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## Born of our fathers : patrilineal descent, Jewish identity, and the development of self

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Liz Sosland  
Born of Our Fathers:  
Patrilineal Decent, Jewish  
Identity, and the  
Development of Self

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the ways in which disagreement within the American Jewish community regarding the legitimacy of patrilineal descent impacts the identity development of Jewish children born of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. Twelve participants who self-identify as Jewish, were born to Jewish fathers, and cannot trace their Jewish descent through matrilineal bloodlines were interviewed for this qualitative, exploratory study. Data was gathered about the ways in which this population is internally impacted by this community disagreement, specifically in regard to their development, understanding, and maintenance of self.

Findings of this study indicate that there is a strong connection between the amount and quality of selfobject experiences participants could access and the quality of each individual's Jewish identity. Those with greater selfobject access reported their Jewish identities to be of greater importance to them, and their narratives indicated greater connection to that identity. When participants did not have access to successful selfobject experiences, they appeared to be more negatively impacted by the patrilineal descent debate.

The types of selfobject experiences that participants accessed reached beyond the three types delineated in self-psychology, ultimately suggesting that participants in this

study have unique selfobject needs that were not included in Kohut's original theory that focused heavily on the experiences of the majority population.

BORN OF OUR FATHERS:  
PATRILINEAL DECENT, JEWISH IDENTITY,  
AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2008

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This project is dedicated to my dad, whose Jewish soul and the beauty it carried, guides these questions.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore how disagreement within the American Jewish community regarding the legitimacy of patrilineal descent impacts the identity development of Jewish children born of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers.

Jewish law indicates that in order for a person to be born Jewish, a child must be able to trace his/her Jewish bloodline through his/her mother's ancestry (Benvenuto, 2004). While this view differs among varied denominations of Judaism, it is one that remains powerfully controversial within the Jewish community. In the United States, the Reconstructionist and Reform movements currently acknowledge the validity of patrilineal Jewish descent; however, their doing so has created enormous disagreement within the Jewish community and confusion among Jews of patrilineal descent regarding the continuity and legitimacy of their Jewish identity.

While the history of this question can be traced back thousands of years, the poignancy of the issue is garnering increasing importance in contemporary society. Interfaith marriages are on the rise in the United States and more and more children are being born of interfaith partnerships between Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers (Bleicher, 1999). Many of these children are being raised Jewish, despite the tenets of traditional Jewish law (Bleicher, 1999), as well as the likelihood that controversy over the legitimacy of their identities will continue passionately within Jewish discourse for years

to come. Consequently, these children are traversing different contexts in which the credibility of their Jewish identity, and ultimately themselves, may possibly face ongoing redefinition. Very little research exists exploring the psychological and developmental impact of this negotiation on Jewish children of non-Jewish mothers; therefore clinical social workers are likely counseling this population without substantial research on their needs or experiences. This study seeks to increase the understanding of the internal impact of these external, social experiences in an effort to explore the relationship that these issues have on one's identity development and emergence of a cohesive self. Ultimately this research will enable clinicians, clergy, and other professionals to provide more relevant support for this population with sensitivity to the unique issues its members are facing.

Very little empirical research has been conducted with a focus on this population. One study was completed by McCleary (1995), and though it did not include a statistically significant sample, it did offer some exploration of the experiences of children within the context of interfaith partnerships between Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. This study found that the Jewish children involved in the research had formed strong Jewish identities as members of synagogues that were particularly welcoming of mixed married couples. The research also reported that the children viewed their experiences growing up in interfaith households positively, and that they were able to integrate the varied religious and cultural experiences of their parents cohesively. McCleary attributed this outcome to the parents' consideration for, and participation in, each other's traditions. While this study provided a small amount of data about the experiences of children raised in interfaith households, a search of the literature



revealed no further studies on this topic. Research has been conducted on the general topic of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, specifically on the dynamics of the couple relationship and on issues related to parenting (Bleicher, 1999; Judd, 1990; Talpiyot, 1994). This study seeks to expand the scope of prior research to better understand the experiences, and ultimately the clinical needs, of this specific population.

I engaged this project by conducting a qualitative, exploratory study in which a sample of twelve adult children who self-identify as Jewish, were born to Jewish fathers, and cannot trace their Jewish descent through matrilineal bloodlines were interviewed to determine the ways in which their identity development and sense of self has been impacted by their patrilineal Jewish descent. I gathered a convenience sample of study participants in the Boston area via snowball sampling. Additionally, I distributed a bulletin via the email list-serv of Congregation Dorshei Tzedek, a local Reconstructionist synagogue, to introduce myself and determine if any of their members were interested in participating in my study. I then conducted interviews to garner and analyze relevant data.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review outlines existing research related to the question of how disagreement regarding the legitimacy of patrilineal descent impacts the identity development of Jewish children born of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. The first section provides background information by focusing on the historical context of the debate about matrilineal versus patrilineal descent in Judaism. The second section explores the increase in interfaith marriages among Jewish men and non-Jewish women, and evaluates the implications of these partnerships within the context of parenting. The third section examines theories related to Jewish identity development, and looks into the differences in conceptions of Jewish identity as defined by ethnic, cultural and religious parameters. The fourth section explores psychological theory related to individual development as posited by several key psychoanalytic theorists. The last section emphasizes the contributions that Heinz Kohut made to individual development theory with the formulation of self-psychology. His self-psychological conception of the cohesive self will then be used as a theoretical framework within which this study was framed.

#### *Historical Context of Debate Over Descent*

When examining the origins of the debate over Jewish descent, it has been noted that among the earliest biblical patriarchs and kings, fathers were responsible for

transmitting the inheritance of a Jewish identity to their children (Benvenuto, 2004). In biblical teachings it is understood that the covenant made between God and Abraham is one that is passed down to Abraham's descendents without concern for matrilineal bloodlines, thereby supporting the existence of Jewish patrilineal descent (Benvenuto, 2004).

However, approximately two thousand years ago when rabbis codified Jewish law through the writing of the *Mishnah*<sup>1</sup>, matrilineal descent was clearly adopted as the only way in which Jewish descent could be transmitted from generation to generation (Benvenuto, 2004). It is unclear what compelled the defining of this principle, what purpose it served, or the context out of which it arose; however, various hypotheses exist. One hypothesis indicates that matrilineal descent was an attempt to alleviate some of the suffering experienced by Jewish women raped by Roman soldiers. While the horror of these experiences could not be erased, some believe that the principle of matrilineal descent provided comfort to female survivors in that it assured the children born of these assaults would be accepted as Jews (Cohen, 1999).

Another hypothesis suggests that Jews implemented matrilineal descent principles to take on Roman customs and align with Roman law, which supported matrilineal descent at that time; however, it is unclear why Jews would choose to model such important social and religious code after a people they regarded as oppressive. Still other hypotheses point to general prohibition against intermarriage and bestiality as the motivating force behind implementing matrilineal descent (Cohen, 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> The *Mishnah* is a six volume text, compiled in A.D. 200 that consists of a collection of interpretations of the Jewish scriptures. It encompasses Jewish legal code, as well as guidance and commentary on ethical, civil, religious, and personal issues for Jews (Soloman, 1996).

While these hypotheses are broad in their reach, none provide conclusive evidence as to why this became the only legitimate way in which Jewish ancestry is perpetuated (Cohen, 1999). It stands today that according to Jewish law or *halakhah*, a person is Jewish only when his/her mother's ancestry begets his/her Jewish identity, or if he/she converts under the guidance of a rabbi.

Within Orthodox and Conservative denominations, adherence to Jewish law continues to require the necessity of matrilineal descent in forming Jewish status, however, other branches of Judaism have called this principle into question. In 1983, the Reform movement ruled that they will no longer honor only matrilineal descent, but will acknowledge that children who can trace their Jewish ancestry through either their mother's or father's lineage, and are raised within a Jewish home, can be considered Jewish (Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1983, ¶ 19). The official ruling by the Reform movement's governing body declares that,

the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent. This presumption of the Jewish status of the offspring of any mixed marriage is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people. The performance of these *mitzvot*<sup>2</sup> serves to commit those who participate in them, both parent and child, to Jewish life (Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1983).

While this ruling provided clarity for some who were uncertain about issues of descent, it created enormous disagreement that continues to be palpable within the Jewish community today.

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<sup>2</sup> *Mitzvot* are defined as commandment[s] or “deeds that are pleasing in the sight of G-d” (Kertzer, 1995, p.71).

### *Current Controversy*

Since the Reform movement's passage of the patrilineal descent ruling, disagreement over the impact of this policy has flourished among those in favor of and against the affirmation of patrilineal descent. Some authors opposed to legitimizing patrilineal descent have noted fears regarding the sociological impact and religious consequences of such efforts (Roth, 2001; Shiffman, 2001). Sociologically, some fear that two separate Jewish communities will emerge, therefore dividing (and perhaps ultimately weakening) the Jewish population (Roth, 2001). Those who do not accept patrilineal descent will not recognize the Jewish identity of children with non-Jewish mothers. Others who do accept patrilineal descent will engage this population as Jews in their communities. Roth (2001) explains that,

the problem turns out to be not merely a single event, namely, a decision affirming the principle of patrilineality, but a process moving towards the creation of a new category of Jew who perceives himself as such but whose Jewish credentials are not acknowledged by the traditional Jewish community (p. 71).

Roth goes on to argue that such a division within the Jewish community would dissolve the cohesion of the Jewish community and therefore, threaten the survival of the Jewish people. Some scholars who agree with Roth about the severity of this threat have equated the Reform movement's ruling with the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem which is deemed the darkest, most tragic and most crisis-ridden period of Jewish history (Schiffman, 2001).

Others who refute the validity of patrilineal descent do so from a religious basis, referring to its conflict with Jewish law. Those who understand Jewish law, or *halakhah*, to be binding believe that its principles, laws and ordinances came from God and have allowed for the regulation and survival of the daily lives and religious practices of Jews

since biblical times. Therefore, to disavow its tenets is to commit a grave moral tragedy that harms oneself as well as the Jewish people. Validating patrilineal descent may then have a considerable impact on the Jewish community's integrity and preservation (Goldberg, 1985).

However, others have expressed support for the Reform movement's ruling by offering additional sociological and religious critiques, as well as feminist analyses of the need to expand definitions of Jewish heritage beyond matrilineal lineage (Benvenuto, 2004). In response to sociological concerns such as those presented by Roth, one scholar in particular writes that, "Far from weakening the Jewish community, emancipating the Jewish father by conferring upon him the right of transmitting his Jewish identity to his children... will increase our numbers and thus add strength to our Jewish survival potential" (Rosmarin, 1985). Other scholars add to this sentiment, noting that denying patrilineal descent stigmatizes non-Jewish women by placing a requirement on them that is not necessary for men to uphold. By virtue of this requirement, it is argued that non-Jewish women and their children are denied literal and metaphorical entrance into Jewish spaces (Benvenuto, 2004). It is also claimed that significant support for patrilineal lineage exists within Judaism, such as in issues pertaining to the priesthood. In discussing this very issue, Alexander Schindler (1995) writes,

Why should a movement that from its birth hour insisted on the full equality of men and women in religious life, unquestioningly accept the principle that Jewish lineage is valid through the maternal line alone? Whether one is a *cohen*<sup>3</sup> or a

---

<sup>3</sup> A *cohen* is a person who belongs to the priestly Levi tribe, and who is a descendent of Aaron. Ritual privileges are often granted to *cohen*s in synagogue services (Cohen, 2008).

*levi*<sup>4</sup> depends on the father's priestly claim, not the mother's. Well, if the status is good enough to bequeath the priestly status, why isn't he good enough to bequeath Jewishness?

Furthermore, it is argued that the idea that patrilineal descent threatens the survival of the Jewish people is unfounded. Were patrilineal descent to be universally supported across all denominations of Judaism, the population of Jews would, in fact, exponentially rise (Benevenuto, 2001).

Some religious scholars who represent more progressive sects of Judaism also argue against the principle that *halakhah* is an immutable system, and instead note the variety of ways in which it has been reinterpreted and augmented over the course of time. Through this lens, patrilineal descent is seen as an advancement in the interpretation of Jewish law, rather than a disavowing of its primacy in upholding the Jewish faith (Sigal, 1985).

