Introductory note

Thanks for inviting me to share my thoughts about how to study “Jewishness” and “identity” in the lives of contemporary American Jews. Since I won’t be joining the meeting on Jan 22, let me offer a brief introduction about how I came to be studying these issues. This will help you to understand where I come from professionally and conceptually in terms of the task at hand.

My work on “Jewish identity” commenced in the early 1990s when I directed a major socio-demographic study of the Jews of the greater New York City area (see Horowitz, 1993). This study ran in parallel to the national study of US Jews (NJPS 1990), trailing it by about a year. When the national study released its bombshell findings about the soaring intermarriage rates among younger cohorts of American Jews (known in many quarters simply by the phrase “52 per cent”!), this news prompted a slew of questions in New York (and of course elsewhere) about the local patterns regarding intermarriage and “Jewish identity”. But “Jewish identity” turned out to be a topic that the socio-demographic studies were not well-equipped to address.

These studies (which serve as the main knowledge base for sociological research about US Jews) include a battery of questions about how much people adhere to a number of traditional or conventional Jewish religious, cultural, communal and ethnic practices, which then end up being used as a means of accounting for the extent of Jewish practice among different subgroups of Jews (denominationally, age groups, etc.). The upshot is that the main way of considering the Jewishness of American Jews has been to focus on adherence to traditional or conventional Jewish practice, without a more direct consideration of the person’s own experience, understanding or motivation or identity. The phenomenon of what being Jewish means to the individual has not been taken into account.

This prompted me to ask a different question, taking as my starting point the whole person rather than just the Jewish part and to look at where the Jewishness fits, if at all, in the mix of the person’s many identities, commitments and affiliations. Instead of asking, in essence, “how Jewish are you?” – for which the answer always will be, not Jewish enough – I reframed the question entirely: How, or in what ways are you Jewish? Under what circumstances is this something you feel more strongly, and when is it immaterial?

1 There are two cultural sources that lead to this stance. One is a Jewish cultural bias that privileges doing.
In designing the *Connections and Journeys* study (Horowitz 2000/2003) I adopted a person-centered, life-course approach to Jewishness. The first stage of this project was a series of in-depth, exploratory interviews with 87 people to learn about how people experienced being Jewish, in terms of the centrality, meaning and salience of Jewishness for them. For the second stage of the research I developed a set of survey questions designed to allow us to differentiate the individual’s view from the shared, more normative ideas of Jewishness.

I have continued to work in this mode and I believe that it offers a helpful orientation when applied to the issue of how to think about Jewishness and individual experience in particular programs. I think I can be most helpful by sharing my current thinking about how adopting a person-centered stance would be useful in the work of the Jim Joseph Foundation and its evaluation efforts.

1. **Defining “Jewishness” and Identity/Self conceptually**

   For the purposes of research and evaluation it’s important to distinguish *Jewishness* from the individual’s *Jewish Self*. The first involves the shared, socially and historically constructed, contested stuff that constitutes Jewishness (that varies depending on context). The second involves the individual’s self-understanding and being as a Jew.  

   So we are looking at *individuals* and their experiences, and at the same time, the thing that interests us isn’t entirely defined by the individual’s own experience. There’s a *social* (i.e. shared, cultural-historical) component as well. This feature is not unique to the study of Jewishness. Social psychology has a lengthy bibliography of studies of ethnic or national groups, where the “group identities” exist over and above the identities of individual group members, and the issue is to understand the individual’s experience of being part of a category or collective (Beginning with Tajfel 1981; more recently Ashmore and Deaux 2004; Brubaker 2004)

2. **How does Jewishness relate to the shaping of the Jewish Self?**

   In the policy world there is a popular slogan about Jewishness and individual identity that asserts “the more, the more” –more Jewish exposure (Jewish friends, years in Jewish school and so on) will yield more subsequent Jewishness. Because this formulation is based on correlational analyses at the aggregate level, rather than on longitudinal studies that follow people’s lives and choice-making over time, these catchphrases can be

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2 I’m not using “Jewish identity” here, because it’s gotten to be too unwieldy in how it’s used (For example, sometimes it signifies what being Jewish ought involve, and other times it refers to how much the person adheres to that.). However I am using self and identity interchangeably in referring to individuals’ self-understanding.
misleading in thinking about persons. They do not illuminate the processes within the self that are essential to understand and encourage.

There is a body of research that conceptualizes identity as *relational*, emerging from the transaction between individuals and the various social worlds they inhabit. This conception sees the person as embedded/interacting in particular social context that itself is already configured in terms of the way it operates, its role relations, the built-in expectations and practices, organizing rules and procedures, etc. The self emerges from practice, involvements and relationships with others. (There are many scholars whose work I’ve found influential: Vygotsky; Rogoff; Holland et.al, 1998; Lave and Wenger, Engstrom, 1999. Psychoanalytic work on “self-states” takes a similar stance—see Bromberg 1996.)

