally, the use of predetermined categories purported to measure the strength of Jewish identity in many studies do not give respondents the option of rejecting the world view the categories suggest. How do we measure, for example, the Jewish identity of the person described by Kress (as cited in Charme et al., 2008), “whose contexts are more circumscribed, where there is tight consonance between roles . . . [who] would not describe an elaborate self system, replying to a question about who they are Jewishly, ‘It’s who I am, I don’t give it much thought.’” Kress asks, reasonably enough, “Does this represent an unelaborated, and therefore weaker, identity? Or, does it represent an identity that is internalized to the point that questioning it is rejected by a research participant?” (p. 133). What about the person who does not define her Judaism according to one of the four denominations on the survey, whose perspective of Judaism doesn’t even include denominations at all? What about people who feel their ethnic or religious identity is fluid, progressive, mutually dependent, mutually determined, and dynamic, so that the aspects of their identity are so intrinsically bound up with each other that it is impossible for them to conceive of being, for example, Jewish and female, as though these aspects were experienced as discrete entities? Generally, no “none of the above” or “all of the above, plus many others” categories exist for those people whose sense of identity is not neatly packaged into labeled boxes.

**ONE ALTERNATIVE METHOD AND WHAT IT REVEALED**

As we have seen, the methods used to study identity reflect researchers’ perspectives of identity and their methodological requirements. Working within a view of identity as “identifying” (a verb: fluid, dynamic, contextual)—indeed, perhaps relinquishing the traditional concept of
“identity” altogether—we sought to study and analyze meaning that is “located in a social fabric managed and constructed continuously in a social concert” (Neuman & Bekerman, 2001, p. 475). One step toward this end is to retain the meaning within the context in which it is generated, overtly acknowledging ourselves, the researchers, as vital and inseparable parts of the picture.

Using interviews loosely built around a set of predesigned questions (the method by which we arrived at these questions will be discussed below) gave us several advantages over questionnaires or surveys. Interviewing allowed us to admit the researcher’s presence as an integral part of the process, to respect and acknowledge the respondents’ roles in attributing meaning to the events in their lives, and preserve both the social and the dynamic nature of “identifying.” We would have the opportunity to analyze the construction of a multilayered, complex situating-of-self, where we as researchers had first-hand contact with the respondents’ meaning-making efforts in action. We did not fear the impossibility of trying to make the research context replicate the “real world” because the research context is the real world; we were not trying to be mirrors of the respondents’ experiences as they related them to us but were rather an integral piece in the puzzle that constituted the respondents’ world at that time.

Researchers and respondents alike bring their own “baggage”—their prior experiences and beliefs—that they unpack during their interaction. One of the primary tasks of researchers, we argue, is that this unpacking should be done explicitly, deliberately, and self-consciously, and perhaps most importantly, with reference to the norms of the social groups involved. After all, “Although each person has a life story, narratives derive their power from being shared by the collective” (Neuman & Bekerman, p. 479). Elucidating those aspects of group identification that are shared by the collective was a key task of the researchers in this project.

We treated the interview itself as the information, rather than as a tool by which we might gain information. For example, Cohen and Eisen (2000) argue that “The use of interview data has obvious advantages, affording insight into meaning motivation, and conflict not easily attained through yes and no questions or rating scales that run from one to five. At the same time, we should be aware that the past may not have been exactly as our informants describe it” (p. 4). We, however, were not interested in “the past” but rather in our participants’ understandings of their pasts (and presents) as they expressed them in that particular setting.

In fact, in their study of Jewish identity, Cohen and Eisen (2000) learned that when they did let respondents (Jews) speak for themselves, they found that “Community and commitment, in fact, are repeatedly redefined and apprehended by our subjects in terms acceptable to sovereign and ever-questing selves. Only in those terms is commitment possible and community permitted to obligate the self . . . The Jews who speak in the pages that
follow take the existence of ‘multiple life-worlds’ and ‘local narratives’ for granted, and value them as precious goods” (pp. 7–8). We, too, tried to elicit the “multiple life-worlds” and “local narratives” from a number of Jewish young people by asking a series of questions about their daily lives—their activities, friends, clothing, and future plans. One challenge was to avoid questions whose language presumed a shared set of categories or imposed a particular worldview, even (especially) when such presumptions might seem to be universal. For example, Gurin and Townsend’s 1986 (as cited in Ashmore et al., 2004) study involved asking female participants “how often in their everyday life they thought about being a woman” (p. 88). Not only does this question make huge assumptions of understanding—that is, that the participants understood what was meant by “thinking about being a woman” in the same way the researchers intended—it also does not allow for the possibility that the participants did not in their everyday lives think about being a woman.