#### *Impact of Interfaith Marriages/Partnerships*

In the 1950s it was estimated that approximately five percent of Jews in the United States had non-Jewish partners. Forty years later that percentage rate climbed significantly, applying to approximately fifty two percent of the Jewish population of the U.S. (Talpiyot, 1994). Some attribute earlier rates of intermarriage to assimilation, wherein Jews used marriage as a means of joining the majority culture and diminishing the likelihood that they would be targets of discrimination (Leher, 2005).

However, in recent years, increases in the rates of intermarriage appear to be attributed primarily to the social structure of society in which Jews and Christians are

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<sup>4</sup> A *levi* is a non-*cohen* descendent of the Levi tribe of Israel, and according to Jewish law, a *levi* possesses status secondary to the priest (Levite, 2008).

brought together more intimately and more regularly than at any other historical point in Jewish or United States history (Leher, 2005). This trend has been credited to changes in basic social norms, largely shaped by various liberation movements of the twentieth century including the civil rights movement and the feminist movement, and later via heightened discourse on multiculturalism, wherein previously rigid social structures instituted to separate different segments of the population became less prominent (Talpiyot, 1994). While some of the more traditional subsets of the Jewish community still remain somewhat separate from the majority culture of the U.S. in an effort to preserve and maintain Jewish ritual, practice, and community, many less observant Jews have become part of this more integrated social environment, and no longer exist separately from the remainder of the population (Leher, 2005).

This decrease in separation between many Jews and non-Jews has contributed to an increase in interfaith partnerships. These partnerships are deemed acceptable within the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, and are seen to be reflective of an intention to be inclusive of diversity in an effort to strengthen and expand the community (Leher, 2005). The Conservative movement does not support intermarriage; however, it has expressly stated an intention to reach out to intermarried couples to bring them closer to Judaism in an effort to increase the likelihood that the couple will raise its children as Jews (United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, 2002). However, within the Orthodox community, such practices are seen as threatening to Jewish law and the survival and maintenance of the Jewish community (Leher, 2005).

One of the primary points of controversy that has evolved from debates over intermarriage has to do with the identity and well-being of children born of interfaith



partnerships. For centuries, it was thought necessary for Jews to partner with other Jews in order to provide an adequate Jewish education and upbringing for their offspring. Some argue that this principle currently remains just as critical, if not more, as society becomes more integrated, and the Jewish home is therefore increasingly important in its responsibility to shape the identities of Jewish children. It is assumed by some that a non-Jewish mother cannot contribute to the shaping of a Jewish home for her children, and therefore, children of interfaith partnerships will be less educated in a Jewish way of life (Talpiyot, 1994).

In addition to concerns about child rearing and education, many have also critiqued intermarriage for placing children in an unavoidable psychological and social experience of marginality. However, studies on the well-being of these offspring indicate that such a perception is actually not grounded in existing research. Experiences of alienation, anxiety, or lower self-esteem were proven no different between children of intermarriage and their peers born of intrafaith marriages (Yogev, 1983). While these studies have demonstrated that psychological and social experiences of children of intermarriage are not significantly different from the mainstream, they did not explicitly explore the impact that disagreement about patrilineal descent may have on a child's experiences of marginality. Further research is needed to explore the connection between descent and experiences of marginality.

More recent research has supported these previous studies and gone even further to reveal that children of interfaith marriage have stronger cultural identities than children of intrafaith marriages, the establishment of which have been seen to be predictive factors in the development of psychological wellbeing, specifically in relation to increased

coping skills, feelings of belonging, sense of personal strength, optimism, and self-acceptance (Leher, 2004). What specifically comprises cultural identity in this equation is not specified in these studies, and further investigation of this factor may generate greater insight into this experience. While this research is generally informative about children of intermarriage, it fails to specify the exact configurations of the families involved in the study.

Research has consistently shown that cultural and religious identification is associated with increased feelings of “belonging, self-acceptance, and optimism” (Leher, 2004). However, the nature of identification for individuals whose status within a particular religious or cultural group has been debated may be more complex, and consequently lead to different outcomes. It has been found that “identification with one’s ethnic group may be more important than group membership per se in understanding the psychological role of ethnicity” (Phinney, 1996, p. 923). The distinction Phinney makes between status in a cultural group and one’s internal sense of identification with a group is important as it implies that group status, or lack thereof, may not serve as a predictive factor in psychological well-being among this subset of the Jewish population. Such a conclusion requires further exploration to definitively determine its application to this particular population.

#### *Theories and Complexities Related to Jewish Identity Development*

Jewish identity is a complex topic that is rich and diverse in its definition and the various factors perceived to be most critical in shaping that definition. One universally accepted definition of Jewish identity does not exist, and some scholars have even argued that Jewish identity cannot, in fact, be defined as it proves too elusive and too varied a

concept (Buber, 1996). However, the difficulty of crafting a universal definition of identity has certainly not prevented theorists from trying to do so, particularly within the the United States, where Jews represent an increasingly more heterogeneous population than they have historically comprised in other parts of the world (Linzer, 1996). This heterogeneity has emerged amidst an increasingly multicultural context, where the historical Jewish experience of being defined by social marginalization and exclusion has become less the case in many geographic areas. While Jewish identity was once defined by both Jews and non-Jews according to their isolation and persecution from the larger community, such social factors have changed over the past several decades, therefore making Jewish identity increasingly difficult to define (Gordis, 1995).

However, some theorists are engaged in an attempt to define and understand Jewish identity, encapsulating it as either a religion, ethnicity, and/or a culture. While a great range of experience, practice, and debate may exist within these categories, they are nevertheless seen as conceptual foundations to Jewish identity (Kirsch, 2001). Those who feel that Jewish identity is defined by religion point to the importance of prayer, religious study, and incorporating Jewish spiritual practice into one's life in order to explain what constitutes Jewish identity.

Others who understand Jewish identity to be a cultural concept feel that it is comprised of an appreciation of, and identification with, Jewish teachings, art, ideas and moral principles (Kertzer, 1993). This cultural association is seen to have developed through the shared history of Jews, the shared languages, and as noted by Kertzer, "above all else, a sense of common destiny" (1993, p. 7).

Some believe that Jewish identity is an ethnic concept, defining Jews not by their religiosity or cultural affiliations, but by the fact that they are descendents of Jews, and therefore, part of the Jewish people. Their ethnic lineage, in this case, provides the defining feature of Jewish identity (Kertzer, 1993). Some scholars argue that such ethnicity carries a significant amount of psychological importance. Phinney (1996) notes that particular aspects of ethnic identity, such as “the cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors that distinguish ethnic groups; the subjective sense of ethnic group membership that is held by group members; and the experiences associated with minority status, including powerlessness, discrimination and prejudices” (p. 919) define the psychological importance of ethnic identity.

Other scholars emphasize the importance of context, pointing to social and historical influences that have shaped the development of Jewish identity. This thinking is closely related to the arguments made by those emphasizing the importance of ethnicity in the establishment of Jewish identity. Exploring experiences of distinctness, persecution, and group membership through the examination of historical experiences such as the Enlightenment, the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel, this understanding closely aligns with the writing of Phinney (1996) and others on ethnicity as a primary factor in Jewish identity creation (Meyer, 1990). While the psychological and social factors noted by Phinney, as well as the historical events noted by Meyer may likely hold particular meaning for Jews based on the longstanding history of persecution and marginalization, further research of the particular psychological impact of ethnic identity on Jews with non-Jewish mothers has not been conducted.

However, some researchers deny the universal importance of historical context or ethnic identity in the development of Jewish identity. In accordance with their understanding that Jewish identity is more amorphous than the preceding categories allow, these theorists have attempted to understand Jewish identity by exploring the emotional and psychological experiences of Jews (Arnow, 1994; Kleinman 1992). By looking at the “feelings, meanings, and values Jews experience, rather than using only Jewish activities and education” (Bleicher, 1999, p. 10), they have developed a more nuanced, multi-layered notion of what Jewish identity entails based on individuals’ own understandings of what has been most meaningful and formative about their Jewish identities. While this research does not offer further clarification of what this particularly means for Jews whose experience this reflects, it advocates for a more personalized understanding of how meaning is made among Jews regarding identity and the process of its formation.

Since the definition of Jewish identity varies so significantly among theorists, scholars, and the larger Jewish population, it was essential that this study explore the ways in which participants develop, understand, and experience their Jewish identities.

Theoretical variations infiltrate discourse on Jewish identity; however, it is important to explore if and how these variations are impacted by an individual Jew’s personal experience, as well as his/her descent status. While one may possess a strong Jewish identity, it is possible that he/she does not have Jewish status. For example, patrilineal Jews may identify strongly with Jewish customs, rituals, and history, yet are not considered Jewish in various religious and political communities both in the United States and Israel. Alternatively, it is possible that one has definite Jewish status in that

he/she was born to a Jewish mother; however, he/she may not have any sense of connection to, or affiliation with, Judaism or the Jewish community, and therefore, not identify as Jewish, despite his/her status.

The term *status* in this context is intended to refer to the external experience of belonging and acknowledgement within the community. Because an individual's engagement with the world inherently impacts how he/she understands him/herself, status cannot be disconnected from the internal experience of understanding and identifying who one is. Therefore, it is important to understand how identity is maintained in an external context in which one's status may, at times, be critiqued, questioned, or potentially devalued. In the context of this study, it should be noted that the term *identity* seeks to incorporate both the external, social way in which one is experienced and experiences him/herself, as well as the sense of self that he/she experiences more internally, and intimately, as an individual.

#### *Individual Development Theory and Self-Psychology*

Psychoanalytic theorists have attempted to define individual development through the delineation of progressive stages. Most notable among these contributions has been the work of Freud regarding psychosexual stages, Erikson regarding psychosocial stages of development and Mahler regarding phases of separation-individuation (Berzoff, Flanagan, & Hertz, 2002). In each of these stages, emphasis is placed on a human being's capacity to transcend various stages at appropriate developmental times in order for the self to develop into a well functioning and psychologically sophisticated self.

With the introduction of his theory of self-psychology, Heinz Kohut expands on this notion that the self develops by maturing through progressive psychological stages.

He argues instead that, at birth, every human being is born with a self. That self is in constant engagement with the outside world, and it is through specific types of interactions, and later internalizations of those interactions, that a self develops into a cohesive, or fragmented state of being. The development of feelings of vitality, wholeness, and a cohesive sense of self are outcomes of successful interactions with responsive and attuned others that can then be internalized within the individual as, what Kohut deems, *selfobjects*. Kohut defines selfobjects as, “objects which we experience as part of our self; the expected control over them is, therefore, closer to the concept of the control which a grown-up expects to have over his own body and mind than to the concept of control which he expects to have over others” (Kohut, 1978, p. 415). While selfobjects are produced through attuned relationships with others, they become part of an individual’s being outside of that initial relationship through which they were created, and function as a tool by which that individual can then further develop his/her self.

Kohut delineates three different types of selfobjects that individuals possess: the mirroring selfobject, the idealized parent imago, and the twinship selfobject. The mirroring selfobject is the internalization of an exchange with another wherein the child’s perfection, success, and greatness is seen and validated by the other. This mirroring allows the child to experience a grandiose sense of him/herself that later allows the self to understand its significance, both internally and externally, resulting in the development of aspirations and ambitions (Berzoff et al., 2002; Donner, 1988; Lichtenberg, 1991).

The idealized parent imago is the internalization of the other whom the child views as omnipotent and flawless, and with whom the child can join in order to experience similar feelings of infallibility, and protection from his/her innate, infantile

helplessness. The child's joining with the idealized parent imago leads him/her to experience his/her parent as competent; therefore, providing a means by which the child can vicariously experience competence (Berzoff et al., 2002; Donner, 1988; Lichtenberg, 1991).

The twinship selfobject is the representation of the experience that "there are others in the world who are similar to the self" (Berzoff, 2002, p. 187). This selfobject function is similar to that of the mirroring selfobject and the idealized parent imago in that it provides a way in which the self can be reflected back and experienced as of value. If these selfobject needs are met, individuals mature with feelings of acceptance, validity, belonging and security, which ultimately strengthen the development of a cohesive self (Berzoff, 2002).