When thinking about evaluating JIF programs, the program context can be viewed as a meeting place where individuals encounter a particular Jewish configuration. We can view the Jewishness embodied in a particular program (and as it is more broadly available) as a potential input or resource for the individual to try out and possibly adopt, build upon, react against and so on.

The emphasis should not be about how much a person conforms to or adopts local expectations and norms, rather, we should focus on how the person self-locates and reflects upon and learns from that experience in the program context, and takes that into the self. (Herbert Kelman (1999) termed this stance as “individualizing” Jewish identity rather than “maximizing” it.)

The challenge, then, is to keep tabs on both the Jewishness embodied in the program and the individual’s experience of it and how these interact. To do this would involve mapping of the image/conception of and assumptions about Jewishness embodied in the program: what are its normative expectations, both hidden and explicit? How are these embodied and enacted in the choreography and particulars of the program? These elements are part of the configured context that the programs create and they play a role in shaping the possibilities for individual action. (I’m drawing on the language of Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain, 1998.)

From the point of view of the individual participants we’d want to tune into the ways that participating in the program affects the person’s own development.

### 3. Identity Formation and the Jewish Self

How does the Jewish Self emerge within the person? Over the years I’ve interviewed scores of people about how they see their lives and their connections to Jewishness, and in analyzing their accounts I have identified three processes that seem to be particularly central:
a. Developing familiarity and competence: People’s commitments and self-understanding emerge out of one’s earliest experiences (echoing Bourdieu’s idea of habitus)
b. Reflecting: reflective self-understanding (that develops in adolescence and continues on into adulthood)
c. Inspiration: imaginative capacities that people develop by seeing what’s possible in their lives.

For years I have shared these ideas informally with some colleagues, searching for what to do with these insights. In recent years I’ve discovered that these three processes comprise what has been called “agency”. In their seminal article from 1998 Emirbayer and Mische described individual agency as a dynamic, unfolding, socially-situated process informed by three elements: past-oriented habit or routine, present-oriented reflection and judgment, and future-oriented purpose or imagination. To exercise agency one needs to be sufficiently immersed in the context to become habituated, to operate fluently in it. In addition one needs to be able to take stock of the conditions one encounters, and then to think imaginatively about possibilities in order to plan going forward.

4. What does agency have to do with “identity”?
I came up against the limits of the notion of “identity” in my work on a longitudinal study of new teachers, whom I and my colleagues followed for several years as they embarked on their teacher preparation and then moved on into their professional work as teachers in several work settings (Horowitz, forthcoming).

The longitudinal study created an opening to see the self in action, in a variety of contexts. We get to see how the inherited and involuntary, habituated aspects of a person’s upbringing can become active elements in the decision-making and deployment of the self. Relying solely on the concept of identity –where in the Jewish world we typically have looked at knowledge, skills or practices to indicate the extent of person’s identity–would not have captured this dynamic change in people’s lives. Agency involves marshaling the self within a domain, the person’s ability to function effectively in the environment. Tracing changes in the person’s sense of agency gives us a better sense of how actively an identity (e.g. being Jewish, being an educator, or a Jewish educator) comes to be inhabited.

5. Measurement of Jewishness and assessment of programmatic attempts to cultivate Jewishness
Programs are limited interventions into a more complex system or ecology—in other words, they happen for only a limited timeframe, yet the people who participate in the program are affected by what they bring with them in their lives over time, and by the many other things that are happening around them. Typically program evaluation focus on program goals, without attending to individual pathways and experiences.
If the person is participating in a program – the person engages with the Jewishness in that setting. But how does that connect to other experiences, parts of the self during the program, and then beyond the duration of the program? Because people traverse multiple contexts in their lives, there is the question of translation, transfer, carrying that into the person and beyond the limits of the program. We might ask, whatever a person gains in one setting or another, what might be adopted or carried forward as the person moves across varied, changing settings and situations? (Note that this question argues for the importance of widening view beyond a program-only focus.)

I advocate adopting more of an ecological perspective, so as to highlight the contexts and configurations that enable or motivate people to in their Jewish exploration/engagement. Develop a way of looking at participants in a setting and seeing where participating in a particular program intersects with their life more broadly—their prior experiences and self-understanding, and where they see themselves heading. What do the programs enable? How does the particular program add to possibilities for individuals in terms of the kinds of relationships, ways of being in that setting, array of symbols, associations, cultural codes?

I think it would be smart to use the various JJF programs as a lab for developing a better understanding, leading to a better set of measures.

References

