

Living with Antisemitism

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Abstract

In an anonymous online study of 242 Jewish-identified participants (71 men, 163 women, 8 other; mean age = 37.8 years) living in ethnically diverse communities we found levels of antisemitism significantly associated with depression, survivor guilt proneness, and self-hate. Involvement in the Jewish community was significantly associated with life satisfaction even when adjusting for the effects of discrimination. A subsample of 124 responded to open ended questions with narratives. Thirty percent indicated feeling endangered when identifying as Jewish.



Support for victims of Chabad of Poway synagogue shooting, Sunday, April 28, 2019., from Deepa Bharath, "U.S. anti-Semitic incidents surge to all-time high in 2019, ADL report shows," *Orange County Register*, May 12, 2020. (AP Photo /Denis Poroy)

Introduction

In the infamous 2017 demonstrations in Virginia, White Nationalists marched to the chant: "Jews will not replace us," sending chills up the spines of American Jews, many of whom were born long after World War II and who grew up believing that Jews had been thoroughly assimilated, and antisemitism, along with slavery, a long-dead piece of a dark history. Ostensibly representing incipient racism focused on African Americans, the chants were confusing to many modern Americans. In fact, even the liberal media reporting on the demonstrations seemed to find it more relevant to focus on "racism," ignoring the obvious target.

While many American Jews have white skin and have enjoyed the privileges of "passing" (Phalen, 1993), labeling Jews "White" may be problematic and demonstrate a subtle colorblindness. The White racial categorization implies shared history, values,

and privilege among group members (Kakhnovets & Wolf, 2011). Therefore, being White in America may also imply that one maintains a Christian identity (Byers & Krieger, 2007; Schlosser, 2003). Further, by labeling Jews "White," it ironically places Jews in the same category as their White oppressors who previously saw them as a non-White other (Langman, 1995). Finally, in this era of popular genetic screening, many Jews find themselves officially categorized as "Middle-Eastern" and "Southwest Asian."

When Jews are classified as White, the history of marginalization, ethnic identity, and discrimination are more easily ignored or even erased (Rubin, 2017). Despite this wide-spread color-blindness, feelings of uneasiness have been spreading through Jewish communities as the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors are forced to recognize antisemitism. This study aimed to investigate its appearance in the psychological life of contemporary Jews.

Methods

Participant Demographics: This anonymous mixed method online study of antisemitism surveyed 242 Jewish-identified participants. Data was collected from March 2019 to June 2019. One hundred sixty-three (66.5%) participants were female; 71 (28.9%) participants were male, and 8 (3.3%) participants identified as "other" for gender. Participants were recruited through online Jewish web pages and social media sources. The majority of the participants resided in the U.S (83.67%). The mean age for the participants was 37.8 years old (SD=16.115) with a range of 18 - 80. The majority of participants (87.4%) identified as Ashkenazi and were well educated with 40.82 % having completed graduate level of education. Current religious identification varied with 14.8% identifying as Modern Orthodox, 14.2% Conservative, and 24.4% Reform.

Measures:

Jewish Ethnic Experience Scale (JEES; Kosdon, O'Connor, & Berry, 2019). The Jewish Ethnic Experience Scale (JEES) is a 38-item pilot measure developed for this study and aims to capture experiences common to Jews. The measure contains three subscales including:

Antisemitism, Concealment, and Involvement. The antisemitism scale contains items pertaining to the experience of antisemitism and/or fear of encountering antisemitism. The concealment scale contains items about hiding or hoping to hide Jewish identity. Finally, the involvement scale contains items related to the participants' involvement in activities connected to the Jewish community. Some questions on the JEES were adapted from the American Jewish Identity Scales (Friedlander et al., 2010), a 33-item self-report measure designed to evaluate the degree to which American Jews identify with Judaism as a religion and Judaism as a culture.

Antisemitism Related Stress Inventory (ARSI; Rosen, Kuczynski, & Kanter, 2018). The Antisemitism Related Stress Inventory is a 30-item instrument developed to measure the impact of antisemitism on American Jews. The ARSI contains three subscales: Individual Experiences, Collective Experiences, and Personal Safety and is scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ; O'Connor, Berry Weiss, Bush, & Sampson, 1997) is a 67-item, self-report measure designed to assess categories of guilt-based empathy and an unrealistic sense of responsibility for others well-being and success.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, 2000) includes five items

measuring feelings of well-being and happiness (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2000).

