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Beyond Ethnicity – the role of coming from a mixed-origin family for Jewish identity. A Polish case.

Contemporary Jews in many countries become linked by the “bond of choice” instead of “bond of fate”. This choice-defined identity deserves research, in order to assess the potential consequences of such processes on contemporary Jewish communities and involvement of their members. This article will specifically focus on the forms of identities and involvement of Polish Jews having different ancestral situation (paternal Jewishness, maternal Jewishness, both-parents Jewishness, converted).

According to the religious laws of halakha, person’s Jewish status is determined by the Jewishness of that person’s mother (Shulchan Aruch, EH 4:19). Such matrilineal definition of Jewishness is currently maintained in Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, although Reform and Liberal Judaism tend to accept also people who have Jewish roots on paternal side. Patrilineality is also widely accepted in secular Jewish circles. All denominations of Judaism accept conversion as means to enter the Jewish community.

Jewish communities traditionally opposed intermarriages. In 1930s most Jews lived in countries where intermarriages did not exceed 5% of the total marriages of Jewish people.¹ Recent study of Scandinavian Jews found that although slight majority of Jews in Sweden, Finland and Norway think that “Jew should marry a Jew”, the vast majority would not oppose their children from intermarriage². In one of the greatest urban centers of Jewish population, New York City, intermarriages formed about half of all non-orthodox Jewish weddings in 2006-2011³. This process is particularly visible in the Jewish communities in post-communist countries, where intensive secularization and assimilation processes occurred after 1945.⁴ In these countries descendants of mixed families and converts to Judaism form large proportion of Jewish community membership.

Acknowledging this new reality, one could pose a question about the consequences of such processes. Are Jews raised in religiously/ethnically mixed families less identified with the Jewish community? Are converted Jews less or more active in their communities? Is maternal ancestry related to higher religiosity? One of rare studies that looked at these processes is a study of Marlene de Vries⁵ who looked on how the Jewish community in post-war Netherlands becomes tied with a “bond of choice” instead of “bond of fate”. Her studies show that although Jews with maternal ancestry are more often found among members of Orthodox congregations, other forms of Jewish activism are more often chosen by Jews without maternal background (non-halakhic).

¹ Shulamit Reinharz / Sergio Della Pergola: *Jewish intermarriage around the world*. New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers 2009, p. 26-27.

² Reinharz / Pergola: *Jewish intermarriage around the world*, p. 5.

³ Steven Cohen / Jacob Ukeles / Ron Miller: *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*. New York: UJA, 2012, p. 165-191.

⁴ Michał Bilewicz / Adrian Wójcik: Does Identification Predict Community Involvement? Exploring Consequences of Social Identification among the Jewish Minority in Poland. In: *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 20 (2010), 72–79.

⁵ Marlene de Vries: An Enduring Bond? Jews in the Netherlands and Their Ties with Judaism. In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32 (2006), 69–88.

In our study, we tried to ask similar question about the contemporary Jewish community in Poland. We wanted to determine, whether Jews of maternal and paternal ancestry differ from each other – and from those Jews who converted to Judaism without having Jewish ancestry. We aimed at discovering the identifications, worldviews and Jewish-related activism of these three groups.

Based on psychological theory of effort justification⁶, one could expect that converts to Judaism should express higher identification, more satisfaction with being Jewish, and greater activism toward their groups. This would be the effect of initiation procedures that they decided to pass as part of their conversion. Another crucial psychological theory, the social identity theory⁷ proposes that highest levels of ingroup attachment and involvement are expressed by people whose position in a group is rather marginal – such marginal status is threatening their social identity, that can be self-assured only by extensive support for the group to which they belong. Based on that one could expect that people with paternal linkage to Judaism would be even more identifying and active on the sake of Jewish community – because of the lack of acceptance of their Jewishness among some Jewish people (those belonging to the Orthodox congregations).

Psychological theories propose reasoning that seems to contradict with the commonsensical understanding of intermarriage as the potential path to dropout from the Jewish community and the pathway to complete assimilation of the Jewish communities. Psychologists would suggest that the “marginal” ingroup members (such as recent converts or Jews with paternal Jewish ancestry) could become particularly important in the process of maintaining the culture and heritage of the Jewish communities.

Study:

The presented article is based on a survey that was conducted in 2009 by the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland in collaboration with the University of Warsaw. It is one of the very few quantitative studies of Polish Jews.