Some frustration is necessary for the self to fully internalize selfobjects; however, one must ascertain "an optimal balance of empathic gratification and empathic failure for the developing self to flourish and eventually experience itself as energetic and cohesive" (Berzoff, et al., 2002). If a mirroring selfobject, idealized parent imago, or twinship selfobject is unavailable or entirely fails to provide the selfobject function for a child, the child then does not experience such functions as internalized, but as outside of him/herself, and accordingly, that his/her self is deficient. Some amount of empathic failure is tolerable and even beneficial to a person's development, in that it encourages the individual to notice the deficit and utilize his/her internal resources to meet his/her need independent of another. However, if a person experiences very limited access to successful selfobjects, or too great a series of empathic failures, his/her self will not be able to develop into a cohesive state. Therefore, in order to prevent the development of a



deficient or fragmented self, it is necessary that an individual have access to selfobjects during his/her early development. However, the seeking out of selfobjects to provide selfobject functions for individuals does not stop when a person reaches a particular developmental stage; rather, it continues throughout the course of one's life (Berzoff et al., 2002; Donner, 1988; Lichtenberg, 1991).

In order for selfobject functions to be met, selfobjects must develop through exchanges with others; therefore, the self is continually impacted by the environment within which the selfobjects are developed. As Donner writes, "in order to feel whole, humans incorporate part of the world into their ongoing intrapsychic realities" (1988, p.20). Donner elaborates further on this interplay, as she argues that access to mirroring selfobjects or idealized selfobjects is impacted by various sociocultural factors, such as race, gender and ethnicity (1988).

#### *Ethnic/Religious Identity as Selfobject*

While a wide range of theorists have considered the interplay of religion and psychodynamic thought (see, for example, Brickman, 2002; Holliman, 2002; James, 1958; Smith, 1990), little has been written that considers the role of ethnic and/or religious identity as a selfobject. In exploring the link between pastoral psychology and self psychology, Pamela Holliman (2002) examines the relationship between religious experience and selfobject functioning. She argues that religious experiences can serve selfobject needs by "provid[ing] compensatory structure; sustain[ing] self cohesion, enhanc[ing] development of self structure, and provid[ing] opportunities for transformation" (p. 3). Holliman notes that due to the range of impact that religious experiences may have on an individual, they hold the potential of enhancing the self

through strengthening a person's relationships, sense of purpose, and meaning-making potential. She also notes that religious experiences can increase an individual's sense of belonging and acceptance, as he/she becomes a member of a defined community. This belonging may represent a sort of twinship selfobject, strengthening the self by demonstrating its similarities to others, and "deepening [a] sense of connection with shared human experience" (Holliman, 2002, p. 7).

While these principles appear to correlate to the role of religious identity in selfobject functioning, they are limited in the underlying assumptions that frame Holliman's work; namely, that the religious experience under consideration is of the same Protestant origin from which her work is based, and is one in which the individual engaged in the experience is regarding positively and without conflict throughout the earlier years of their involvement (Brickman, 2002). Additionally, it implies that one has been accepted as a member of the religious community in which these experiences are taking place; therefore, negating the possibility, or significance, of one's status being questioned. While Brickman critiques Holliman's work based on the underlying assumptions of her analysis, no further writing has developed to advance the discourse that explores the relationship between religious experience, identity, and selfobject functioning.

However, it appears that religious identity and status impact access to mirroring, twinship, and idealized selfobjects. Because the validity of their Jewish status varies among the subsets of the Jewish community, patrilineal Jews may not be able to reliably access an exchange between themselves and the external Jewish community wherein they receive validation for their worthiness, and that worthiness and value is reflected back to

them, serving the function of a mirroring selfobject. If, as noted earlier, validating their Jewishness is seen by some to be as equally tragic as the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (Schiffman, 2001), surely one's sense of value and self-worth will be lessened.

It is also possible that patrilineal Jews have fewer opportunities for twinship selfobjects than Jews with Jewish mothers. Their identity as Jews born of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers is likely not reflected in either their mother's or their father's identity. Given the fact that patrilineal Jews represent a subgroup of the larger Jewish community in the United States, it is also unlikely that they will see themselves in the identities of the majority of Jews they encounter in their community. Without these selfobjects available, it is possible that patrilineal Jews may undergo very different experiences establishing their own feelings of security, belonging, and legitimacy within the Jewish community.

Regarding the idealized parent imago, it is again noteworthy to consider the impact of patrilineal descent on a child's access to this selfobject. Again, a patrilineal Jew's capacity to view his/her parents as fully competent and powerful in the context of religious identity may be limited if the parents cannot protect the child from the external experiences of exclusion or misunderstanding that he/she may experience within the Jewish community. However, it is also possible that, depending on the way in which the parents engage the Jewish community both independently and on behalf of the child, the child may be witness to other non-traditional Jews navigating their own belonging in the Jewish community. If done effectively, this experience may serve the selfobject function

of the idealized parent imago, and allow the child to gain competence through experiencing his/her parents as competent.

In the context of Jewish identity, it appears that access to various selfobjects will be experienced differently for patrilineal Jews and matrilineal Jews. However, it should not be assumed that such functions are not, in fact, met, or that the outcome of different access suggests a less cohesive, whole, or vital sense of self. Rather, it begs an investigation into the experience of this population in order to more fully understand how selfobject needs are met, and if the preceding hypotheses do in fact apply to individuals' real life experiences.

Collecting data from patrilineal Jews regarding the ways in which disagreement over descent has impacted their identity development allowed for increased understanding about how these selfobject experiences have or have not offered some structural framework by which individuals can access opportunities for personal development, transformation, and ultimately, cohesion (Holliman, 2007). By doing so, greater understanding was generated regarding the ways in which selfobject experiences affect the religious and/or ethnic identity and status of patrilineal Jews. Participants engaged in this study may have experienced their identities in ways that deviate from those of the larger Jewish population due to the complications of their descent status; therefore, this exploration generated further understanding beyond that which Holliman has contributed. Ultimately, expanding the scope of this exploration advanced understanding about the ways in which Jewish identity, particularly for this population, serves, or does not serve, as a meaning-making tool necessary for self development and cohesion.

### *Summary*

Literature examining the experiences of Jewish children born to Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers is exceedingly limited; however, much has been said about the context that gives value to this configuration and its history. Examining this population in the context of this disagreement, as well as in the context of identity development theory provides ample ground to begin to understand the experiences that have shaped the identities of this population. The purpose of this study is to gather additional data about the ways in which this population is internally impacted by this community disagreement, specifically in regard to their development, understanding, and maintenance of self. The hope is that by participating in this study and helping to generate greater awareness and understanding of the needs and experiences of this population, study participants will help social workers develop greater sensitivity and more appropriate therapeutic supports related to the unique needs of this population.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Problem Formulation*

The purpose of this study is to explore the question of how disagreement within the Jewish community regarding the legitimacy of patrilineal descent impacts the identity development of Jewish children born of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. In order to ascertain a greater understanding of the ways in which this context impacts the experiences of this population, I engaged in an inductive, qualitative, exploratory study using flexible methods to gather data from which larger phenomena could then be theorized. Because few studies have been conducted on this population and little data exists as a result, this method helped increase understanding of the psychosocial experiences of this population by incorporating participants' voices. This method also allowed for variation among participants' narratives and therefore, allowed the data to reflect diverse experiences. I created a set of semi-structured, open-ended interview questions to solicit the narrative experiences of study participants. These narratives were audio taped during the interview sessions, and transcribed at a later time to evaluate and code the content of participants' narratives for themes.

#### *Sample*

Participants were sought who were between the ages of 25 and 40, self-identified as Jewish, and were born to a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother. Participants in this

study were interviewed about their understanding of their Jewish identity, the impact that the disagreement related to descent has had on their identity development, and the ways in which that impact has affected their experiences and decision making over the course of their lives. They were also asked to provide demographic information about themselves. The interview was conducted with twelve sample participants.

While efforts were made to include Jews of color in this study when contacting synagogues and via snowball sampling, this study does not represent a wide range of racial diversity due to the very small population of Jews of color in the United States. Although I hoped to get a diverse sample, this study also fails to reflect a wide range of diversity related to socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and other socio-cultural characteristics. Outreach through Congregation Dorshei Tzedek, a Reconstructionist synagogue in Newton, Massachusetts was conducted with the aim of recruiting greater diversity, as it is a congregation that is explicitly welcoming to individuals of diverse socioeconomic statuses, sexual orientations, and family compositions (Congregation Dorshei Tzedek, 2008, ¶ 2). However, because recruitment efforts focused specifically on individuals who met the inclusion criteria, regardless of other socio-cultural identities, the majority of participants did not represent a diverse sample of the population.

I gathered a convenience sample of study participants in the Boston area via snowball sampling. I also received an agency approval letter from Congregation Dorshei Tzedek. I communicated with the Rabbi via email, introduced myself and this project, and asked if she would permit me to share the details of the study with the membership over their congregation's e-mail list serve, to which she agreed. I also posted a bulletin that included the information noted on the flyer to the online public bulletin board of

www.geshercity.org (an organization that promotes Jewish community involvement among Jews between the ages of 21-35).

The interviews took place in person or over the phone for approximately one hour, during which time they were tape recorded and later transcribed by the interviewer.

### *Ethics and Safeguards*

The risks related to participating in this study included the possibility that some interview questions could have caused some emotional discomfort or stress as participants were asked to reflect on a range of life experiences. A list of resources was provided to all participants, in case they needed support following the interview. The benefit of participating in this study was that participants' narratives may help increase understanding of, and sensitivity toward, the unique experiences of this under-researched population. Participants may benefit from possible support generated from knowing that research is being done to further understand this population. Greater understanding among social workers, clergy, and other relevant professionals will likely increase their capacity to provide more sensitive and relevant support and services to this population, their families, and their communities. Increased understanding may also increase sensitivity among the Jewish community to these important issues. Finally, there was no financial compensation for participation in this study.

Participants' involvement in this project remained confidential, with the exception of the interviewer and research advisor being aware of the demographic information of study participants. Should the data be used in publications or presentations, it will be presented with the identity of all participants carefully disguised. Participant names will not be used in printed analysis of the data, transcriptions, or in labeling audio tapes



containing their narratives. In the writing of the thesis, demographic information that discloses individual participants' identities is not discussed. Demographic descriptors are used only as related to the whole of study participants. In accordance with federal regulations, all information related to participants' involvement (including audio tapes, consent forms, and transcriptions) will be kept in a secure location for three years after the completion of this study. Should the materials be needed beyond that three year period, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and destroyed when no longer needed.

Participants' involvement in this study was entirely voluntary. They were permitted to refuse to answer any questions asked of them during the interview without penalty, and could withdraw from the study at any point prior to March 1, 2008 by indicating in writing their wish to do so.

#### *Data Collection*

In all outreach efforts, I asked that interested candidates contact me by phone or email. Following phone or email contact, I assessed candidates' availability and eligibility for participation in the study either by phone or email. If a candidate expressed interest by email, I emailed the candidate back and explained the study, outlined the criteria for inclusion in the study, confirmed whether or not they meet the criteria, and clarified whether or not they wished to participate in the study. (See attached questionnaire for exact questions asked in email or phone screening.) In order to encourage more participants, I used the snowball method by asking current participants to identify other people who may be interested in taking part in this study. If they were not

comfortable identifying other people, I asked them to share information about my study with others whom they believe may be interested in participating.

After I assessed their eligibility and they agreed to participate, the participant and I set up a place and time to meet for the interview. I then emailed or mailed an informed consent form and a copy of the interview guide for them to review before the interview. I collected the informed consent form at the time and place of the interview, and gave the participant a copy as well. For those interviews that took place over the phone, I ensured that I had received a signed consent form by mail prior to conducting the interview. In case the participant forgot to bring his/her copy of the informed consent to an in-person interview, I brought additional copies to share with them at the interview. The informed consent form explained the nature of the study, the risks and benefits of study participation, and the safeguards used to protect study participants. Interviews took place on the phone, or in a public setting that had the likelihood of affording a measure of privacy, such as a private study room within an area library.