We suspected that the more intrinsic to the “identity” of the respondent the category is, the less likely he or she would be to mention it, a phenomenon noted by Davey, Stone-Fish, and Robila (2001) when one respondent explained: “It’s like grounding. I was raised Jewish. I can’t even think of not being Jewish” (p. 331, emphasis added). In addition, we didn’t want to impose on the participants a false dichotomy between “Jewish” activities and “regular” activities. Therefore, we tried to avoid questions that dealt directly with what we might think of as the respondents’ “Jewish” beliefs or practices, except to follow up on statements and terms introduced by the respondents. In an effort to avoid imposing any Jewish framework on the conversations, we simply announced that we were studying the daily lives and habits of young people. We began each interview with a series of basic questions like “What do you take with you when you leave the house/dorm?” and “What is your daily routine?” We hoped to gain from the responses to these questions a picture of the meaning these young people attributed to the various activities, events, and relationships in their lives, without circumscribing this meaning to a religious sphere. Because our conception of “identifying” is one grounded in mediation with “Others,” we included some questions that we hoped might help us get a sense of the participants’ ways of distinguishing themselves from Others. For example, we asked “What is one thing that you do that others around you do not do?” and “What are the situations or settings in which you feel most/least comfortable?”

Above all, we sought to show respect for dialogue as a process; therefore we tried to pay close attention to changes in discourse throughout the interview—especially changes that were in response to our comments or questions—and to look for the ways in which participants might actively identify within the context we would create with them. We also wanted to recognize and appreciate what language can do at its best: create a text and a relationship.
One of our goals was to attempt to discover whether the speech and behavior typically defined by other researchers as a measure of ethnic/religious (in our case, Jewish) identity was in fact defined that way by the participants themselves. To refer to a previously cited example, a participant might describe at length a “religious” ritual, such as attending a Passover seder, in terms of his or her family, without once mentioning religion. Thus we would have to question the accuracy of categorizing that behavior, attending a seder, as “Jewish,” if by “accuracy” we mean the degree to which the behavior measures the participant’s commitment to his or her faith. In this example, attending a seder might have nothing to do with religion and everything to do with family relationships.

To summarize, we sought to build on what previous research already revealed about the nature of identity and social interaction, granting overt recognition to the unique interactions between researcher and participant and studying the form, content, and context of these interactions. We interviewed our respondents and, allowed the dialogue to provide us with categories. In keeping with Erickson’s definition of “interpretive” research (1986), we considered “as a basic validity criterion the immediate and local meanings of actions, as defined from the actors’ point of view” (p. 119, emphasis in the original), noting the respondents’ language, terms, and categories, and attempted to tease out patterns and points of view. We also studied the form of the dialogue itself. We had no illusions that any patterns we might find would be consistent with our respondents’ perspectives; rather, we acknowledged that we would create our own texts from the social interactions of which we had been a part and with regard to the wider social collectives in which we live.

Our 14 respondents were young people (ages 16–29) who were, in some cases, graduates of American high schools on a 9-month study program in Israel, or high school students currently enrolled in Israeli high schools. They had agreed to be interviewed for what was described as “a study about young people, their interests and activities.” Some of the interviews were conducted in Hebrew (the authors have translated Hebrew quotations into English), others in English. Although most interviews were done on a one-time basis, a few involved follow-up sessions. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and all respondents were given the option of reading the transcripts; none exercised this option.

Methodologically, our approach to the analysis of the data bears similarities to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994); as this is applied to qualitative data, we extract our categories from the texts we construct together with the respondents without forcing on these texts any predefined theoretical structure. Our approach is also aligned with perspectives that suggest we create ourselves and our identities through narratives (Fischer-Rosenthal, 1996; MacIntyre, 1981; McAdams, 1990; for a Jewish version see Prell, 2000). Within a conceptualization of narrative as a framework
that provides individuals with a map of possible roles and trajectories where actions become possible (Bruner, 1987), our interview schedule tried to elicit individual narratives concomitantly with the elements necessary for the construction of a sense of being in present and future (Polkinghorne, 1988). Though we are aware that any talk is framed implicitly or explicitly, we might be differentiated from other “narrative” approaches because of our choice to avoid imposing any overt theoretical framework (in our case, a Jewish one) on the interview schedule. We asked our participants questions about their lives as youth or adolescents, not as Jews; thus, the framework enclosing our interview schedule was as neutral as possible regarding “typical” ethnic identity talk.