Main research questions that will be answered by this article are:

- (1) What are the main dimensions of Jewish identity?
- (2) Do they differ in a systematic way between Jews coming from non-mixed and mixed family background?

This article will be structured as follows: A short note about the sampling method used in the study will be given. Then different forms of Jewish identities in Poland will be described and it will be followed by the description of willingness of Jewish community members to engage into Jewish community activities. It will be also analysed whether the fact of coming from a mixed ethnic origin Jewish family influences the strength of Jewish identity as well as their engagement into Jewish community.

Sample:

Due to difficulties in obtaining the representative sample of Jewish community population, a non-probabilistic sampling method was used. We recruited one hundred and fifty participants through e-mail database of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland and among the subscribers of Jewish weekly *Midrasz*. The participants fulfilled the questionnaire individually either in a paper (N = 87) or in internet version (N = 63). The sampling method allowed us to include both the religious and non-religious representatives of the Jewish community. The mean age of participants was 44.60 years. People under 30 years of age made up 20% of the sample, people of more than 60 years of age made up 10% of the sample.

⁶ Elliot Aronson / Judson Mills: The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group. In: *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 59 (1959), 177–181.

⁷ Henri Tajfel: *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations. European Monographs in Social Psychology*. London ; New York: European Association of Experimental Social Psychology by Academic Press, 1978; Naomi Ellemers / Russell Spears / Bertjan Doosje: Self and Social Identity. In: *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53 (2002), 161–186.

Eighty percent of our respondents declared that at least one of their parents was of a Jewish origin. Twenty percent of our respondents refused to declare their parents ethnicity.

The sampling method probably influenced results obtained in the study. Taking into account the specific group that was studied it was highly improbable to create other sampling frame. No central register of Polish Jews exist and that is a prerequisite for random sampling. Thus the respondents' identification and engagement in Jewish community were probably higher than in general population of Polish Jews.

Ancestors' origin:

One of the main aims of the study was to analyse whether there are significant differences between persons coming from families of a mixed vs non-mixed Jewish roots. Among our respondents⁸ the majority declared that only one of their parents was of Jewish origin (72,3%) and 23,7% declared that both their parents were of Jewish origin. Fifty point eight percent of respondents declared that their mother was Jewish, fifty point four percent of respondents declared that their father was Jewish.

Different forms of Jewish identity:

Basing on previous research we have distinguished between two different typologies of Jewish identity. First one was based mainly on the specific content of Jewish identity⁹. The second typology was grounded into social psychology tradition and referred to more general forms of Jewish identity as proposed by social psychology¹⁰.

Contents of Jewish identity:

The Jewish identity may be surely built around different issues. The Jewish auto-identification may refer to biological, religious and cultural issues¹¹. In previous research on identity of Polish Jews it was found that one of the most important issues was the sensitivity to anti-Semitism and Holocaust experience¹². Still, the younger generations of Polish Jews seem to rely their identification on more cultural and religious basis¹³. Basing on the previous research 10 issues related to Jewish identity were selected. They referred to biological, religious and cultural forms of Jewish identity (Table 1). Our participants were asked a question *In your opinion, how important are following things for your Jewish identity?* The scale ranged from 1 ('not at all') to 4 ('very important'). The means for each of the item were calculated.

Item	Mean	St. Dev.	Factor
Language (Hebrew or Yiddish)	2,50	1,04	R
Daily customs	2,67	,95	C
Religion (Judaism)	2,81	1,07	R
Connection with Israel	2,86	1,02	C
Jewish symbolism (Star of David; Menorah)	3,02	,95	C
Knowing other Jews	3,13	,87	C

⁸ Please note that the following numbers refer only to those respondents who declared the ethnic origin of their parents.

⁹ Marius Gudonis: Is Jewish Identity a Matter of Choice? The Case of Young Jews in Contemporary Poland. In: *European Judaism*, 34 (2001), 132–143; Erik Cohen: Jewish Identity Research: A State of the Art. In: *International Journal of Jewish Education Research*, 1 (2010), 7–48.

¹⁰ James Cameron: A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity. In: *Self and Identity*, 3 (2004), 239–262.; Bilewicz and Wójcik: Does Identification Predict Community Involvement?.

¹¹ Erik Cohen / Vivian Klaff: Defining American Jewry From Religious and Ethnic Perspectives: The Transitions to Greater Heterogeneity. In: *Sociology of Religion*, 67 (2006), 415–438; Susan Glenn: In the Blood? Consent, Descent, and the Ironies of Jewish Identity. In: *Jewish Social Studies*, 8 (2002), 139–152.

