

The Centrality of the Family in Defining Jewish Identity and Identification*

Chaim I. Waxman, Ph.D.

Associate Professor and Chairman, Department of Sociology, University College
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey

The leadership and representatives of American Jewish communal organizations and agencies would have to accept and project marriage and family life as a positive value even when this may not be entirely commensurate with the prevailing American attitudes, values and behavior.

If newspaper and magazine articles, books and public lectures, are any indication, one of the issues which are of serious concern to Americans is that of the future of the family in American society. The increasing divorce rate, the decline in birth rate, the rise in the age of first marriage, the increase in the numbers of working mothers, especially among those of pre-school children, the increasing numbers of single-parent families, and the perceived decline of the extended family have led many Americans to question whether the family is not in serious trouble. In fact, one noted authority in the field of child development has stated rather unequivocally that "the family is falling apart."¹ Many others, however, take a more sanguine approach and maintain that while the family is apparently undergoing change, it is by no means falling apart. On the contrary, they argue, the evidence is overwhelming that the family is "here to stay"² and that while it does need institutional supports as the result of the changes, these changes do not pose any threat to the future of American society.

American Jews, too, are apparently concerned about the future of the American

Jewish family, assuming that the topics on the American Jewish lecture circuit and articles in American Jewish popular publications are any indication. At the outset, we must point out that the implications of changes in the structure and roles of the family may be very different for American Jews, as a minority group, than they may be for American society in general. To put it another way, assuming that those who take the more sanguine approach to the future of the American family are correct, it does not, therefore, follow that American Jews *qua* Jews should not be concerned. To see this point more clearly, we will review the empirical evidence dealing with the relationship between the family and religio-ethnic identity and identification.

The work of Charles Horton Cooley³ and George Herbert Mead⁴ provide the sociological perspective on identity. Cooley spoke of the "looking glass self," by which he meant that it is through interaction with others and through the eyes of others that one derives a conception of self. Mead, likewise, emphasized the importance of relationships with others by distinguishing between the "I" (subject) and "me" (object) phases of the self which derive from social interaction with others. Through the process of roletaking, initially with "significant others" (e.g. parents) and later with the "generalized other" (society), the individual internalizes his

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¹ S. Byrne, "Nobody Home: The Erosion of the American Family—An Interview with Urie Bronfenbrenner," *Psychology Today*, May 1977, p. 40.

² Mary Jo Bane, *Here to Stay: American Families in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Basic Books, 1976.

³ Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: Schocken Books, 1902; and Charles Horton Cooley, *Social Organization*. New York: Schocken Books, 1909.

⁴ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934.

or her identity. Recent empirical research⁵ uniformly confirms the reflexiveness of the self. However, research also indicates that different significant others may be influential in certain situations, while parents were more influential in others. Two important hypotheses derived from his data are: "Adolescents are more strongly given to peer-conformity in making choices in areas in which social values are changing rapidly, than making choices in areas in which social values are relatively stable,"⁶ and "Adolescents are more disposed toward peer-conforming in making choices where immediate consequences are anticipated than in making choices where emphasis is on long term effects."⁷ Similarly, on the basis of their findings with respect to educational plans, Kandel and Leiser⁸ aver that while in certain areas peers may be more influential "on the issue of the adolescent's life goals, parents have a stronger influence than peers."⁹

⁵ See Carl Couch, "Self Attitude and Degree of Agreement with Immediate Others," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 63, 1958, pp. 491-496; Norman K. Denzin, "The Significant Others of a College Population," *Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 7, 1966, pp. 298-310; Theodore D. Kemper, "Self-Concepts and the Expectations of Significant Others," *Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 7, 1966, pp. 323-343; Frank S. Miyamoto and Sanford Dornbusch, "A Test of the Symbolic Interaction Hypothesis of Self-Conception," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 61, 1956, pp. 399-403; Enrico L. Quarantelli and Joseph Cooper, "Self-Concepts and Others: A Further Test of Meadian Hypothesis," *Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 7, 1966, pp. 281-297; Leo G. Reeder, G.A. Donohue and Arturo Biblarz, "Conception of Self and Others," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 66, 1960, pp. 153-159.

