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Kosdon, Sari M.; Keller, Alex; Berry, Jack W.; Stiver, David J.; Whiteford, Kelly; O'Connor, Lynn E.

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The Experience of Being Jewish: Living with Antisemitism.

Sari M. Kosdon

The Wright Institute, Berkeley, Canadá

skosdon@wi.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9871-3460>

Alex Keller

The Wright Institute, Berkeley, Canadá

Akeller@wi.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7857-1175>

Jack W. Berry

Samford University, Birmingham, Albania

jwberry@samford.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4338-2582>

David J. Stiver

Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Canadá

dstiver@gtu.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5983-6978>

Kelly Whiteford

The Wright Institute, Berkeley, Canadá

kwhiteford@wi.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3357-381X>

Lynn E. O'Connor

The Wright Institute, Berkeley, Canadá

loconnor@wi.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9173-6392>

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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 unsafe when identifying as Jewish.

KEYWORDS: ethnicity, antisemitism, culture.

RESUMEN:

En un estudio online y anónimo de 242 participantes identificados como judíos (71 hombres, 163 mujeres, 8 otros; media de edad = 37,8 años) que viven en comunidades étnicamente diversas, encontramos niveles de antisemitismo significativamente asociados con la depresión, la propensión a la culpa del sobreviviente y el odio a sí mismo. La participación en la comunidad judía se asoció significativamente con la satisfacción con la vida, incluso cuando se ajusta a los efectos de la discriminación. Una sub muestra de 124 personas respondió a preguntas abiertas con narrativas. El treinta por ciento indicó sentirse inseguro al identificarse como judío.

PALABRAS CLAVE: etnia, antisemitismo, cultura.

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, was 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.

Contemporary antisemitism as a global phenomenon has been formally studied and acknowledged by the Anti-Defamation League who estimated that one billion people hold antisemitic views. In their 2014 survey of 53,100 people in 101 countries, it was revealed that 35 % failed to have heard of the Holocaust, and 41 % believed that Jews were more loyal to Israel than their own country (Anti-Defamation League, 2014).

With antisemitism at the highest levels since WWII it may be surprising that it has been relatively ignored in multicultural literature (Fischer & Moradi, 2001; Schlosser, 2006; Weinstein & Jackson, 2010). This lack of discourse may perpetuate the notion that antisemitism is not a problem (Rubin, 2017). Some have asserted that this silence is due to Jewish oppression not fitting the established analyses of racism and economic discrimination (Altman, Inman, Fine, Ritter & Howard, 2010). That is, multiculturalism has been mainly synonymous with "people of color" (Galchinsky, 1994), and Jews in the U.S. have been typically categorized as White (Altman et al., 2010; Greenberg, 2013; Singer, 2008).

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 as white, it ironically places Jews in the same category as their White oppressors who previously saw them as a non-White other (Langman, 1995).

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

METHOD

This anonymous mixed method online study of antisemitism surveyed 242 Jewish-identified participants 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.

Two instruments measuring levels of antisemitism were included; the Jewish Ethnic Experience Scale (JEES; Kosdon, O'Connor, & Berry, 2019) developed for this study and the Antisemitism Related Stress Inventory (ARSI; Rosen, Kuczynski, & Kanter, 2018). Widely used and validated measures of depression, life satisfaction, the Big Five personality factors, and levels of empathy-based guilt were included. A subsample of 122 participants wrote narrative responses to open-ended questions about their personal experiences as Jews.

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. This suggested that active engagement with other Jews modified the negative impact of discrimination. Engagement in the Jewish community also appeared to act as a protective factor which is consistent with the literature on other ethnic minorities. For example, a study of American Indian/ Native Alaska Communities (AIAN) indicated that while discrimination was associated with depression, participation in traditional practices buffered the negative impact (Whitbeck et al., 2004).