¹² Barbara Engelking: *Zagłada i Pamięć (Holocaust and Memory)*. Warsaw: IFiS Publishers, 2001, p. 8.; Malgorzata Melchior: Jewish Identity: Between Ascription and Choice. In: *Polish Sociological Review*, 109 (1995), 49–60.; Malgorzata Melchior: Threat of Extermination in Biographical Experience of the Holocaust Survivors. In: *Polish Sociological Review*, 137 (2002), 53–70.

¹³ Gudonis: Is Jewish Identity a Matter of Choice?

Culture (literature, music)	3,36	,81	C
Ethnic Origin	3,37	,83	B
Holocaust experience (own or coming from ancestors)	3,54	,81	C
Sensitivity to Anti-Semitism	3,67	,62	C

Table 1. *In your opinion, how important are following things for your Jewish identity?* Letters C, R, B refer to empirically identified dimensions of Jewish identity obtained in Factor Analysis with Varimax rotation. Letter refer to the factor that loaded primarily the specific item. C refers to *cultural identity*, R refers to *religious identity* and B refers to *biological identity*.

All of the items were evaluated as rather important for Jewish identity. Mean scores exceed the scale's middle point (2,5). The perceived importance of specific items varied significantly. The most important were: sensitivity to Anti-Semitism and Holocaust experience of the family. The issues perceived to be least important were: language and daily customs. Those results confirm previous qualitative research that found that sense of Jewishness among Polish Jews is grounded mainly in Anti-Semitism and Holocaust sensitiveness¹⁴.

The Factor PCA Analysis with Varimax rotation was also performed in order to check how the specific items are classified and what were the major dimensions of Jewish identity perceived by our respondents. The three factors solutions was obtained (see: Table 1). The first major factor (Eigenvalue = 3,22) was loaded primarily by 7 items related to cultural practices and by connection to Israel. The second factor (Eigenvalue = 1,68) was loaded mainly by two items referring to religious practices and to perceived importance of language. The third factor (Eigenvalue = 1,02) was loaded primarily by single item referring to ethnic origin. It was thus showed that the sense of Jewishness may be perceived in three different ways – referring to cultural (first factor), religious (second factor) and biological categories.

Forms of Jewish identity:

A broader framework of general social identity was also used in the study. One of the most influential models of social identity in socio-psychological research was proposed by James Cameron¹⁵. It distinguishes between three different dimensions of social identity:

- Ties - the extent to which 'group members feel 'stuck to,' or part of, particular social groups
- Centrality - the subjective importance of the group to self-definition
- Ingroup Affect - specific emotions (i.e., being glad or regretful) that arise from group membership

The construct and the measure of social identity proposed by Cameron proved to be useful and reliable in a series of follow-up studies¹⁶.

In the described study a 12-item scale adapted from original work of Cameron was used. Our participants were asked whether they agree with following statements (see Table 2). The scale ranged from 1 ('not at all') to 5 ('totally agree'). The means for each of the item were calculated.

Item	Mean	St. Dev.
<i>Ties – general score</i>	3,77	
I have a lot in common with other Jews.	3,76	1,07

¹⁴ Melchior: Jewish Identity: Between Ascription and Choice.

¹⁵ Cameron: A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity.

¹⁶ Patricia Obst / Katherine White: Three-Dimensional Strength of Identification Across Group Memberships: A Confirmatory Factor Analysis'. In: *Self and Identity*, 4 (2005), 69–80.; Patricia L. Obst / Katherine M. White: An Exploration of the Interplay between Psychological Sense of Community, Social Identification and Salience'. In: *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 15 (2005), 127–135; Elvira Cicognani: Social Participation, Sense of Community and Social Well Being: A Study on American, Italian and Iranian University Students. In: *Social Indicators Research*, 89 (2008), 97–112.