Interviews were qualitative, inductive, and flexible. They were comprised of ten semi-structured, open-ended interview questions intended to solicit narratives from participants about the range of experiences they have undergone. It was important to allow participants to reflect on and prepare for the interview ahead of time, so I provided them with a copy of the interview guide prior to the scheduled interview. The interview guide also sought demographic information such as, age, gender, race, and ethnicity that was collected at the start of each interview. I conducted 45 – 60 minute interviews with each individual participant.

Themes of the interview guide included participants' understanding of their Jewish identity, the impact that the disagreement related to descent has had on their identity development, and the ways in which that impact has affected their experiences and decision making over the course of their lives. These questions were intended to illuminate the range of experiences that children of non-Jewish mothers and Jewish fathers experience over the course of their childhood through early adulthood. I also audio taped the interviews. I then transcribed the interviews at a later date.

The reliability and validity of this study will be determined by its reader, as the strength of the reliability and validity is impacted by the flexible research method. Excerpts from participants' narratives were included in the study's findings, enabling readers to determine whether or not they perceive the interview responses to speak to larger phenomena regarding patrilineal descent and identity development issues. Efforts were made to ensure that interview conditions were as consistent as possible across all twelve interviews, regarding location, mental status of interviewer, and length of time allotted for each interview. In addition, questions were clear, carefully designed, and screened by an expert reviewer, and pilot tested on two non-participants to ensure clarity.

#### *Data Analysis*

Once all twelve interviews were conducted, the data was manually transcribed from audiotape by the interviewer. Each participant's interview was assigned a numerical code to identify the transcript while ensuring confidentiality. Each transcript was then reread in order to determine themes unique to each narrative, as well as themes that appeared frequently across interviews. These themes were then coded and grouped categorically using axial coding. Coding consisted of naming the theme, defining its

parameters, and defining how the theme is identified within the interview transcript (Anastas, 1999). Responses to individual questions were also grouped categorically by question to further illuminate similarities, differences, and patterns among responses. As themes emerged, the data was then reorganized around these particular themes to craft a more in depth analysis. Once this preliminary analysis was complete, the codes were then described in the analysis of the study's results. Inclusion of interpretations of these themes as well as direct examples of these themes from participants' narratives helped craft possible formulations of the data.

### *Discussion*

It was expected that a range of feelings regarding the significance of descent questions on an individual's identity development would be discovered within this study's findings. By looking at the development of self through the lens of self-psychology, it was apparent that selfobject experiences such as mirroring, twinship, and the idealized parent imago are important in individuals' development of self-cohesion. Therefore, I anticipated that there would be a correlation between individuals' access to such selfobject experiences particularly related to their Jewish identity, and the degree to which they have felt secure and cohesive in regard to their identity as Jews. It seemed likely to me that individuals with less access to these experiences either as young children, or throughout the duration of their lives, may feel less secure about their identities as Jews due to the lack of opportunity to experience their value, competency, and belonging regarding their Jewish identity through the reflection of others like themselves. I anticipated, therefore, that these participants would be more heavily impacted by the patrilineal debate controversy, as their internal senses of themselves may

not be as cohesive as those who had access to appropriate selfobject experiences. It was possible, however, that these themes would not emerge in the study's results.

My study was limited by a lack of racial diversity. Non-European Jews, and other Jews of color likely have experiences wherein their Jewish identity has been debated both in the context of descent issues, as well as racial and ethnic issues. Accessing those stories and including them in this study could add an additional and important perspective to this research question. However, this population comprises less than seven percent of the broader Jewish population in the United States (Cohen, 2005); therefore, finding appropriate participants for this study within that seven percent proved difficult.

This study was also limited by its small sample size. The themes that emerged from the twelve participants may be considered trustworthy and accurate; however, the extent to which they can be generalized to the larger population of Jewish children born to Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers is minimal. These limitations may later be useful in determining future areas of study.

This study is also impacted by my own biases. As a self-identified Jew who was raised by a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father, my own experience is not separate from this study. My own beliefs and opinions about what Jewish identity is and means, as well what impact patrilineal descent questions have on that concept, may have biased this research. Every attempt to personally account for those biases was made in this study; however, it was not possible to fully prevent these factors from impacting my research.

The findings of this study, nevertheless, have useful implications for theory and practice. Questions raised about the ways in which one's identity is socially called into

question and continuously redefined theoretically impact our understanding of identity development and self-cohesion. Further understanding of the complexities of one's identity and religious/cultural affiliation is useful to clinicians when working with diverse clients. Cultural competency and cross-cultural therapy are cornerstones of social work practice; therefore, it is necessary that clinicians understand the nuances of what such competency may mean for different populations in order to best understand a person's inner experience. This increased understanding also helps advance sensitivity within the Jewish community to the particular experiences of this population.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### *Introduction*

This exploratory study investigated the way in which disagreement within the Jewish community regarding the legitimacy of patrilineal descent impacts the identity development of Jewish children born of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. The following sections outline the demographic data of the study participants, as well as the various themes that emerged throughout the interviews.

#### *Demographic Data*

The study was comprised of twelve participants, five of whom self-identified as male, and eight of whom self-identified as female. They ranged in age from 26 to 37 with the mean age being 29.8. All participants self-identified racially as either Caucasian (n=2) or white (n=10). Four participants self-identified ethnically as white, while the remaining participants identified as European American/Ashkenazi Jewish (n=1), Jewish (n=1), half-Jewish/half-Anglo-Saxon (n=1), Non-Latino/Hispanic Caucasian (n=1) and Irish/Jewish/Italian/Lithuanian (n=1). All but one participant (n=11) identified religiously as Jewish, with one identifying as half-Jewish. Three of the twelve underwent formal conversion processes as adults. One participant identified as gay, one as queer, and all other participants identified as heterosexual (n=8) or straight (n=2).

## *Jewish Identity*

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe their Jewish identities and evaluate the importance these identities had to them. All but two participants (n=10) described their Jewish identity as primarily cultural; however, the ways in which participants described the cultural foundation of their Jewish identity differed widely.

One participant stated, “I feel like culturally, politically and socially I identify as Jewish, so my Jewish identity is more about my relationship with people than my relationship with God.” Another participant noted,

I feel like I have a culturally Jewish outlook on life. I feel like my sense of humor is kinda typically Jewish—that culture of intellectual wit that seems very Jewish to me. My quiet existential despair feels like a culturally Jewish aspect of my personality; my whole way of reacting to the world. And then, you know, I make brisket and noodle kugel and I like cooking with chicken fat, so there is that culinary tradition that I think is important in Judaism.

Other participants described the cultural aspects of their Jewish identity as they connect to Jewish music, intergenerational sharing of tradition among family and community members, ethnicity, holiday celebrations, and a strong sense of social justice.

Still one participant noted that,

A part of it feels like being loud, arguing, lots of questions and stuff, lots of touching and hugging, and lots of allergies. And it’s both a connection to Jewish community, and a want to assimilate, and wanting to fit in, but having anxiety about fitting in, and anxiety about making it. Lots of focus on education and school. Yeah, that’s how I would describe the culture of it.

Many participants (n=7) also spoke of the importance of family in defining their Jewish identities, primarily noting that their Jewish family members were the ones to whom they felt most strongly connected, or by whom they were primarily raised. One participant stated, “What I would like to say being Jewish means to me is family, because I think at its core, that’s why I felt Jewish as a child, and later, that’s why I get so much



comfort from Jewish tradition.” Several participants (n=7) also spoke of the power that the historical narrative of their Jewish family held for them, particularly in regard to the Holocaust, and the way in which that family narrative offered greater meaning to their own personal Jewish identities.

All but two participants (n=10) noted that their Jewish identities had considerable importance to them. Of those who denied their Jewish identity to be of significance (n=2), one participant negated it having any relevance to her life stating, “It’s just not something that impacts my life, and certainly not in a spiritual way anyway.” All other participants (n=10) agreed that their Jewish identity was important to them, with five of those remaining ten respondents stating it to be of very high importance. One participant stated, “it feels crucial...central to who I am.” Another respondent noted, “It’s next to my family in importance. My family is the most important to me and then Judaism.” And still another interviewee reported, “I wouldn’t be who I am. I wouldn’t be me. I wouldn’t be whole if I wasn’t Jewish.”

It was evident from speaking with study participants that their feelings about the importance of their Jewish identity directly correlated to their level of engagement with Jewish life. Those who indicated their Jewish identity to be of high importance were far more likely than their counterparts to belong to a synagogue, be engaged in social action with a Jewish community, or to participate in religious tradition through honoring dietary laws, observing the Jewish Sabbath, or engaging in religious study. Those who acknowledged the importance of their religious identity but did not perceive it to be of primary importance to them tended to participate in High Holiday observance, and to appreciate and engage in some aspects of Jewish cultural tradition, including cooking

culturally Jewish food, enjoying Jewish music, and feeling their values in life to be informed by a culturally Jewish perspective. In such cases, the data did not indicate whether participation in Jewish life led to a stronger Jewish identity, or if an initially strong identity led to greater participation. Participants in this category were not necessarily raised with any consistent Jewish practice, nor did they necessarily have religiously practicing parents or family members.

#### *Patrilineal Descent Debate*

Half of all participants (n=6) explicitly noted feeling impacted by the debate within the Jewish community regarding patrilineal descent. Two interviewees noted being impacted in practical terms at their respective synagogues. During one participant's childhood, she was allowed to participate in programs within her synagogue, but was excluded from participating in programs outside of the synagogue, such as trips the congregation organized, because her mother was not Jewish. Another participant began Hebrew school in one synagogue with many friends, only for the synagogue to find out her mother was not Jewish and consequently send her to another, less traditional, Hebrew school where she did not have any friends and, consequently withdrew.

Participants (n=6) also reported feeling emotionally impacted by the debate and reported painful experiences wherein they questioned their own Jewish identities or their status as Jews within the Jewish community as a result of the controversy. Some participants felt the emotional impact of this debate within their own families, as can be seen from the following words of one participant,

One of your questions was about who along the way told you that you weren't who you thought you were and one of those people was my father. It left me feeling like I knew what I was and feeling like nobody else agreed so I didn't fit anywhere. The Hebrew alphabet thing was an example. He came and picked me

up for gymnastics one day, and I'm like "Look what I learned!" and I went on and on and he looks at one of the Jewish mothers and says "Oh, my *goy*<sup>5</sup> daughter." He never got it. And then even when I was considering how to raise children and was talking to my husband and was talking to my father about it, [my father] was like "but you're not Jewish." And I would say, "Even though I think I am, you don't think I'm Jewish." And it was awful.

Some other participants noted feeling more heavily impacted by the debate when entering, or attempting to enter, a space within the Jewish community, and spoke to the impact this has had on their ability to genuinely be themselves in a Jewish context. One respondent stated,

I feel like I'm more tentative about my place in the Jewish community than I would be otherwise. Like, I mean there are definitely a lot of conversations about anti-Jewish oppression, anti-Semitism and like, *goys* and Christians and "those folks", and as much as I can identify with that, I can also identify with my mom and parts of what it means to not be in the Jewish community. So yeah, I think it prevents me sometimes from being active in more professional roles like in leadership in Jewish community spaces because I feel like I may get called out as not Jewish enough and I think at times that has made it hard. I've thought about being a rabbi or doing more stuff like that and I feel like it's held me back from... because I'm not sure how to do that while acknowledging that I have a Christian mom and that that's also part of who I am.

Another respondent reflected similar difficulty finding a place of belonging and authenticity within the Jewish community, and simply stated, "You know, if they don't want me, I don't want them" despite having reported her Jewish identity to be of importance to her.

Others experienced the debate to expand beyond the Jewish community, and felt its impact most prominently from non-Jews and those outside of the Jewish community. For example, one respondent reporting on the reactions of non-Jews to her patrilineal identity, stated,

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<sup>5</sup> *Goy* is a Yiddish term used to describe someone who is not a Jew, sometimes understood to have a disparaging connotation (Soukhanov, 1996).