⁶ Clay V. Brittain, "Adolescent Choices and Parent-Peer Cross Pressures," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 28, 1963, pp. 385-391.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

⁸ Denise B. Kandel and Gerald S. Leiser, "Parental and Peer Influences on Education Plans of Adolescents," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 34, 1969, pp. 213-223.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

Sociologists and social psychologists generally view social identity as the place or situation of the individual within the variety of roles and statuses provided by society.¹⁰ Closely interrelated with the concept of social identity is that of self-conception, which consists of the sets of attitudes, internalized from others, which the individual has of his or her self. Individuals usually have various identities in accordance with the varieties of close social interactions in which he or she participates. Kuhn and McPartland¹¹ distinguish between the "consensual" and "sub-consensual" components of the self, the former ("more directly socially anchored") being analogous to social identity, whereas the "subconsensual" is subjective and individual.

When dealing with the role of parents in identity formation and identification transmission, we are essentially concerned with the socialization process which has fostered a vast literature. Reference was made earlier to the role of others as suggested by Mead. It is clear that when he spoke of "significant others," parents are usually the first to be recognized as such. Cooley, too, stressed the importance of parents when he wrote of the "primary group"¹² as primary in that it has primary influence upon the individual. There is, perhaps, no better example of the primary group as he conceived it than that of the parent-child group. As children grow older, however, other groups enter the picture as influences.

The question of the extent and impact of

¹⁰ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959; Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963; Gregory P. Stone, "Appearance and the Self," in Arnold M. Rose, ed., *Human Behavior and Social Processes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962, pp. 86-118.

¹¹ Manfred H. Kuhn and Thomas S. McPartland, "An Empirical Investigation of Self-Attitudes," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 19, 1954, pp. 68-76.

¹² Charles Horton Cooley, *Social Organization*, op. cit.

parental influence can be seen more clearly when we look at adolescents. An extensive study of the impact of family socialization upon the adolescent was undertaken by Thomas, Gecas, Weigert and Rooney¹³ in an effort to determine the effects of parental "support" and "control" upon adolescent self-esteem, conformity, religiosity and deviant life styles. The data was derived from samples of middle-class high school and college students in San Francisco, Minneapolis, St. Paul, New York, San Juan and Merida. For the purposes of this paper, the findings on the effects of parental support and control upon adolescent religiosity are most significant. My own research for this paper confirms their comment that "The question of the impact of parental socialization on the religiosity of adolescents is a relatively neglected topic within the disciplines which study either family or religiosity."¹⁴ A notable exception is the work by Rosen,¹⁵ which found parents to be important in forming attitudes and behavior, but not exclusively so. Thomas and his colleagues found support for the hypotheses that "adolescents recalling a high degree of support and control from mother, father, or both parents give evidence of significantly greater commitment to traditional religiosity."¹⁶ Moreover, a "major determinant of traditional religiosity in the parent-child relationships which we are studying is the degree of mother and father support of the adolescent, both males and females..."¹⁷

The question might be raised as to the relevance of the subject of religiosity to this paper, since this paper deals with ethnic and/or

¹³ Darwin L. Thomas, Victor Gecas, Andrew Weigert and Elizabeth Rooney, *Family, Socialization and the Adolescent*. Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1974.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁵ Bernard C. Rosen, *Adolescence and Religion*. Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1965, esp. Ch. 6.