I feel strong ties to other Jews.	4,05	1,07
I find it difficult to form a bond with other Jews ^R .	2,49	1,21
I don't feel a sense of being "connected" with other Jews ^R .	1,83	1,06
<i>Centrality – general score</i>	4,09	
Overall, being a Jew has very little to do with how I feel about myself ^R .	2,17	1,38
The fact that I am a Jew rarely enters my mind ^R .	1,94	1,19
Being a Jew is an important reflection of who I am.	4,04	1,16
In my everyday life, I often think about what it means to be a Jew.	4,44	,90
<i>Ingroup Affect – general score</i>	4,32	
In general, I'm glad to be a Jew.	4,27	,95
I often regret that I am a Jew ^R .	1,56	1,03
I don't feel good about being a Jew ^R .	1,47	,91
In general, I feel good about being a Jew.	4,10	1,04

Table 2. Forms of Jewish identity. Letter R stands for reverse coding of the item. Means of three dimensions were computed with reverse coding of negatively formulated items taken into account. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis confirmed that the three-dimensional structure of the scale is reproduced by the data and that the scale is a reliable tool for analysing the identity of Jewish community in Poland¹⁷.

It is worth to emphasize that all the major dimensions of Jewish identity were assessed highly by our participants. Mean scores for every of three theoretical dimensions exceeded the middle point of the scale (3). That means that respondents feel highly identified with Jewish community. That is not surprising when taking into account the way that the sampling method favoured persons with strong Jewish identity. Still, there was a strong variability between different dimensions of identity. The identification of our respondents seems to be based mainly on positive affect related to their Jewish identity. Their Jewish identity seems to be also central for their self-image. The mean centrality score is 4,09 highly above the middle point scale. The lowest score was achieved for the ties dimensions. Thus our respondents felt generally positive about their Jewishness, they perceived it as central for their identity but at the same time their perceived similarity to other Polish Jews was relatively smaller.

Community engagement

The strength and importance of identity is only one of the factors that predict whether the social group will survive in broader social context. The other is members' engagement into common group's activities. As a part of the study the behavioural intentions related with Jewish community were analysed. Our respondents were asked what their plans are for future related to their Jewish identity. The scale ranged from 1 ('not at all') to 5 ('totally agree'). The means for each of the item were calculated.

Item	Mean	St. Dev.	Factor
emigrate to Israel	2,41	1,13	RG
have Jewish wedding	3,18	1,43	RG
I wish my children would have a Jewish wedding	3,44	1,23	RG
find a Jewish partner	3,52	1,29	RG
I wish my children would go to a Jewish school	3,54	1,27	RG
participate more often in religious ceremonies	3,55	1,37	RG
be buried at the Jewish cemetery	3,82	1,29	RG

¹⁷ Bilewicz and Wójcik: Does Identification Predict Community Involvement?.

participate more often in Jewish secular practices 4,30 ,89 S

Table 3. *What are your future plans related to your Jewish identity? Would you like to ...?* Letters S, RG refer to empirically identified dimensions of Jewish identity obtained in Factory Analysis with Varimax rotation. Letter refer to the factor that loaded primarily the specific item. RG refers to *religious and group sustaining practices*, S refers to *secular practices*.

It is worth to notice that once again nearly all of the items were evaluated rather high. The middle point of the scale was three and only one item scored below that level.

The Factor PCA Analysis with Varimax rotation was also performed in order to check how the specific items are classified and what are the major types of community engagement as perceived by our respondents. The two factors solutions was obtained (see: Table 3). The first major factor (Eigenvalue = 4,50) was loaded primarily by 7 items related to both religious and group sustaining practices. The second factor (Eigenvalue = 1,01) was loaded mainly by single item referring to secular practices. It was thus showed that the planned engagement into Jewish community may be divided into two major categories: First of them is related to religious and group sustaining practices, second was related to secular practices related to their Jewish identity.

The majority of the items loaded on first major factor. That means that the differentiation between forms of engagement into Jewish community is not highly pronounced. With one exception the engagement into Jewish community takes “all or nothing” approach. Being engaged into religious practices enhances at the same time the willingness to immigrate to Israel, having Jewish wedding and sending children to Jewish school.

Does a mixed Jewish origin matter?

It was already shown that the Polish Jews identify highly with their ingroup. The remaining question was whether fact of being brought up in a family with a mixed-origin influences the strength of identity and the declared willingness to engage into Jewish community. According to theoretical introduction it was predicted that respondents with mixed-origin background should identify and engage stronger into Jewish community. Their identity cannot be based merely on ethnic-origin and thus they have to ground it on other premises.

The series of regression analyses was performed to check whether this hypothesis was right. Table 4 shows the summary of the analysis. Having Jewish mother and/or Jewish father were introduced into the regression equations as separate factors. We hypothesised that because of the Halakha having a Jewish mother may influence the Jewish identity of our respondents more strongly.