So when I'd say 'Oh, I'm going to temple...' or something, people are like, 'You're Jewish?' and I'll be like, 'Yes' and they're like, 'Are you really Jewish?' and I'll be like, 'What do you mean?' and they'll say, 'Are you half?' and I'll say, 'Well my mom is not Jewish, but were totally raised Jewish' and they'll say, 'Oh, so you're not really Jewish.'

Additionally, some participants felt the impact of this debate more historically, noting "During the Third Reich, no one cared if your mother or your father was Jewish—you were sent to the concentration camps." Still others experienced the impact that this debate has on them more generally, without a clear source from which they experienced the direct emotional impact, as is evident from the following participant's testimony,

I feel like part of self-determination is the ability to define for yourself who you are and I believe in that and I'm down with that. So there's a certain part of me that's like, "I claim my Judaism, and fuck whoever wants to tell me otherwise because they can't tell me who I am." And I like that. And I've always known that Judaism follows the mother's line so there are lots of people who would not consider me Jewish, first because my mother's not Jewish, and secondly, because I wasn't *bar mitzvahed*<sup>6</sup> and because I don't celebrate *Shabbat*<sup>7</sup> every week. Right, I mean there are just lots of ways that I don't live the lifestyle of practicing religious Jews. Um, and so you know, knowing all of those things I think inevitably raises the question because it does matter what other people think of you. You know, even if I claim the right to decide for myself, it still matters what other people think of me.

While half of the people interviewed (n=6) were explicit in noting the impact the debate has had on them, an additional four participants denied any explicit impact but spoke of other experiences that implied that they were affected by this disagreement. For example, all four respondents reported that their Jewish identity or status was questioned or denied by others, and three of these four spoke about undergoing a conversion process wherein they wanted to more deeply solidify their Jewish identity and status. All three

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<sup>6</sup> A *Bar Mitzvah* is a ceremony in which a thirteen year old Jewish boy is ceremonially initiated into adulthood and granted the moral and religious duties of a man (Soukhanov, 1996). Some people refer to this process as having been *bar mitzvahed*.

<sup>7</sup> *Shabbat* is the Hebrew word referring to the Jewish Sabbath (Soukhanov, 1996).

participants who had undergone conversion either implicitly or explicitly connected their mother's non-Jewish status to their rationale for converting. One respondent in particular noted that it was important to her to "count" as a Jew when engaging in Jewish ritual, and in doing so obtain a sense of legitimacy about her identity. She reported,

My father died, and I wanted to say *Kaddish*<sup>8</sup> for him, and it kind of dawned on me as I was sitting in services and stuff, that if it were close to having a *minyan*<sup>9</sup> and [the other congregants] were looking to me and counting me as one of the Jewish adults in the room... I almost felt like it was a little deceptive. I never talked to any of them about it, and none of them ever knew that according to their rules I wasn't Jewish, but I kinda felt like I wanted to count, and I wanted to make sure that no matter what kind of situation I was in, I didn't want anyone to worry if they found out later, that they had broken some sort of rule or something by counting me as one of the adults. And I kinda looked to the future, and what would happen if I had kids of my own, and I just wanted to make sure that they would count to anyone worried about it.

While this participant denied that insecurity about her own identity caused her to convert, it is evident that a correlation exists between the way in which she perceived the community to possess uncertainty about her Jewish status, and her own desire to "count" or belong within that community in a way that her patrilineal Jewish status could not fully afford. Other participants who had undergone conversion also spoke of feeling that increasing their level of Jewish education and being seen as a Jew in the eyes of other Jews was considerably important.

While all three participants who did convert were in agreement that their mother's non-Jewish status factored in to their decision to convert, their feelings about this fact differed enormously. One participant felt that the study involved in converting was an essential part of being comfortable identifying himself as a Jew. He stated,

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<sup>8</sup> *Kaddish* is a daily Jewish prayer recited in the synagogue by mourners after the death of a close relative (Soukanov, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> A *minyan* is the requisite ten Jews, or by Orthodox standards ten Jewish men, required for Jewish communal worship (Soukanov, 1996).

I knew that a large part of what Judaism is about is study, and if I hadn't learned about Judaism, I really had no business calling myself a Jew. I wasn't saying, "I believe in this. Isn't that enough?" or "My father is Jewish. Isn't that enough?" and "to heck with the whole system." I didn't feel that way at all. I felt like it was a process that would help me understand how to become a Jew. So I thought, yes, if I want to become Jewish, I have to do this conversion.

Another interviewee reported that her conversion process was, in fact, quite painful and alienating, as she did not experience the support from her sponsoring rabbi that she hoped would finally allow her to feel accepted as a Jew. She noted,

I felt like I had to effectively beg and plea for someone to convert me. And after that, it feels so heavy and insincere that I think it'll take a long time before I feel like I'm really Jewish. I desperately needed to do whatever people told me for some people to think of me as Jewish on the books.

It appears possible that these vastly different experiences with the conversion process connected to the way in which these two participants' identities differed prior to the conversion; the former participant feeling that the conversion was a means to become Jewish, and the latter to be deemed legitimately Jewish after feeling herself to be Jewish for many years prior to her actual conversion.

Participants who firmly stated that they were not, and continue to avoid being, impacted by disagreement about patrilineal descent (n=2) were heavily rooted in the Reform or Reconstructionist Jewish communities in which they were raised, and report choosing to avoid more traditional communities where they would likely face greater challenge about the status of their identities. The caution exercised in this selective approach to Jewish community involvement could arguably be understood, in and of itself, to be evident of the impact this debate has had on these participants. However, these respondents stated that they did not feel personally impacted by this disagreement within the Jewish community.

### *Selfobject Experiences*

As noted previously, theorists have reported on the importance that access to selfobject experiences can have on the identity development and sense of self-cohesion that a person comes to experience within him/herself (Berzoff, 2002; Kohut, 2002). While this study does not attempt to evaluate participants' ultimate psychological experiences with such self-psychological concepts, it does seek to examine the way in which their experiences specifically related to their Jewish identity development and sense of self are impacted by the selfobject experiences they have, or have not, accessed.

All but two (n=10) interviewees reported having very limited access to twinship selfobject experiences. Eight participants out of twelve reported to have never had exposure to other patrilineal Jews either as children or adults. Two respondents who did know other patrilineal Jews did not ever share their thoughts or feelings with those other patrilineal Jews about this similar aspect of their identities. Two others, however, did. One spoke of his unique situation wherein his partner is also a patrilineal Jew and the way in which he was drawn to her in part due to the similarities that they share both in their descent status, and in their experiences grappling with its complicated consequences. Through this relationship, it appears that this participant was very much able to access twinship selfobject experiences in his adult life.

Another participant spoke of her experience with a failed twinship selfobject experience she had with a rabbi sponsoring her conversion. The rabbi had himself converted years prior, which this participant found very appealing in the sense that they had been through something similar and she felt as though "he really got me, and really got my situation." He was also a Jewish figure to which this participant reported being

able to turn to find some sameness in a community from which she previously felt alienated because of her descent status. After undergoing the study prior to the conversion, the rabbi refused to convert this participant, stating that if she intended on marrying a non-Jew (which she did, as her fiancé was Christian), he could not convert her. The feelings of normalcy and ease that she had once felt about herself in his presence immediately dissolved, and she endured a failed twinship selfobject experience.

Those interviewees who were connected to Jewish communities as children reported that there was pressure from Jewish community members and leadership while growing up to not speak about this aspect of their identity, as to do so risked alienation from the Jewish community to which they belonged. This silence encapsulates the experience that various participants spoke of, wherein they were unable to access spaces in which they could fully be themselves, without the need to split off a portion of themselves and disavow their individual needs for self-cohesion. Most participants (n=10) explicitly referenced conversations they had with others about their patrilineal Jewish lineage; however, in all such instances, these conversations were not had with other patrilineal Jews but rather with individuals who were either not Jewish, or had matrilineal Jewish heritage.

It is notable that several interviewees asked me about my own interest in researching this topic, and if I too, have patrilineal lineage, obviously seeking to know whether or not they were having a conversation with someone similar to them. In these situations, I attempted to wait until the completion of the interview to respond to these questions, simultaneously balancing my awareness that these questions were likely an attempt to access twinship selfobject experiences, and that my answers could affect their



interview responses. At the close of the interviews, I did occasionally return to these questions and provide a brief explanation of my personal interest in the topic, more of which they could read in the final report of the project. All participants expressed an interest in reading the completed thesis, noting that they were extremely interested in hearing of others' experiences, as they had never had the opportunity to share their experiences or hear the experiences of others like them. It is evident that participants in this study have had limited access to twinship selfobject experiences, and continue to yearn for such experiences. One participant expressed this sentiment very simply in speaking about her desire to partner with another Jew, stating, "I just wanted someone who was the same."

However, such limited access to twinship selfobject experiences did not appear to cause participants in this study to feel universally different than other Jews. When asked how they generally feel amidst other Jews, most participants (n=7) reported feeling a sense of shared identity, sameness, and belonging, albeit with some insecurity about their level of Jewish education or practice (n=6). Therefore, it is important to state that while participants have not had access to twinship selfobject experiences that reflect sameness in regard to their patrilineal descent, they have been able to access other religious twinship selfobject experiences simply as people who identify as and with Jews.

The degree to which respondents appeared to access mirroring selfobject experiences varied more considerably than did twinship experiences. Some insight into mirroring experiences of participants may be generated by looking at the ways in which supportive others responded to the challenges participants faced about their identities. A small minority of respondents (n=2) noted that they had never been challenged by others

about their Jewish status or identity, despite being open with others about their patrilineal descent. These two respondents developed their Jewish identities later in life, beginning to feel some sort of kinship with other Jews in their late childhood but not fully embracing their Jewish identities until adulthood, at which time both participants converted. Both participants spoke of their conversion experiences as being very positive, and found great support, encouragement and guidance in their respective sponsoring rabbis. These rabbis could have potentially served as mirroring selfobjects in that they validated each participants' capacity to evolve in his/her identity, and provided support to their success undergoing a conversion process.

Ten respondents reported to have had experiences where their Jewish identity or status was denied or questioned by others. The existence of these challenges does not necessarily indicate decreased access to mirroring selfobject experiences among these respondents; however, it is necessary to examine the way in which these challenges were responded to by the people in the participants' lives in order to, at least partially, understand the ways in which these ten respondents did or did not come to feel seen for who they were and supported in their potential to excel and evolve.

Five of those ten respondents reported having parents who were responsive to these challenges, explaining to them the historical context from which this patrilineal descent principle evolved, and the ways in which people misunderstand, or disagree about, its current application. In their reported experiences, these five participants seemed to access some mirroring selfobject experiences through their responsive parents, as their parents saw them as Jews, acknowledged their connections and positions within the Jewish community, and supported them in their capacity to remain in those positions

despite larger controversy they may have been facing. One participant spoke of the time when her father asked her if she would teach her little sister how to be a Jewish woman, as she was the oldest female in the household. This participant spoke of this experience as a moment where she was fully recognized and seen as capable of great teaching and guidance regarding what it means to be a Jew.

Parents of the other five respondents also appeared to provide external context in such a way as to shift the focus of the controversy from each participant's particular identity, to a larger social context in which the patrilineal debate principle was seen as a response to particular historical quandaries. Doing so seemed to allow participants the opportunity to feel the problem was less about who they were, and more about society and Jewish community concerns. This shift appeared to take place through the mirroring selfobject experiences these five respondents were able to access.

The five remaining participants who faced challenges about their identity did not report having had access to mirroring selfobjects in their families, however, they all report being impacted by this circumstance differently. One participant successfully sought out other mirroring selfobject experiences through literature and writings that had been done on the various definitions of Jewish identity and Jewish status. In such literature, he found ways of understanding his own experience through the personal experiences and theoretical arguments of others. One other seemed never to have been able to access mirroring selfobject experiences in the context of her patrilineal lineage, and spoke of feeling deeply unsure of her status as a Jew. Her insecurity about the ways in which other Jews would receive her was so alive for her that she reported feeling strongly opposed to ever dating another Jew for fear of how she would be received when

her patrilineal status was revealed. The remaining three participants spoke of the ways in which they were limited in regard to pursuing Jewish life and leadership, as the degree to which they would be able to be successful as patrilineal Jews in a Jewish context felt uncertain. One participant spoke of this concern in regard to becoming a rabbi, and another spoke of the way in which she doubts her understanding of what it means to be a Jewish woman, having never had that shown to her by a Jewish mom. In all three cases, participants sought out other ways of engaging Jewish life that were less impacted by questions of status, such as social justice work and activism.