¹⁶ Darwin L. Thomas, et. al., op. cit., p. 104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

religious group identity, or more accurately, identification. Rosen raised the same question in his study of Jewish adolescents:

Why is there, the reader may ask, a relationship between ethnic identification and adolescent religiosity? After all, there are other ways of showing one's attachment to the group... The answer, in part, seems to lie in the relationship many adolescents see between religion and group survival.¹⁸

In other words, while one may validly come up with any number of alternatives to religiosity as valid and meaningful expressions of group identification, adolescents define the connection between religiosity and group survival as crucial. Similarly, in a study of Jewish college students in New York and Connecticut, more than 90 percent of those interviewed proclaimed religion to be essential for Jewish survival.¹⁹ The subject of religion is, thus, not tangential but central to the question of the role of parents in the formation of group identification. In his study of Jewish identity in Israel, Herman²⁰ found that:

The degree of religious observance is the crucial variable in the study of Jewish identity... Not only do the religious students feel more Jewish and value their Jewishness more under all circumstances, but they feel closer to, and have a greater sense of identification with Jews everywhere.²¹

¹⁸ Bernard C. Rosen, op. cit., p. 184.

¹⁹ Chaim I. Waxman and William B. Helmreich, "American Jewish College Youth: Changing Identity," *Forum* (Jerusalem), Vol. 27, No. 2, Spring 1977, pp. 35-44.

²⁰ Simon N. Herman, *Israelis and Jews: The Continuity of An Identity*. New York: Random House, 1970.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115. Also see Simon N. Herman, *Jewish Identity: A Social Psychological Perspective*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977. Further evidence to support this hypothesis was reported by Mervin Verbit, "The Impact of Secularization on Family and Philanthropy: An Empirical Report on Jewish University Students' Values," paper presented at the Tenth Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Boston, December 1978.

One study which bears most directly on the subject of this paper is that of Dashefsky and Shapiro²² who questioned several hundred younger and older men in the city of St. Paul, Minn., in an effort to determine how Jewish identification is formed and maintained. For our purposes, the significant finding was that the family is the most important source of Jewish identification, in addition to being the major mechanism by which identification is transmitted.²³ (One interesting finding was that "under the rubric of family influences we observed the persistent significant independent effect of having an older brother.")²⁴

One reservation in drawing any broad conclusions from their study is that of representativeness. That is, while the data may well be representative of medium-sized and rather self-contained communities, one wonders about its applicability to the larger cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, which, in fact, contain a majority of the American Jewish population. It may be that in terms of family unity there are disruptive forces at work in these large urban areas which may produce effects different from what one finds in medium and small-sized communities. This is not intended in criticism of Dashefsky and Shapiro, but rather as a matter for further research. It should also be noted that their study confirms the findings of Sklare and Greenblum as to the important influence of parental orientation on religious observance.²⁵ And, the same question as to representativeness might be raised with respect to "Lakeville."

Given the significant impact of parents on the ethnic and religious identity and identification of children, we now turn to a brief examination of the pertinent features of the

²² Arnold Dashefsky and Howard M. Shapiro, *Ethnic Identification Among American Jews*. Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1974.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁵ Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*. New York: Basic Books, 1967, Ch. 5.

American Jewish family. Here, too, those who have studied the subject stress "the paucity of substantial research studies on the American-Jewish family."²⁶ The specific characteristics under review are extended familism, fertility and divorce.

Numerous studies consistently point to the uniqueness of American Jews in terms of their retaining the traditional value of strong family and kinship ties despite their rapid acculturation in American society.²⁷ Despite the very serious criticisms of the Balswick literature review raised by Westerman,²⁸ the many studies from so many diverse populations seem to support the basic proposition of the intense familism of American Jews.²⁹ However, while there may well be a relationship between this strong familism and the Jewish identification of children, there has as yet been no reliable study which confirms and explains the precise nature of this relationship.

Considerable concern has been expressed over the fertility patterns of American Jews, according to which the birth-rate has dropped rather markedly. As Sklare sees it, "in the second generation the birth rate dropped so precipitously as to have serious implications for Jewish population size as well as for group

²⁶ Marshall Sklare, *America's Jews*. New York: Random House, 1971, p. 74. Also see Victor D. Sanua, "The Contemporary Jewish Family: A Review of the Social Science Literature," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 50, No. 4, Summer 1974, pp. 397-312.

²⁷ Jack Balswick, "Are American Jewish Families Close Knit?: A Review of the Literature," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, July 1966, pp. 159-169; Marshall Sklare, *op. cit.*; Robert F. Winch, Scott Greer and Rae Leiser Blumberg, "Ethnicity and Familism in an Upper Middle-Class Suburb," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 32, 1967, pp. 265-272.