Narrative responses to open-ended questions indicated 62% (72 people) of the subsample of 122 participants experienced fear, 48% (57 people) verbal harassment and .08% (10 people) had been met with physical violence. In addition, a smaller number reported being excluded from social situations. Narratives suggested that Jews commonly evaluate situations for signs of danger and may conceal their Jewish identity depending on their location, the political environment, and familiarity with the people with whom they're interacting. As expected, those who had felt endangered because of their Jewish identity demonstrated higher levels of depression and self-hate, indicating internalized antisemitism. Despite the negative impact of antisemitism, 89% (109 people) described experiencing pride in relation to either their culture and or religion.

We also found that the shadow of the Holocaust lingers. Forty-two percent (51) of the narratives mentioned the Holocaust. We infer that higher levels of survivor guilt proneness may relate to parents, grandparents or close community members literally surviving when loved ones were killed by the Nazis. The results demonstrating the significant correlation between concealing one's identity and survivor guilt proneness further supports this inference. While not all participants were Holocaust descendants, higher levels of survivor guilt may point to the potential potency of intergenerational trauma. When asked how they first heard about antisemitism, one participant responded: "I learned about it when I heard my parents talk about fleeing from different parts of Europe." Another reported that she knew about antisemitism because "it was embedded in [her] family history." These references to family history are consistent with literature describing how trauma may be passed from generation to generation. Adult children and grandchildren may find themselves living out aspects of the original trauma (Braga, Mello & Fiks, 2012; De Mendelssohn, 2008; Volkan, 2001). For example, research has demonstrated that some children of Holocaust survivors feel pressure to console their parents, minimize their needs, or replace those family members that were lost (Felsen, 1998; Marom, 2010). Controlled studies have also confirmed a higher level of childhood trauma, increased vulnerability to PTSD, psychological distress, and other psychiatric disorders amongst children of Holocaust survivors (Scharf, 2007; Sorscher & Cohen, 1997; Yehuda et al., 2000; Yehuda et al., 1998; Yehuda, Halligan, Grossman, 2001).

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

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that antisemitism continues to negatively impact the psychological life of Jews. In particular, Jews experience survivor guilt proneness, self-hatred, neuroticism and depression. Despite evidence of psychological distress and the rise of antisemitism, Jews are resilient in that they take pride in their culture and or religion. In fact, the more involved that they are in the Jewish community the more satisfied they report being with their life.

While less is known about current antisemitism, survivor guilt and psychopathology, the results of this study are consistent with the literature on empathy-based guilt and Holocaust survivors (Hirsch, 2004). Research on the Holocaust indicates that while survivors demonstrate tremendous resilience and coping skills, they also experienced a wide range of negative psychological symptoms including denial, agitation, anxiety, depression, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, psychic numbing, and survivor's guilt (Barocas & Barocas, 1980; Eitinger & Strom, 1973; Neiderland, 1968, 1981). Neiderland (1968) first identified these collective symptoms as 'survivor syndrome' or survivor guilt. This type of guilt, often under the surface of conscious awareness, is based on empathy and compassion for the suffering of others. Survivor guilt has been described as the prosocial emotion people tend to feel when they believe that their success will harm others, simply by comparison (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, & Gilbert, 2002). Exploring the prevalence of survivor guilt amongst the second generation, Hirsch (2003) discovered that children of survivors exhibited higher levels of survivor guilt when compared to a group of non-Jewish European Americans. The literature on survivor guilt explains that guilt can become pathogenic when people erroneously believe they are the source of other people's problems or that they have the ability to relieve someone else of their difficulties. Studies point to an association between survivor-guilt proneness, depression, and self-hate (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson, 1997).

A high drop-out rate may indicate a potentially biased sample. Many of the participants responded to the survey on a smart phone or other handheld device, making the survey appear longer than it appeared on a computer and this may have discouraged participants from completing the survey. In addition, it is likely that the study attracted participants who were more involved in the Jewish community, while failing to include less affiliated Jews, leading to a somewhat biased sample. Despite these limitations, this study seems to reflect the negative impact that emerging nationalism and tribalism may be having on Jews, along with other ethnic and religious minorities.

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