The Brief Big Five Inventory, V44 – (BFI-44; John, Donahue, & Kentle 1992). The Brief Big Five Inventory, (BFI; John, 1990), is a 44-item self-report inventory, used to assess five personality traits: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism.

Center for Epidemiologic Studies of Depression (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). The CES-D was designed to measure depressive symptoms including depressed mood, feelings of guilt and worthlessness, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, psychomotor retardation, loss of appetite, and sleep disturbance.

Narrative Responses: Questions calling for narrative responses asked participants to write freely about their Jewish identity and their personal experiences with antisemitism.

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Data Analysis

TABLE 1: Pearson correlations between JEES and ARSI subscales and primary psychological outcomes

	JEES Concealment	JEES Antisemitism	JEES Involvement	ARSI Individual	ARSI Collective	ARSI Unsafe
Survivor Guilt	.31 ***	.30 ***	-.08	.43 ***	.30 ***	.22 **
Omnip. Guilt	.16 *	.19 *	.09	.32 ***	.28 ***	.16 *
Self-hate	.22 **	.20 **	-.16 *	.25 ***	.11	.25 ***
Depression	.08	.20 *	-.18 *	.24 **	.06	.29 ***
SWL	-.15	-.16	.28 ***	.03	.02	-.16
Neuroticism	.14	.19 *	-.18 *	.16 *	.13	.26 **

1 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TABLE 2: Multiple Regression Predicting Survivor Guilt from Depression (CESD) and Antisemitism Scales

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Standardized Coefficients t				
		Std. Error	Beta	p		
1	CESD	0.58	0.12	.38	4.96	<.001
	JEES Antisemitism	0.33	0.12	.22	2.81	<.01
2	CESD	0.53	0.11	.35	4.63	<.001
	ARSI Individual	0.36	0.08	.33	4.45	<.001
3	CESD	0.61	0.11	.41	5.30	<.001
	JEES Concealment	0.42	0.12	.27	3.60	<.001

Narrative Responses



Results

Results demonstrated a significant association between levels of antisemitism and depression, survivor guilt proneness, neuroticism and self-hate (See Table 1). Concealing one's Jewish identity was significantly associated with antisemitism, self-hate, proneness to empathy-based guilt (survivor guilt proneness and feeling omnipotently responsible for others) and with feeling endangered. Participants who were active in the Jewish community were found less likely to feel it necessary to hide their Jewish identity. Satisfaction with life was associated with levels of involvement in the Jewish community, even when adjusting for the effects of all other predictors. Lastly, the experience of antisemitism may predict survivor guilt proneness even when accounting for depression.

Responses to qualitative questions indicated that participants of the subsample had at some point experienced fear, verbal harassment and had been met with physical violence. In addition, participants reported being excluded from institutions, community events or other social situations. According to narrative responses, Jews commonly evaluate the environment for signs of danger and may try to hide their identity depending on their location, the political environment, and familiarity with the people with whom they are interacting. It appeared that Jews who are exposed to severe antisemitism may become depressed and exhibit self-hate.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that there is a negative relationship between the experience of antisemitism and the psychological well-being of Jews. For example, antisemitism was significantly correlated with survivor guilt proneness, self-hatred, neuroticism and depression. Despite evidence of psychological distress and the rise of antisemitism, Jews appear resilient; taking pride in their culture and religion, we found the more involved they were in the Jewish community, the greater their satisfaction with life.

A high drop-out rate may indicate a potentially biased sample. In recent surveys we've found that participants responding on a smart phone or other handheld device are more likely to stop before completing the survey because surveys appear longer on a phone than on a computer. It is likely that the study attracted participants already involved in the Jewish community, while failing to include less affiliated Jews, leading to a sample bias. Despite these limitations, this study may reflect the negative impact that emerging nationalism and tribalism is having on Jews, along with other racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.