²⁸ Jacqueline Westerman, "Note on Balswick's Article—A Response," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 29, 1967, pp. 241-244.

²⁹ Gerald S. Berman, "The Adaptable American Jewish Family: An Inconsistency in Theory," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* (London), Vol. 18, No. 1, June 1976, pp. 5-16.

continuity."³⁰ Whereas Freedman, Whelpton and Campbell³¹ and Freedman and Whelpton³² attribute the lower Jewish fertility to urban residence patterns and economic attributes of American Jews, Goldstein and Goldscheider³³ suggest that the source lies in Jewish upward mobility and minority group status. Most importantly, Goldscheider³⁴ demonstrates that Jews have had low fertility rates in both America and Europe since at least the 1800's, and that in America today there is a positive correlation between social class and fertility—higher class has higher birth rate—in contrast to the reverse relationship characteristic of Protestant Americans. If this pattern continues and Jews continue to be upwardly mobile, there may, in fact, be a reversal of the decreasing birth-rate which is characteristic of American Jewry today.

Jews and Judaism have traditionally placed a very high value upon marriage, and the available data indicate that a high proportion of America's Jews are married, and that the vast majority marry at least once. Goldstein and Goldscheider³⁵ report that in Providence, Jews have a higher rate of marriage and lower divorce rate and separation rates than does the non-Jewish population. And, in a more recent study of Providence, Kobrin and Goldscheider found virtual universality of marriage among American Jewish men and women, with the proportion of ever-married increasing over the

³⁰ Marshall Sklare, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

³¹ Ronald Freedman, Pascal K. Whelpton, and Arthur A. Campbell, *Family Planning, Sterility and Population Growth*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1959.

³² Ronald Freedman and Pascal K. Whelpton, "Socioeconomic Factors in Religious Differentials in Fertility," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 1961, pp. 608-614.

³³ Sidney Goldstein and Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Americans*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968, p. 135.

³⁴ Calvin Goldscheider, *Population, Modernization and Social Structure*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1971.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

years.³⁶ They report that their

data show a higher proportion of Jews than non-Jews in first marriage for both sexes and controlling for cohort. Combined with the earlier data on percentage ever married, these data imply a high level of marriage and marital stability for Jews, higher than most if not all of the ethnic groups examined.³⁷

At the same time, however, there are indications of a breakdown in the traditional patterns. For example, the Providence study indicated a progressively higher divorce rate by generation.³⁸ It should be emphasized that the increases are slight, and that the Jewish divorce rate remains lower than that of non-Jews. Yet, concern has been voiced in the American Jewish community over the increasing Jewish divorce rate, and, while data is not yet available, there are rumblings of a seriously increasing rate of divorce even among Orthodox Jews who, as a group, have had a very low divorce rate until now. Here again, one can but decry the dearth of empirical data.

Related to this trend is the tendency for American Jewish males and females to marry later than non-Jews. In their Providence study, Kobrin and Goldscheider found "that only a very small proportion of Jewish males marry at ages 20 or younger compared to Protestants and Catholics,"³⁹ and that "Jewish women marry at older ages on average than Protestants or Catholics in both age cohorts."⁴⁰ This phenomenon is significant not only in that it impacts upon the birth rate, but also in that it results in a growing number of adult Jewish singles who often feel estranged from the institutions of the organized Jewish community. They may become

³⁶ Frances E. Kobrin and Calvin Goldscheider, *The Ethnic Factor in Family Structure and Mobility*. Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Co., 1978, p. 38.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁸ Goldstein and Goldscheider, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-111.

³⁹ Kobrin and Goldscheider, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

so alienated from the community that they will remain lost to it for many years.