In their responses to the questions, the participants sounded like young people anywhere: They spent their time with friends, playing basketball, going to movies, sitting through classes, sleeping late, and enjoying their families and friends (or, in the case of the American students spending the year in Israel, missing them). If we were to view this phenomenon through the lens of a traditional conceptualization of identity, we might be tempted to conclude that being Jewish was not at all important in the lives of these young people; indeed, they rarely used the word “Jewish,” nor did they refer to their activities as being “Jewish.” Brubaker (2002) reminds us that we should conceive of ethnicity “in relational, processual, dynamic, eventful and disaggregated terms” (p. 167), which indeed appears to be how some people conceptualize them when discrete categories are not imposed. As we suspected, even when the participants described behaviors that are considered in some studies of Jewish identity to be measures of a person’s attachment to Judaism (or the strength or degree of his/her Jewish identity), they did not themselves place these activities in a context of “Jewish activities.” Furthermore, they reported a high degree of comfort moving between various levels of observance, depending on the social setting. One participant, for instance, spoke about visiting friends and family in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City (Jerusalem), and described how she dressed differently on such occasions: “When I visit my friends in seminary, I would dress like I did in high school with my skirt and my sleeves long, and here, I’ll wear jeans and a tank top.” Another participant, most of whose high school friends were in yeshiva (religious seminary), continued to visit them from his non-Orthodox program, making accommodations for what he called their “restrictive” setting, compared to his own program and to the community from which they had all come: “In Chicago we’d go to the beach . . . but they can’t go to Tel Aviv too often because they have curfews and such.” What is noticeably absent is any attempt on the part of these young people to place their groups of friends into stable, unchanging categories or to characterize their own different behaviors in terms of religion.

The participants also declined to box themselves into static categories when describing changes in their habits. One participant mentioned several
times that she had at first wanted to stop “keeping things” (for example, observing the Sabbath) but found that she missed these activities. She also said she began to value “doing it on your own rather than having people tell you what to do.” The apparent ease with which she related her stopping and then re-starting these activities may well indicate that she does not associate them with any particular static, essential quality within herself. Certainly she did not describe the process in terms of an “identity crisis.”

Moreover, some of the participants described similar processes of “keeping more” and “keeping less” among their parents. One participant described how her father attended different synagogues, eventually choosing membership in an “Orthodox” synagogue, although until that time all the family had attended a “Conservative” one. She mentioned that during this time, her mother and father “seemed to switch places,” with her mother, who had previously been “more religious” becoming “less religious” and her father becoming “stricter about everything” (i.e., ritual observance). Another participant described the influence his brother’s Sabbath observance had on the rest of the family (in both directions!). In this latter case especially, the effect of context on behavior was salient: When his brother wasn’t home, the participant said, everyone in the family did what they had always done. This tells us that behavior, including religious ritual behavior, may have more to do with keeping and maintaining relationships than it does with commitment to a particular belief system. This point is particularly important for educators, for it dovetails with theories of learning in which learning is understood not as the transference of disciplinary knowledge but with human interaction and, specifically, the creation of relationships (McDermott, 1993; Bateson, 1972).

The degree of the participants’ acceptance of fluidity extended to other spheres as well. One participant explained that her feelings regarding her college plans had changed during the year: “I wasn’t ready to go to college last year, and now I’m ready. Maybe I’ll be ready to move to Israel after college, I don’t know.” Another participant, explaining his decision not to attend yeshiva with most of his friends, said, “I don’t think in terms of religiosity I’m there yet . . . I just didn’t think I was ready”—a statement that leaves wide open the possibility that one day he may be ready. More significantly, it expresses a sense of self as one that grows and changes. The yeshiva environment is a constant, but people’s sense of whether or not they belong there is dynamic.

