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PERSPECTIVES
ON
THE FAMILY AND JEWISH IDENTITY IN AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

The American family seems to be in a state of flux. For a variety of reasons, the degree of marital stability is weakening, as indicated by the rising rates of divorce and remarriage. Likewise, changes appear to be occurring in the traditional father and mother roles. The extent to which these are the direct effects of the women's movement is as yet unclear. It seems rather safe to assume that social structural changes in American society have made their impact; in some situations coupled with the ideology of the women's movement and in others alone.

Motivated by ideological, intellectual, economic, and other factors, an increasing number of American women are entering the labor force each year. In 1973, about one-third of all American children under age six, had mothers who worked. According to the United States Bureau of the Census, the percentage of married women in the labor force had increased from about 32% in 1960 to about 47% in 1973, for those 25-44 years of age. Working women and working wives are now close to half of the labor force in the United States. And, the changing roles of American women have forced many males in the United States to question, if not actually change, their traditional roles.

At the same time, an apparent change in American sexual mores has affected our traditional views on what is a family. While many of the reports of "deviant" family life styles may be exaggerated, some changes have clearly occurred.

All of these changes have significance in terms of the socialization of children, a task which has been and is central to the family, the local community, ethnic and religious groups, and to society-at-large. For the American Jewish community, the condition of the Jewish family is of prime importance, since the family has served as a central vehicle for the transmission of Jewish identity. The transmission of positive Jewish identity and identification was, presumably, always a matter of concern for the Jewish community; it becomes a matter of highest priority in an open and mobile society in which identity and identification are achieved rather than ascribed.

American Jews are not immune to the strains which the American family is experiencing. When one speaks of "the American family," that typically refers to the middle class family in the American society, and in many respects American Jews are more middle class than non-Jews. For example, Ruderman (1968, pp. 134-136) found American Jewish mothers to have a higher rate of working mothers than do Protestants and Catholics. She suggests that this may be

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The focus of this paper is the role of the nuclear American Jewish family in forming religious and/or ethnic group identification among the children. The perspective is social scientific, and emphasizes the impact of social factors in group identity and identification. Moreover, the first part of this paper is a review of studies and publications in which conclusions are based upon empirical data. A number of issues discussed are the subjects of hundreds of intuitive, speculative, and/or sermonic books and articles. Not being in the position to dispute any of the assertions contained in these writings, I have, with all due respect, limited myself to social scientific, empirically-based works. Only after having reviewed the empirical data are policy recommendations presented.

The work of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) provide the foundation for 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 role-taking, initially with "significant others" (e.g. parents) and later with the "generalized other" (society), the individual internalizes his or her identity. Recent empirical research (Couch 1958; Denzin 1966; Kemper 1966; Miyamoto and Dornbusch 1956; Quarantelli and Cooper 1966; Reeder, Donahue and Biblarz 1960) uniformly confirms the reflexivity of the self. However, research also indicates that different significant others may be influential in certain situations. Thus Brittain (1963) found peers to be more 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," and "Adolescents are more disposed toward peer-conformity in making choices where immediate consequences are anticipated than in making choices where the emphasis is on long term effects." (p. 391). Similarly, on the basis of their findings with respect to educational plans, Kandel and Leeser (1969) 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." (p. 222).

control from mother, father, or both parents give evidence of significantly greater commitment to traditional religiosity." (p. 104) Moreover, "the 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,..." (p. 106)

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 religious group identity, or more accurately, identification. Rosen (op. cit.) raised the same questions 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." (p. 184)

In other words, while one may validly come up with any number of alternatives to religiosity as valid and meaningful expression of group identification, adolescents define the connection between religiosity and group survival as crucial. Similarly, in a recent study of Jewish college students in New York and Connecticut, more than 90% of those interviewed proclaimed religion to be essential for Jewish survival (Waxman and Helmreich 1976). 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, Herman (1970) 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." (p. 115)

The one study which bears most directly on the subject of this paper is that of Dashefsky and Shapiro (1974) 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 (p. 53). (One interesting finding was that "under the rubric of family influences we observed the persistent significant independent effect of having an older brother." (p. 73)

One reservation in drawing any broad conclusions from this 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

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 1971). Goldstein and Goldscheider (1968) report that in Providence, Jews have a higher rate of marriage and lower divorce rate and separation rates than does the non-Jewish population. 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 (pp. 106-111). 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.