	Cultural identity	Religious identity	Biological Identity	Ties	Centrality	Affect	General engagement	Secular Engagement
Father origin	-,06	,02	,16*	,05	-,05	-,12	-,07	-,17**
Mother origin	,08	-,08	,25**	,03	-,04	,05	-,01	-,01
R ²	,01	,01	,09	,00	,00	,02	,01	,03

Table 4. *Summary of the effects of having Jewish father or Jewish mother on identity and willingness to engage into Jewish community.* The table contains standardised coefficients for regression equation.

* p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01

The results of the regression analysis show that having a mother or a father of a Jewish origin influences only marginally the strength of Jewish identity. Most of the results showed that the predictive power of having a Jewish father or mother was low and insignificant. Two exceptions were biological identity and secular engagement. Both having a Jewish mother or Jewish father influenced the perceived importance of ethnic origin as a base for Jewish identity. Still, having a Jewish father was related with lower willingness to engage into secular practices of Jewish community.

We checked also whether having one vs two parents of Jewish origin influenced different forms of Jewish identity as well as willingness to engage into Jewish community activities we have repeated previous analyses. But this time the only predictor entered into the regression equation was a dummy variable for coming from a mixed origin (one Jewish parent only) vs non-mixed origin family (two Jewish parents). The variable was coded 1 for one Jewish parent and 2 for two Jewish parents. The summary results are in Table 5.

	Cultural identity	Religious identity	Biological Identity	Ties	Centrality	Affect	General engagement	Secular Engagement
No. of parents	,05	,08	,03	,05	-,19†	-,24*	-,26*	-,06
R ²	,00	,01	,00	,00	,04	,06	,07	,00

Table 5. *Summary of the effects of different types of family origin on identity and willingness to engage into Jewish community.* The table contains standardised coefficients for regression equation.

† p < 0,01; * p < 0,05

The respondents from mixed vs non-mixed Jewish families did not differ significantly in cultural, religious and biological identity. Levels of willingness to engage in secular practices of Jewish community as well as the ties subscale of identity were also comparable between two groups. However, respondents who were coming from non-mixed Jewish family showed significantly lower levels of centrality and affect subscale. At the same time they also declared lower willingness to engage into Jewish community activities. Thus our introductory hypothesis was confirmed. Respondents coming from a Jewish families with a mixed origin expressed relatively higher levels of Jewish identity. They perceived it as something more central to their personality and they also assessed more positively their feeling about being a Jew. They also assess their willingness to engage into Jewish community as higher.

Summary:

The presented study suggests that the pure fact of having mixed-origin family background is not endangering for the Jewish community in Poland. Contrary to that, Jews with a mixed family origin identify more strongly with their in-group. They also tend to engage more into Jewish community activities. The observed revival of Jewish life and community in Poland after 1989 may therefore be explained by socio-psychological factors that motivate members of Jewish community to act more actively for the sake of its preservation. Many of those actions were started by people who had a mixed family background and who choose to actively preserve their Jewishness. Probably in the nearest future this state of things will continue. The Jewish community in Poland is relatively small and the rate of inter-marriages is high. Still, our research suggest that this fact does not mean that the Jewish community will vanish in Poland and that its members will forget about their roots. On the contrary, the results suggest that the community will be preserved and that its members will create new Jewish identity in a more reflexive way. Coming from a mixed ethnic family means that a person needs to create his or her identity from a scratch. It is a matter of choice and not of fate. Thus probably new forms of Jewish life will arise but for sure the Jewish community in Poland will not perish.

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Abstract:

The article is based on the first quantitative survey of the Jewish community in post-War Poland that was performed in 2009. The study examined what dimensions (biological, cultural, religious) are important for Polish Jews in creating their sense of identity. It also explores whether their Jewish identity is important for them, whether they feel positively about this and connected to other members of Jewish community in Poland. We also analyse the influence of socio-demographical background of the respondent on their Jewish identity. In line with theoretical expectations resulting from the Social Identity Theory, persons who were raised in non-mixed families declared lower levels of specific aspects of Jewish identity. The difference was especially noticeable in relation to biological identity but it was also significant with regard to the centrality and the positive emotions related with being Jewish. The mixed vs. no-mixed family background predicted also significantly different forms of engagement in the Jewish community. The respondents coming from mixed families declared generally higher level of willingness to engage into Jewish community.