It is also possible that such challenges to their identity did not impact participants' access to mirroring selfobject experiences but rather represented examples of optimal frustrations, a minor selfobject failure that was understood by Kohut to help an individual more realistically internalize self-soothing skills, and regulate his/her own self-esteem (Berzoff, et al., 2002; Donner, 1988). Whether the challenges these participants faced were experienced as selfobject failures or optimal frustrations may be best understood in the context of what greater mirroring selfobject experiences they were able to access beyond the context of having one's status as a Jew challenged.

As previously noted, one participant experienced acute denial of her identity from her father; therefore indicating that she was not able to experience a sense of legitimacy and value in regard to her identity within a family context. Other respondents reported that their families were the people who affirmed their Jewish identity and did not necessarily delineate between family members who were patrilineal Jews or family members with Jewish mothers. One interviewee in particular clearly stated, "I think my parents made me feel like I belonged." Participants in such families were likely to have

had greater access to mirroring selfobject experiences, as they were treated as valued members of their Jewish family and their status as Jews was affirmed within this family context. In some cases, these participants were ultimately able to engage in Jewish life, as it was understood by their families, with greater psychological ease than their peers who did not have these mirroring selfobject experiences. However, when it came to involvement in a Jewish community that differed from the one reflected by their family, the same uncertainty that was experienced by their counterparts who did not have their identities affirmed by their families arose. One participant reflected on her personal experience transcending these community boundaries, noting,

I also started dating someone who was Orthodox my sophomore year of college. So that had a big impact on how I identified as a Jew. I dated him for six years. His family didn't think that I was Jewish. I don't think he really thought that I was Jewish but I don't think he would have really gotten into it with me, but they didn't want him to date someone who was not Jewish, and they didn't want him to marry someone who was not Jewish. And I was also confronted... I grew up in a reform Jewish community, and most of the people in my community... most of the other Jews that I knew in my community were kind of laid back, liberal, kind of whatever Judaism means to you kind of Jews, and um, his family and his culture was really not like that.

Additionally, mirroring selfobject experiences did not necessarily correlate to greater involvement in Jewish life later on, as strong participation during childhood and adolescence did not necessarily carry over into strong participation as adults. Those who were not practicing at all as adults (n=5) or reported to practice only occasionally (n=2) pointed to disinterest in, or discomfort with, faith and/or organized religion in general.

Participants in this study appear to have had some access to idealized parent imago selfobject experiences, though they appear to vary significantly both in terms of who provided those experiences and how greatly they impacted particular participants. Idealized parent imago selfobject experiences are those wherein an individual can

identify strength, competence, and protective qualities in another, and by joining with that other, can come to feel his/her self to be less vulnerable, stronger, and more competent (Berzoff, 1998). Eight participants reported accessing successful idealized parent imago selfobject experiences: six from a parent or other family member, two from their rabbis, and three through the members of their activist communities. Two participants did not report having any access to idealized parent imago selfobject experiences, and still another three reported having exposure to opportunities for idealized parent imago experiences that ultimately failed to provide the type of soothing function typically understood to be connected to such a selfobject. In all three of these cases, supportive, nurturing figures ultimately discredited the identities of these participants rather than providing help resolving any relevant internal or external tension they experienced in relation to their sense of themselves.

Participants reported their parents' responses to their identities to vary greatly. One participant highlighted earlier in this study clearly was not seen by her father as a Jew, despite seeing herself as such. Most participants (n=10) reported that, while their parents may have thought about how to celebrate holidays in an interfaith family, they did not understand or speak with their children about the way in which patrilineal descent is perceived within the Jewish community. In such cases, because the unique selfobject needs of this population were not addressed, interviewees appeared to feel disappointed in their parents' inability to help them navigate this more complex terrain within the Jewish community.

The experiences of two respondents whose families did, in fact, communicate with them about their descent served as exceptions to this rule. One reported that she had

discussed the implications of patrilineal descent with her father in great depth, which ultimately allowed her to feel more secure in her ability to navigate the various views she would likely encounter in the Jewish community. Her father made very clear to her that if she wanted to be considered Jewish outside of the Reform community, she would need to convert. She decided that she did not feel that was necessary, but was able to make an autonomous and informed decision about the matter that she felt confident was the appropriate choice for her circumstances. One other participant reported that she and her father addressed the impact of her patrilineal descent in great depth also; however, in this case (as noted earlier) the participant's view of herself as a Jew was denied by her father, who firmly felt that her lineage negated the possibility of having a Jewish identity. The former of these experiences appears likely to have provided a supportive and soothing selfobject experience, whereas the latter appears to represent an empathic failure by this woman's father. In most cases (n=11), it appears that few people, communities, or institutions supported interviewees in modulating and addressing their frustrations, or teaching them to respond to the challenges they faced about their identity.

#### *The Interplay of Identity, Debate, and Selfobject Experiences*

In examining the findings of this study, it appears notable that in all participants' accounts, the amount and quality of selfobject experiences a respondent was able to access directly matched the quality of his/her Jewish identity. All participants who had numerous successful selfobject experiences (n=5), regardless of which type, also reflected strong Jewish identities and reported feeling only minimally impacted, if at all, by the patrilineal descent debate. Three of these participants also reported their Jewish identities to be of very high importance to them, and their involvement in Jewish

community life to be highly active. Those who had very limited, or perhaps no, access to selfobject experiences (n=2), reported having weaker Jewish identities that they deemed to be of only minimal importance to them, high levels of impact by the patrilineal descent debate, and low to nonexistence levels of involvement with the Jewish community. Thus, the two participants who reported their Jewish identities to be of low importance to them also had very few selfobject experiences. In almost all cases (n=10), the quality of one's selfobject experiences was positively related to the quality of one's Jewish identity.

One outlier provided a compelling contrast to this connection, reporting to have had very few selfobject experiences, and yet possessing a very strong Jewish identity. This participant also noted being highly impacted by the patrilineal descent debate. She reported her involvement in the Jewish community to fluctuate and remain somewhat tenuous due to her fears of being alienated based on her descent status. The contrast in this narrative is also notable as this is the one participant who appeared to face the greatest struggle regarding her Jewish identity, labeling it "troubled", undergoing conversion and feeling that she had to "effectively beg and plea for someone to convert [her]", and reporting of her painful journey to determine where she fits "in the Jewish tapestry". The two other participants who also converted similarly possessed strong Jewish identities, but had greater selfobject experiences, and expressed feeling less impacted by the patrilineal descent debate. Thus, it appears evident that there exists a strong relationship between selfobject experiences, identity, and the patrilineal descent debate.



### *Summary*

These findings reflect the various ways in which individuals have been impacted by debate within the Jewish community regarding patrilineal descent. By exploring the ways in which they understand their own Jewish identities, how they have been impacted by the patrilineal descent debate, and whether or not they accessed selfobject experiences, greater understanding can be gained about the impact this debate has on identity development and self-cohesion for adult Jews with non-Jewish mothers.

Regarding concepts of Jewish identity, several findings of this study appear most notable. All but two participants described their Jewish identity as primarily cultural, as opposed to religious, ethnic or emotional/psychological. Though the ways in which they explained the meaning of that cultural association differed widely, most spoke of a strong familial connection as a key part of that concept. Many others spoke of the relevance of Jewish history, namely the Holocaust, to that notion of a Jewish cultural identity. All but two participants rated their Jewish identities to be of high importance to them, which directly correlated to their level of engagement with Jewish life.

Upon reflecting on the patrilineal descent debate, half of the participants reported to feel emotionally impacted by this controversy, which consequently caused them to question their Jewish identity or status as Jews. An additional four participants denied any acute emotional impact, but spoke of implicit experiences wherein they were affected by this disagreement. Those who denied being impacted in any way by this debate affiliated exclusively with the Reform and Reconstructionist communities in which they were raised.

When exploring selfobject experiences, most interviewees reported to have had no exposure to other patrilineal Jews as either children or adults, and therefore, universally reported to have limited access to twinship selfobject experiences. It is notable, however, that such limited twinship selfobject experiences did not cause participants to experience themselves as different than other Jews. It did, however, appear to cause participants to continue to seek out twinship experiences, and find great value in those twinship selfobject experiences that participants, when possible, were able to engage. Access to mirroring selfobject experiences ranged more considerably due to the amount of selfobject experiences participants could find in their family contexts, the ways in which participants' Jewish identities or status as Jews was questioned by others, and the extent to which individual participants were able to overcome optimal frustrations posed by such challenge to their identities via the support of responsive others.

Participants in this study appeared to have some access to idealized parent imago selfobject experiences, though they differed widely in regard to who provided these experiences, how greatly they impacted particular participants, and the way in which they supported participants in modulating their frustrations or teaching them to respond to challenges they faced about their identities. All participants reported to experience some degree of insecurity about their Jewish status or level of education, which may or may not be a result of selfobject failures.

Regardless of the type of selfobject experience under consideration, findings indicate that there is a strong connection between the amount and quality of selfobject experiences participants could access, and the quality of each individual's Jewish identity. Those with greater selfobject access reported their Jewish identities to be of

greater importance to them, and their narratives indicated greater connection to that identity. When these factors did not align in such a way, it appeared to cause greater distress and fragmentation in one's sense of him/herself.

The following chapter will explore the significance of these findings as they apply to identity development and self-cohesion among patrilineal Jews.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to explore how disagreement within the Jewish community regarding the legitimacy of patrilineal descent impacts the identity development of Jewish children born of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers.

#### *Key Findings*

Relevant findings reflect the various ways in which individuals have been impacted by debate within the Jewish community regarding patrilineal descent. Regarding concepts of Jewish identity, all but two participants described their Jewish identity as primarily cultural, as opposed to religious, ethnic or emotional/psychological. Though the ways in which they explained the meaning of that cultural association differed widely, most spoke of a strong familial connection as a key part of that concept. Many others spoke of the relevance of Jewish history, namely the Holocaust, to that notion of a Jewish cultural identity. All but two participants rated their Jewish identities to be of high importance to them, which directly correlated to their level of engagement with Jewish life.

A review of the literature reveals that Jewish identity has been defined within four distinct categories: religion (Kirsch, 2001), culture (Kertzer, 1993), ethnicity (Kertzer, 1993; Meyer, 1990; Phinney, 1996), and psychological/emotional experience (Arnow, 1994; Bleicher, 1999; Kleinman, 1992). This study supports these areas of emphasis,

namely culture, ethnicity, and psychological/emotional experiences, as all participants pointed to such factors in defining their own identities. The ways in which participants defined these factors, however, differed from those definitions offered in the corresponding literature. Culture is encapsulated in the literature to relate to “Jewish teachings, art, ideas, and moral principles” (Kertzer, 1993), as well as shared history, language and destiny (1993, p. 7). This study indicates a more expansive understanding of the meaning of culture, encompassing such things as humor, food, family, styles of interpersonal engagement, work ethic, holiday celebrations, political opinions and activism. While participants’ understanding of Jewish identity as defined by culture is clearly broader in this study than the literature would indicate, it is unclear whether or not this difference in definition is related to their experiences as patrilineal Jews.

Study participants did not define their Jewish identity in connection to religion, even in the cases where individuals described themselves as religiously observant. Kertzer (1993) defines the religious component of Jewish identity as a commitment to religious study, Jewish spiritual practice, and prayer. While several interviewees spoke of holiday celebrations as part of their cultural definition of their Jewish identities, none spoke of the factors noted in Kertzer’s definition. Further research is necessary to determine the degree to which the exclusion of religion in participants’ definitions of Jewish identity is related to their patrilineal descent status.