When we compare the Jewish family of today to that of a generation or two ago, there may be reason to seriously question "whether the Jewish family can continue to maintain its function of identity-transmission..." (Skalre 1971, pp. 99-100) However, there are several other matters which must be dealt with if we are to gain a context from which one can draw policy implications. First of all, while there has been some erosion in the traditional cohesion of the Jewish family, the American Jewish family remains significantly more cohesive than the non-Jewish American family. Moreover, there have been periods in the not-too-distant past when the Jewish family showed severe signs of stress and strain. True, these were usually during periods of migration. The point, however, is that for an assessment of the role of the family in the transmission of identity and in forming identification, one cannot view the family in a vacuum. The family must be seen within the context of the total community. For while the family is, apparently, the most important structure for the transmission of identity and the formation of identification, it, too, needs the support of other institutional structures. Since this is not the place to evaluate the other institutional structures, such as that of Jewish education (see Bock 1974), we turn now to an outline of policy recommendations.

Both for the children of parents who work outside the home out of choice and for those who do so out of economic necessity, the Jewish community ought to consider developing Jewish day care programs, within which children will be adequately cared for in a Jewish environment. For the programs to be most effective, the parents would play a central role in the planning and administration of the program, and parents would be encouraged to actively participate as volunteers, aides, and, where feasible, as paid staff. (Bronfenbrenner 1976, p. 2a)

One recent approach to strengthening husband-wife relationships, is that of the "marriage encounter." Designed by a Catholic priest, initially for Catholics but now for non-Catholics as well, this is a program which aims at helping husbands and wives to communicate meaningfully with each other, to involve each partner with the deepest feelings of the other, and to thereby enhance their love for each other. Marriage encounter has reportedly met with glowing success, and there is now a specifically Jewish marriage encounter. However, there have been a number of serious questions raised as to the Jewish character of Jewish marriage encounter (Glazer 1976) Jewish organizations might familiarize themselves with the mechanics of marriage encounter, and then accept the challenge posed by Glazer, namely, "much more success can be achieved if we look for solutions out of our own tradition; it is there that we should direct our attention and search for guidelines." (p. 88)

The next suggestion, while aimed at strengthening the Jewish family would, at the same time, deal with a second and not totally unrelated problem in the American Jewish community. Much has been written recently on the extent to which the aged are isolated from their children and grandchildren; indeed they are isolated from virtually all but other aged (Johnson 1973) Moreover, there have been numerous reports and investigations of scandalous conditions in nursing homes. By contrast, Kahn and Kamerman (1975, ch. 7) report that Sweden has developed many communities in which the aged are integrated into a total community of middle aged adults, young adults and children. American Jewish organizations would be remiss were they not to sponsor a study of the feasibility of developing Jewish communities or at least housing, which would be of that integrative nature. In that way the aged would be able to develop relationships with young parents and children and lend necessary support to working parents thereby gaining an increased sense of self worth.

A word of caution must be introduced, however, in order that the responsibility not be placed solely on the shoulders of the family. It must be reemphasized that the family can operate only within a framework of a network of supportive institutions. Efforts must also be directed toward strengthening the Jewish educational system (Bock 1974), the role of religious institutions in general and the clergy in particular (Mayer and Waxman 1976), and the variety of other community institutions.

At the same time, however, it must be recognized that there will probably be an increasing number of parents who will separate. The Jewish community must therefore direct its attention to providing alternatives for the family. Single parents and non-parents are to be viewed as both a problem and a resource. They are a resource because they can be organized into active participants involved in communal child-rearing units. But important as the efforts in this direction may be, care must be exerted that "our effort should not be to institutionalize such alternatives, rather we should help men and women to make their families work." (Hendin 1976)

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