The rise in the American Jewish divorce rate has resulted in an increasing number of single-parent families. The National Jewish Population Study⁴¹ sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations, reported that of those aged 25-29 years of age, approximately 15 percent of heads of households were separated or divorced. Several years later, the National Conference on Single Parent Families suggested that about 20-30 percent of the national membership in Jewish community centers are single parents.⁴² In interviews in community after community we have been told that the issue of single-parent families, in particular, is the most critical family issue facing the Jewish population. Most institutions within the community have not, as yet, squarely faced up to the reality of this phenomenon and continue to focus their services toward the traditional two-parent family, leaving single parents with little recourse but to affiliate with non-Jewish institutions which are more sensitive to their needs. The functions and significance of the family for Jews, as a numerical minority group with its own religio-cultural identity, are much more central in terms of group continuity than are the functions and significance of the traditional nuclear family for the future of American society, since the evidence strongly indicates that the family is the most important structure for the transmission of identity and the formation of identification. Many other Jewish and non-Jewish observers point to the central role of the family in terms of Jewish survival and continuity. For example, a psychologist who is critical of some recent trends in American psychology and Catholicism, states in passing, "Judaism's remarkably

⁴¹ Alvin Chenkin, *Demographic Highlights: Facts for Planning*. New York: Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, 1972, p. 5.

⁴² The figures on the Jewish Single-Parent Family," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LIV, No. 3, Spring 1978, p. 230.

strong support for the family is well-known. Many have explained Jewish survival in terms of this reverence for the family."⁴³ Recent studies by Steven M. Cohen also appear to confirm the centrality of the family in defining Jewish identity and identification. Significantly, his data show that those who live in "alternative families" are considerably less Jewishly active than those who live in traditional normative families.⁴⁴

Since the American Jewish community has a vested interest in its own continuity, it is incumbent upon the community to respond to the conditions which impact on and cause stress for the traditional forms of Jewish family life. Obviously there is no one strategy which will respond to all of the strains, nor will any combination of strategies be successful if implemented for only short-term duration. What is called for are wide-ranging and comprehensive strategies, some of which can be introduced and would begin to bear fruit in a reasonably short period of time, while others would require a much longer period for implementation and whose effects would become apparent only over the span of several years and even decades.

Even if time and space were available, we would not, at the present moment, be in the position to specify all of the elements of that long hard agenda. The collective thinking and recommendations of one group, a Task Force on Jewish Family Policy of the American Jewish Committee contains a series of specific

⁴³ Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self Worship*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977, p. 89.

⁴⁴ Steven M. Cohen, "Will Jews Keep Giving?: Prospects for the Jewish Charitable Community," paper delivered at the Tenth Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Boston, December 18, 1978. Also see Cohen's article by that same title, *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LV, No. 1, (Autumn) 1978, pp. 59-71. The A.J.S. paper is a continuation of the study first reported in the J.J.C.S. article, and contains analyses of items not detailed in that article.

recommendations both in terms of American Jewish communal policy and public policy.⁴⁵ For the purposes of this paper, we conclude that basic changes are called for on both the cultural and structural levels. The leadership and representatives of American Jewish communal organizations and agencies would have to accept and *project* marriage and family life as a positive value even when this may not be entirely commensurate with the prevailing American attitudes, values and behavior. Whatever its validity in other areas, with respect to the centrality of the family it is not the case that what is good for the whole of society is good for all of the constituent groups. In line with this, each institution and agency would engage itself in a serious and

⁴⁵ Chaim I. Waxman, *Report of the AJC Task Force on Jewish Family Policy*. New York: American Jewish Committee, Jewish Communal Affairs Department, December 1978.

thoughtful self-evaluation in an effort to determine the extent to which its policies and procedures impact upon family life, both positively and negatively. All too often some of these may have been adopted without the realization that they may restrict the possibilities for marriage and family life, or that some of them may, unintentionally, alienate those who do not live in two-parent nuclear families, such as singles and single parents.

In due course the organized American Jewish community will have to face the challenge asserting the priority of marriage and family life without simultaneously stigmatizing and alienating those who do not conform with those values. The extent to which the community is successful in integrating those who do not so conform, but yet does not allow those patterns to become completely institutionalized and acceptable alternatives, may well determine the fate and future of American Jewry.