Another researcher observed among her respondents a natural moving in and around a variety of “circles of affiliation” (translated from the Hebrew by the authors). One respondent noted that she “contributed and received from here, and here, and here . . . with each one there’s a different relationship, so I don’t know how to say which is the closest . . . like everyone relates to me at a different point. I don’t know which is the closest to me—*in what aspect*?” (emphasis added by the authors). The researcher remarked later: “The concept ‘closest’ came from *my* culture, and was not
appropriate to her.” This researcher’s sensitivity to the difficulty some of her respondents had with certain terms and questions alerted her to times when respondents perceived their world, their relationships, and themselves in frameworks markedly different from her own. Moreover, we noted that this particular difficulty arose because of the researcher’s tendency to see “identity” in positivistic terms, as some inner state she could elicit from respondents through the right series of questions.

Some respondents reshaped the terms of a question so that they could more easily answer it. As one researcher described: “In their answers to the question ‘Where do you feel most uncomfortable?’ they defined situations in which they felt ‘unwelcome’ or ‘unwanted.’” The researcher did not force her own definition on the respondents but rather took note of their hesitations, their re-framing of questions, and their outright rejection of certain terms as benefits to the use of dialogue as a research tool. An interview is an interaction that works in two directions: Although the questions reflected our biases and perspective (in spite of our efforts to make them as open as possible) the respondents nonetheless could negotiate with us their own meanings and world categories.

As mentioned earlier, researchers create contexts together with the participants, contexts that are an intrinsic part of whatever manifestations of “identification” occur. The dialogues we researchers had with the participants revealed the potential value of such settings as a tool for developing ideas and emergent concepts in a “safe” setting—that is, one that is temporary, with relatively few, if any, lasting social repercussions. Just as the participant described above was able to reject the terms and assumptions of some of the questions as they were phrased, others used the give-and-take of the interview as a way to fine tune their positions, consider alternatives, and reshape their initial characterization of people, events, and relationships. One participant, for example, rejected certain statements suggested by the interviewer (in an attempt to restate or clarify what he had said)—“No, that’s not it” or “No, not a crisis”—and then reshaped them himself, sometimes in quite a different form than he had initially proposed. For example, when describing family meals, he first asserted that “my family eats together.” The interviewer asked, “Every night?” and he replied, “Not every night. Probably—not true . . .” and went on to describe how the family members’ different schedules usually precluded their eating together. Then he said, “Definitely Friday night dinner we eat dinner together.” When the interviewer then offered the statement back, “So every Friday night you eat dinner together,” he said, “Definitely. Unless someone goes somewhere else for Shabbat.”

This pattern of initial, if tentative agreement, followed by a fine tuning of the image, followed by a new characterization, occurred most significantly with another participant, when she began by discussing her favorite
class and ended by describing herself. She reported that she liked a philosophy course in spite of her not being “a deep person.” When the interviewer asked her what she meant, she explained, “I never really got into philosophy because I just kind of see things how they are. I don’t really see the meaning behind them . . . it’s the first time I really understood things like that.” If reality is shaped by language, then for a young woman to articulate what it means to begin seeing herself as someone who “understood things like that” may be empowering indeed. One of the additional messages for researchers is that the contact itself is a specific context in which the participants might, in the course of answering questions, expand, develop, or changes ideas.

One of the other researchers looked to the relationship she developed with her respondents as a guide for when and how to broach certain topics. For instance, she noted that the multiplicity of terms one respondent used to describe where she lived might possibly indicate the ambivalence she felt about it (this particular respondent was an orphan, living in a dormitory in which the “house parents” changed every 4 years). However, the researcher did not feel she could follow up on this topic until their second meeting, illustrating not only the sensitivity this method permits but its tacit recognition of the connection and context created by phenomenological interviews.