While the concepts used to define Jewish identity in both the literature and this study clearly overlap, participants’ narratives did not reflect the same type of categorical delineation between religion, culture, ethnicity, and emotional/psychological experience outlined in the literature. Whereas the literature seems to indicate, or perhaps aspire to

create, distinct ways of defining Jewish identity, the interrelatedness of these concepts that emerge in this study appear to support Buber's (1996) notion that Jewish identity proves too elusive a concept to classify into one, or even four, definitions. While the literature generally reports each of these themes to be independent of each other, the findings of this study tend to blend the categories much more significantly than one may assume based on the corresponding literature. Participants clearly understand their Jewish identity to be primarily cultural, which encompasses the themes of ethnicity and emotional/psychological experience illustrated in the literature.

The difficulty found in attempting to define Jewish identity provides context for the ways in which debate about patrilineal has both evolved over time, and impacted participants in this study. If Jewish identity is so amorphous, who is entitled to claim such an identity? In what circumstances is Jewish status conferred in support of such an identity? And when is claiming such status perceived to be objectionable to others who claim that status on, perhaps, different grounds?

Regardless of the ways in which they came to define their Jewish identities, all but two interviewees reported their Jewish identity to be of high importance to them. Participants did differ in regard to how that importance was defined, with some reflecting it to be a core part of who they were and others noting it to be important in the connection it offers to their families and their families' histories. While no previous research has been done on the importance patrilineal Jews place on their Jewish identities, Leher (2004) conducted research on children born of interfaith partnerships and found them to have stronger cultural identities than children of intrafaith partnerships. This present study, in contrast to Leher's, does not attempt to be comparative in nature, and therefore,

cannot conclude that patrilineal Jews are necessarily ranking their Jewish identities to be of greater importance than their peers of matrilineal descent; however, Leher's study does support the findings of this study that indicate that the importance of participants' Jewish identities (which they all described as primarily cultural), is not necessarily inhibited by the fact that they came from Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. It is perhaps possible that further research may even indicate, in accordance with Leher's study, that the descent status of patrilineal Jews actually relates to a stronger Jewish identity than they would have possessed as Jews not born of interfaith partnerships; however, further study would be necessary to make such a correlation.

It is notable that the more important one ranked his/her Jewish identity, the more involved he/she also reported to be in Jewish life, as evidenced by participation in religious tradition, Jewish community, and religious study. While these findings do not indicate whether an important identity led to participation, or participation led to a more valued identity, it evidences a strong connection between identity and participation. Phinney's (1996) prior research on identification with, and membership in groups, further advances the potential of this connection. His research supports the notion that identification with a group holds greater psychological importance for individuals than whether or not they clearly possess status or membership in that group. Therefore, despite facing challenge to their status as Jews, or the legitimacy of their membership among the Jewish people, participants in this study who felt their identity to be of critical importance were far more engaged in Jewish life than were participants whose identities were deemed of less importance. What seemed to matter ultimately was not whether or

not others viewed them as group members, but the depth of their internal sense of identification.

Despite the importance of identification, debate about patrilineal descent was reported to have an emotional impact on half of those interviewed in this study, causing participants to experience some feelings of insecurity about their Jewish status. Prior research (Friederes et al. 1971; Yogev & Jamsky, 1983) explored similar insecurity and feelings of marginality among children of intermarriage, and ultimately concluded that significant differences did not exist between children of interfaith and children of intrafaith partnerships. While again the present study is not comparative, it appears possible that findings of this study may potentially refute this prior research. When specifically exploring the experiences of patrilineal Jews, participants expressed feelings of insecurity about their Jewish status, and marginalization from various parts of the Jewish community.

A portion of the remaining participants felt implicitly impacted by the debate but did not feel it altered their sense of themselves, and two participants reported to avoid the debate by choosing not to associate with communities that did not clearly accept patrilineal Jewish heritage. The latter of these experiences highlights the factions that have developed within the Jewish community wherein some support the legitimacy of patrilineal descent, and others refute it. The two noted participants stated their clear preference to only associate with those communities that value them as Jews. Participants expressly report having to navigate this divergence in just the ways that scholars concerned about legitimizing patrilineal descent previously predicted (Roth, 2001; Schiffman, 2001). In their writings, concerns were expressed regarding the



potential divisions that the patrilineal descent issue may incite within the Jewish community. These findings indicate that, in some ways, patrilineal Jews are feeling the need to traverse these distinctly different Jewish territories, therefore, legitimizing the existence of that which Roth and Schiffmen feared would occur.

While such concerns regarding what this division means were limited to community-based issues regarding the potential dismantling of the Jewish community and the consequent threat to Jewish survival (Roth, 2001), it is also necessary to explore the impact that traversing these different territories and standards has on the psychological experience of patrilineal Jews. By examining the ways in which participants' experiences specifically related to Jewish identity development and sense of self are impacted by the selfobject experiences they have, or have not, accessed, additional understanding about the ways participants maintain, or fail to maintain, cohesive selves can be ascertained.

When exploring selfobject experiences, most interviewees reported to have had no exposure to other patrilineal Jews as either children or adults, and therefore, universally reported to have limited access to twinship selfobject experiences. Additionally, participants had most limited access to twinship selfobject experiences when they were faced with challenges to their Jewish identity. According to selfobject needs and their corresponding functions, this type of challenge could be seen to incite an even more acute need for such selfobject experiences than one may normally possess (Donner, 1988). When the very essence of one's identity is being challenged, he/she may likely look for selfobject experiences that would generate feelings of wellbeing, stability and security in oneself; feelings that may not otherwise be readily available in that

moment. It is notable, therefore, that the times when participants were feeling challenged about their identities were also the times when twinship experiences were least available; thus, participants could not utilize twinship selfobject experiences to increase feelings of security, validation, and normalcy about who they are. Such limited twinship selfobject experiences with other patrilineal Jews did not cause participants to experience themselves as different than other Jews. This similarity reported could perhaps cause participants to endure greater distress in response to challenge from other Jews about their Jewish status, as they do not experience themselves as necessarily different from other Jews; however, greater research is necessary to determine if this correlation is valid as it was not explicitly noted in this study's data. Regardless, the sameness that many participants reported to experience between themselves and other Jews contrasts prior self-psychology research that suggests that twinship selfobject experiences are required in order to experience feelings of sameness and normalcy, and prevent ones' self from developing into a fragmented state (Berzoff et al., 2002).

Several factors may contribute to the contrast between this finding and prior self-psychology research. One such factor relates to lack of attention Kohut gave to the experiences of minority populations in devising self-psychology theory (Berzoff et al., 2002). By focusing primarily on majority populations, Kohut assumed that it would be possible for people to access others like them. However, this assumption is problematic when applied to people whose sociocultural location is less common than those whose identities correspond more readily to those of the majority population. Patrilineal Jews in this study reflected this limitation of self-psychology, noting, with minimal exceptions, that they had never met another patrilineal Jew. Additionally, in many cases, participants

spoke about a sort of silence that existed around disclosing their descent statuses; thus, accessing others who could provide twinship selfobject experiences was essentially impossible for this population.

One must then wonder how participants came to experience feelings of sameness, having, most often, not had access to twinship selfobjects. One possibility is that Kohut's proposal of the three distinct types of selfobject experiences is perhaps only the beginning of a full understanding of selfobjects, and additional types of selfobjects exist that serve the unique selfobject needs of this population which does not have access to twinship in the way that Kohut assumed. Leher's (2005) previous research illustrated the way in which strong cultural identities yield greater feelings of belonging. It is possible that the strong cultural identities of participants' in this study served as selfobjects utilized to instill feelings of belonging, through which they were able to feel a part of the Jewish people. Similarly Donner (1988) wrote of the way in which group membership itself can serve as a selfobject, and it is again possible that participants in this study, through their strong cultural identities and group membership, were able to have some degree of their twinship selfobject needs met through these alternative means. Such alternative selfobject usage may also explain why most participants in this study did not appear to experience their selves as fragmented. While participants did express some conflict about different aspects of their Jewish identities, most of them reported feeling more puzzled about how to navigate this conflict in society, and less internally distressed about how to experience themselves cohesively.

It is notable, however, that participants did continue to seek out twinship experiences over the course of their lives and even during our interview; a process that is

congruent with self-psychology's conclusion that individuals will attempt to find selfobject experiences continually throughout their lives, rather than during any one particular developmental stage (Berzoff et al., 2002; Donner, 1988; Lichtenberg, 1991).

While participants reported to feel strong connections and commonalities with other Jews when viewing themselves simply as Jews, they experienced greater internal conflict and fears of alienation from their communities when considering their patrilineal descent status. Additionally, participants reported to find great value in those twinship selfobject experiences that, when possible, they were able to engage. This desire perhaps indicates that despite the resourceful ways in which participants have been able to access other types of selfobjects to experience feelings of similarity between themselves and other Jews, the basic need that Kohut addresses in his reflections on twinship still exist to some extent among this population. Participants naturally still face some basic desire to experience others like them.

Access to mirroring selfobject experiences and idealized parent imago selfobject experiences varied more significantly among participants. Participants' access to mirroring selfobjects ranged due to the amount and quality of selfobject experiences provided by their families, the ways in which participants' Jewish identities or status as Jews was questioned by others, and the extent to which individual participants were able to overcome optimal frustrations posed by such challenge to their identities via the support of responsive others.

Optimal frustrations appeared relevant to the experiences of those who chose to undergo conversion. Each participant who converted reported to have had experienced some form of optimal frustration, whereas the one participant who converted and endured

a much more painful process in doing so, appeared to face a more acute empathic failure. The distinction of these two types of experiences is significant, in that optimal frustrations tend to be more limited in scope and more tolerable to the individual, ultimately inspiring him/her to utilize internal resources to meet the failed selfobject's intended function (Berzoff, 1998). Empathic failures, on the other hand, when experienced on a regular basis, tend to represent much more significant experiences, wherein selfobject needs are so severely unmet that the self is unable to overcome the experience independently and autonomously supplement the selfobject function to regain a sense of cohesion (Berzoff, 1998).

Idealized parent imago selfobject experiences differed in regard to who provided these experiences, how greatly they impacted particular participants, and the way in which they supported participants in modulating their frustrations or teaching them to respond to challenges they faced about their identities. All participants reported to experience some degree of insecurity about their Jewish status or level of education, which may or may not be a result of selfobject failures.

In the cases of both mirroring and idealized parent imago selfobject experiences, wherein participants reported to experience a greater range of success accessing selfobjects, it was apparent that participants had stronger, less internally conflicted Jewish identities. Thus, a strong connection exists between the amount and quality of selfobject experiences participants could access, and the quality of each individual's Jewish identity. Those with greater selfobject access reported their Jewish identities to be of greater importance to them, and their narratives indicated greater connection to that

identity. When these factors did not align in such a way, it appeared to cause greater distress and fragmentation in one's sense of him/herself.

These results are congruent with the very basis of self-psychology theory: namely, that selfobject experiences allow individuals to realize themselves more fully and more cohesively. It is through such selfobject experiences that individuals come to feel integrated, valued, normal, and able to overcome and manage frustrations (Berzoff et al., 2002). Therefore, it is reasonable that participants who felt less impacted by the patrilineal descent debate, less conflicted about who they are, more alike other Jews than different, and basically of value as Jewish people, are those who have had greater availability to, and success accessing, the selfobject experiences that Kohut suggested lead to such feelings of wellbeing. While the three types of selfobject experiences that Kohut proposed do not adequately cover the types of selfobject experiences that this population of patrilineal Jews utilized in order to experience these feelings, the underlying premise that greater selfobject access leads to greater self-realization and self-cohesion appears relevant to this population and the development of their Jewish identities.

#### *Research Implications*

This project aimed to increase understanding of the ways in which the identity development of Jews with non-Jewish mothers is impacted by disagreement in the Jewish community regarding patrilineal descent. Such information was intended to both increase clinical sensitivity to the particular issues facing this population, as well as to contribute to greater research on the unique experiences of patrilineal Jews. Future research may be improved by examining a larger, more diverse sample; therefore, making the results of

the study more generalizable to the broader population of patrilineal Jews. Further research could also explore the ways in which selfobject experiences and patrilineal Jewish heritage collectively impact an individual's level of engagement with the Jewish community. Additional research could also more exactly investigate the particular types of selfobject experiences that patrilineal Jews access when twinship selfobjects are not available to them. Lastly, continued research could examine the degree to which the cultural definition of Jewish identity, and lack of religious definition of Jewish identity, that participants shared in this study correlates to their patrilineal descent status.

### *Theoretical Implications*

Kohut has been criticized for the lack of regard he gave to minority populations in developing the theory of self-psychology (Berzoff et al., 2002). Such critiques acknowledge that social circumstances may exist that hinder one's ability to access the three types of selfobject experiences that frame self-psychology. The findings of this study provide further support to the notion that Kohut's three selfobject types are both limited in their scope, and perhaps less relevant to the social circumstances of minority populations than to the more common experiences of the majority population on which self-psychology rests. In the case of patrilineal Jews in this study, accessing twinship selfobject experiences was essentially impossible for almost all participants; however, participants were able to utilize alternative selfobject experiences to generate the same feelings of wellbeing and normalcy that Kohut suggests are found through twinship, mirroring, and idealized parent imago selfobject experiences. Thus, it is apparent that self-psychology, while still somewhat useful in its application to this population, must be broadened to provide a more accurate framework within which to understand the

experiences of patrilineal Jews, and other populations with limited access to Kohut's three types of selfobject experiences.

### *Social Work Implications*

The findings of this study have useful implications for clinical social work practice. By understanding the range of ways that individuals in this study have been impacted by the patrilineal descent disagreement in the Jewish community, greater sensitivity may be generated among clinicians working with clients with similar socio-cultural identities. A particular awareness of the selfobject needs of this population may inform more responsive and appropriate clinical treatment for patrilineal Jews who have, perhaps, not had adequate access to such selfobject experiences. Similarly, an increased appreciation for the benefits of greater access to selfobject experiences may also increase competence among clinicians in supporting clients toward greater self-realization and self-cohesion. Cultural competency and cross-cultural therapy are cornerstones of social work practice; therefore, it is necessary that clinicians understand the nuances of culturally relevant practice may mean for the inner experience of patrilineal Jews. Such awareness of the internal experience of this population may also help advance sensitivity within the Jewish community to the particular experiences of patrilineal Jews. This information may also be useful for social workers working in Jewish communal or religious settings who may be responsible for policy and programming.

### *Limitations*

The results of this study are limited in their generalizeability, due to the small sample size and convenience snowball sampling method used to gather participants. The themes that emerged from the twelve participants may be considered trustworthy and



accurate; however, the extent to which they can be generalized to the larger population of Jewish children born to Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers is minimal.

This study is also limited by bias in data interpretation. While every attempt was made to maintain neutrality during the transcribing, coding, and interpretation of participants' narratives, such impartiality cannot be entirely ensured. Additionally, my status as a patrilineal Jew and my own related experiences to that identity inevitably impact my interpretation of the study's findings. While I did not disclose my identity to any participants until the completion of the interview, it is possible that participants made assumptions about my identity during the interview based on my interest in the topic, and such assumptions impacted the information that they did or did not choose to share. It is also possible that my own experiences and opinions as a self-identified Jew who was raised by a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father biased my understanding of the issues regarding Jewish identity and patrilineal descent that participants expressed.

Efforts were made to ensure that interview conditions were as consistent as possible across all twelve interviews, regarding location, mental status of interviewer, and length of time allotted for each interview; however, it was not always possible to ensure such similarity among conditions. Some interviews took place over the phone, while others took place in person.

Lastly, this study is limited by a lack of racial diversity. Non-European Jews, and other Jews of color likely have experiences wherein their Jewish identity has been debated both in the context of descent issues, as well as racial and ethnic issues; however, these experiences are not represented in this study. All participants included in this study identified as either white or Caucasian.

## *Conclusion*

Significant attempts have been made at defining Jewish identity, but both the literature and the findings of this study indicate that no one definition exists. Regardless, considerable attention has been given to determining who does and does not possess that identity, and who can legitimately possess Jewish status. Prior research indicates that greater psychological importance is found in how one identifies than who is accepted as a member in a particular group (Phinney, 1996); thus, how one feels internally about being Jewish has greater psychological meaning than whether or not they are granted membership or group status by others. However, the denial of that status still has great emotional impact, unless one separates from that context entirely, as group membership and identification cannot be separated as fully independent experiences. Different factions of the Jewish community remain strongly committed to their feelings about and positions on patrilineal descent, challenging patrilineal Jews to find some sense of well-being, and means of maintaining cohesion regarding their selves and identities in the context of this controversy.

From a self-psychology framework, this cohesion and wellbeing is found through accessing twinship, mirroring, and selfobject experiences. Participants in the study had difficulty accessing twinship, and some varying success accessing mirroring and idealized parent imago selfobject experiences. However, in examining their experiences with selfobjects, participants expressed a strong connection between access to successful selfobject experiences and the quality of ones' Jewish identity, and sense of self-cohesion as a Jew. In the particular case where a participant did not have access to successful selfobject experiences, she appeared to experience greater distress both about her own

identity and the consequences of disagreement in the Jewish community regarding patrilineal descent. The types of selfobject experiences that participants accessed reached beyond the three types delineated in self-psychology, ultimately suggesting that participants in this study have unique selfobject needs that were not included in Kohut's original theory that focused heavily on the experiences of the majority population.

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Appendix A

**Recruitment Material**

**Online Posting for GesherCity.org and Congregation Dorshei Tzedek list-serv:**

**ARE YOU JEWISH, BUT YOUR MOM IS NOT?**

Would you like to participate in a masters-level social work thesis study on identity, and how it is experienced by self-identified Jews who do not have Jewish mothers?

People who:  
are between 25-40 years old, self-identify as Jewish, and have a non-Jewish mother and Jewish father are sought for this study.

Participation involves an audio-taped interview that lasts 45-60 minutes.  
Confidentiality is assured and participants can withdraw by March 1st, 2007.

My name is Liz Sosland and I am looking for people to interview for my Master's level thesis project for Smith College School for Social Work.

If interested, please call 617-901-0704 or email [lsosland@yahoo.com](mailto:lsosland@yahoo.com).

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form

October 13, 2007

Dear Potential Study Participant,

My name is Liz Sosland and I am a graduate student at the Smith School for Social Work. I am conducting a research study on the ways in which debate in the Jewish community regarding patrilineal descent impacts the identity development of Jewish children born of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. Data from this study will be used in a master's level social work thesis intended to help clinical social workers engage in more sensitive and relevant clinical work with this population.

I am seeking study participants between the ages of 25 and 35 who self-identify as Jewish, have not been through conversion, and were born to a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother who has no known Jewish ancestry. If you choose to participate in this study, I will interview you about your understanding of your Jewish identity, the impact that the disagreement related to patrilineal descent has had on your identity development and sense of self, and the ways in which that impact has affected your experiences and decision making over the course of your life. I will also ask you to provide demographic information about yourself. The interview will be conducted in person for approximately one hour, tape recorded and later transcribed by me.

The risk related to participating in this study may be that some interview questions may possibly cause some emotional discomfort or stress, as I ask you to reflect on a range of life experiences. A list of referral resources will be provided to you, should you need them following our interview.

The benefit of participating in this study is that your narrative will help increase understanding of, and sensitivity toward, the unique experiences of this under-researched population. Greater understanding among social workers will likely increase their capacity to provide more sensitive and relevant clinical practice to this population, their families, and their communities. Unfortunately, there will be no financial compensation for your participation in this study.

Your involvement in this project will remain confidential, with only myself and my research advisor having information regarding your participation. Should the data be used in publications or presentations, it will be presented with the identity of all participants carefully disguised. Your name will not be used in printed analysis of the data, transcriptions, or in labeling audio tapes containing your narrative. In the writing of the thesis, I will not use demographic information that discloses your identity. Demographic descriptors will be used only in the whole of study participants. In accordance with federal regulations, all information related to your participation (including audio tapes, consent forms, and transcriptions) will be kept in a secure location for three years after the completion of this study. Should the materials be needed beyond that three year period, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and destroyed when no longer needed.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions asked of you during the interview without penalty, and may withdraw from the study at any point prior to March 1, 2008 by indicating in writing your wish to do so. After that point, I will begin analysis of the data gathered from the interviews. Should you choose to withdraw, all materials pertaining to your participation will be immediately destroyed and excluded from analysis in the study.

You may contact me, Liz Sosland, at 617-901-0704 or [lsosland@yahoo.com](mailto:lsosland@yahoo.com) with any further questions, wishes to cease participation, or concerns regarding your rights or any other aspect of the study. You may also contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413-595-7974.



**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

Please return this consent form to me by November 15, 2007 to indicate your intention of participating in the study. If I do not hear from you by then, I will follow up with a telephone call. Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records. Thank you for your time, and I greatly look forward to having you as a participant in my study.

Sincerely,

Liz Sosland

## Appendix C

### **Questions for Telephone Screening Prior to Participation**

1. Are you interested in participating in the study?
2. Do you identify as Jewish?
3. What is your age? For this study you need to be between the ages of 25-40.
4. Were you born to a non-Jewish mother and Jewish father?
5. Do you know of other people who may be interested in participating in this study? If so, would you be comfortable sharing their names with me, or my contact information with them, in order for us to get in touch?

## Appendix D

### **Demographic Questionnaire**

The following demographic data will be distributed with the interview guide and collected during the interview with participants after they are selected for the study and have returned an informed consent agreement. The data will be used to assess the demographic diversity, or lack thereof, of the participant pool involved in the study.

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Religion:

Race:

Ethnicity:

Sexual Orientation:

## Appendix E

### Interview Guide

Participants in this study will be interviewed about their understanding of their Jewish identity, the impact that the disagreement related to descent has had on their identity development, and the ways in which that impact has affected their experiences and decision making over the course of their lives.

1. How would you describe your Jewish identity?
  - Have you always identified as Jewish?
  - What factors/experiences have shaped your Jewish identity?
  - Do you ever feel at all ambivalent about your Jewish identity?
  - How important is your Jewish identity to you?
  
2. Was your Jewish identity part of your upbringing?
  - Did your family participate in Jewish life cycle events, holidays, etc.?
  - Did your family belong to a synagogue?
  - Were you connected to Jewish extended family?
  - Did you have other experiences (such as travel to Israel, Jewish summer camp) that were formative as a child in your Jewish learning/development?
  
3. Have you ever questioned your Jewish identity or status?
  - If so, what factors have caused you to question it?
  - If not, what factors do you believe contributed to your feeling secure about your identity or status?
  - Have there been times throughout your life when you felt more or less confident about your Jewish identity? (ie. Developmental milestones, etc.)
  - Have you ever considered conversion?
  - Has your mother converted or, to your knowledge, ever considered conversion?
  
4. Have you had experiences where your Jewish identity or status was questioned or denied by others?
  - Have you had experiences where your Jewish identity or status were questioned or denied solely because of your mother not being Jewish?
  - ... because of other identities such as your sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, etc.?
  - If so, can you remember the first time your identity or status was questioned?
  
5. Growing up, did you have exposure to other Jewish children with non-Jewish mothers?
  - Did you have exposure to any other patrilineal Jews?
  
6. Do you feel that having a non-Jewish mother has impacted your engagement with the Jewish community either positively or negatively?
  - How do you feel about yourself (ie. feelings of belonging, sharing commonalities, etc.) when amidst a group of Jews?
  
7. Do you perceive your Jewish identity, or your dual heritage to have had (or to be likely to have in the future) an impact on your preference in partners?
  
8. If you were to consider having children, how would you raise them religiously/culturally if at all?
  - If you are a parent, already, how have you chosen to raise your children religiously/culturally, if at all?
  - Do you think your sense of your Jewish identity has impacted these ideas or choices?

9. How do you feel your parents understood your identity as a Jew born of patrilineal descent?
10. What is your current engagement with Jewish life, if any?

Appendix F

**Human Subjects Review Board Approval Letter**

November 13, 2007

Elizabeth Sosland

Dear Liz,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and you have done a great job. All in now in order and we are happy to give final approval to this most interesting study.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project. As the grandmother of three Jewish children whose father is not Jewish, I am particularly interested in the topic. The identity issues are complex even when Jewish law declares them to be Jewish.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Carla Naumburg, Research Advisor