Researchers do not want to start their work knowing that their method will either fall far short of revealing what they want to know or distort beyond recognition what is revealed. Theories are changing to accommodate what people have learned about the nature of how people identify themselves and others in the world. We believe that working to develop research methods that recognize these changing theories, allow for complexity in people’s relationships, give meaning and credence to contexts (including the research context itself), and respect the mutual roles we all play in attributing meaning to events, will help us understand these topics more deeply.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

We have seen the vast differences in how the participants ascribed meaning to their activities, the significance to which they attributed certain actions and behavior—and especially in terms of the grace and ease with which they switched codes of behavior according to setting and circumstance—compared to the literature’s rigid boundaries and labels. Thus, the study of “identifying” is not a matter of recognizing that people change but that people are changing. People do not move from one category to another but rather, the categories themselves are continually being created and recreated with every interaction.
Our preliminary conclusions should not be confused with what could be considered attitudinal views of Jewish identity. Jewishness, we suggest, is not about feelings and attitudes, but behaviors and relationships. Our illustrative study is not analogous to the individualized identity perspectives that predominate symbolic ethnic models (Gans, 1979) nor to Sklare and Greenblum’s (1967) appreciation of a decline in “sacramentalism,” the observance of normative Jewish behaviors; neither is it equivalent to more sophisticated sociological approaches, such as those exemplified in the familialism suggested by scholars such as Liebman and Cohen (1990). All these studies compare Jewish life against an “authentic” core of behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge. When holding to such idealist perspectives, these studies demonstrate an inevitable decline in Jewishness. In our work we attempted to avoid the claim of knowing in advance what Judaism should be; thus we prevent ourselves from falling into the trap of cultural deficit theories. Together with psychologized views of Jewish identity, the deficit model is reflected both in Jewish identity research and in much of Jewish education, as we indicated earlier. Our work points in the direction of multiple activities (non-verbal and verbal) which can be conducive to the creation and maintenance of social bonds that in certain contexts can be considered Jewish. From this perspective, Jewishness could provide points of contact available to people in various social settings.

Having said that, we must add as well that however deeply we understand that identities are not essential but are socially constructed, they nonetheless have very real consequences that are too often severe and damaging (see, for example, Bekerman 2009a, 2009b). However, this should only drive more strongly our efforts to put what we learn toward educational reform and development. If, for example, our research shows that identities are contextual and emergent, we might turn our attention toward uncovering the processes and contexts through which these once fluid “identifyings” become essentialized. We might explore as well whose interests they serve when they do become essential and what existing power structures support them.

In the lingo of contemporary politics, “identity” has become a key term, and both we educators and researchers need to account for it. Yet this does not imply the need to confuse a folk term with an analytical one. We feel that research in identity in general and Jewish identity in particular have confounded these folk and analytical categories for too long. By focusing on identity as an analytical concept and approaching it as we have described above, we might be in a better position to employ research approaches and educational interventions geared toward the well-being of our communities. The shift from identity to identifying is not just a rhetorical issue, for it affects not only the language of our social analysis but its substance, on the heels of which follow our educational practices.
As Jewish educators, we may also benefit from the findings of this methodology in terms of developing curricula that are aligned with the perspectives and the contexts of our students. Knowing, for example, that people emphasize relationships, we can move away from the current deficit models in which students are measured against a [mythical] ideal Jew, inevitably falling short and requiring the infusion of massive amounts of Jewish knowledge to strengthen their “Jewish identity” to acceptable levels. Such models not only rely on the outdated “tabula rasa” theories of learning that deny students’ active role in the learning process, they also impart to students the sense that they are, in their current state, inadequate—hardly a way to establish the positive and productive relationships so vital to education.

We might do well to remember Gramsci’s (1971) warning against a science of people that merely predicts behavior, for if things are not good today—e.g., not Jewish enough—there is little use for a science that tells us they will be the same tomorrow. The social sciences should not assume that people are static, nor should it lock them into categories that do not reflect their rich lives, struggles, and complexities. When approaching that which is Jewish, confronting complexity is a better choice if continuous formation is what we want to achieve. As Horowitz (2011) observes, “The central challenge in postmodern times is to examine the ways in which people’s supposedly autonomous actions are embedded in relationships and contexts, and to consider the various elements that come into play in arriving at a choice” (p. 88). Furthermore, acknowledging that Jews, like all humans, are continually acting and identifying, points Jewish researchers in more fruitful directions than attempting to measure artificial states of being. We might explore, for example, with whom and in what situations people identify as Jews, and in what form and through what actions this “identifying” occurs. We might ask about the nature of the relationships around which Jewish “identifying” takes place. A more modest first step, however, may be to do all we can to ensure that our research methods do not detract from, but rather enhance and validate, people’s sense of themselves as vital, active forces in the many contexts they inhabit.

REFERENCES

Measuring Jews in Motion


