

Jews and Whiteness: Challenging Assumptions for the Sake of Community

Essential Understandings

- American Jewish community has often been assumed to follow a normative white, Jewish, Ashkenaz narrative but the reality is that American Judaism is far more diverse than many assume.
- Challenging normative narratives helps us build more inclusive and welcoming communities because it provides opportunities to open ourselves up to multiple perspectives and ideas.

Essential Questions

- How might we navigate the complexity of race when applied to Jewish identity?
- How do we build more inclusive and welcoming communities even across potential difference?

Excerpt from How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America, by Karen Brodtkin (1998)

The history of Jews in the United States is a history of racial change that provides useful insights on race in America. Prevailing classifications at a particular time have sometimes assigned us to the white race, and at other times have created an off-white race for Jews to inhabit. Those changes in our racial assignment have shaped the ways in which American Jews who grew up in different eras have constructed their ethnoracial identities...

Different generations in my family have different ethnoracial identities. My sons, who did not grow up in a Jewish milieu, tell me they don't really think of themselves as Jewish but rather as generic whites. When I asked my parents [who grew up in the '20s and '30s] what they thought of that, they both gave me a funny look. "We're Jewish," was my father's answer, to which my mother added that, yes, she supposed that she was white, but Jewish was how she saw herself. I see myself as both - white and Jewish.

Discussion Questions

- Do you find Brodtkin's story relatable? Which generation of her do you identify with?

[Beyond the Count: Perspectives and Lived Experiences of Jews of Color](#)

Linked above, the "Beyond the Count" survey in 2020 by the Jews of Color initiative has pushed forward a conversation about race and American Judaism. Their work is meant to center a multiplicity of narratives to challenge normative assumptions about the makeup of the American Jewish community. Pay close attention to why this survey exists and the sorts of norms it challenges.

This research presents an intersectional account of American Jewish life by exploring the ways in which the ethnic, racial, and cultural identities of Jews of Color (JoC) influence and infuse their Jewish experiences. Beyond the Count was commissioned to inform the work of the Jews of Color Initiative (JoCI), a national effort focused on building and advancing the professional, organizational, and communal field for JoC. This study provides valuable insights to help Jewish communities and organizations reckon more directly and effectively with the racial diversity of American Jewry.

In this research, “Jews of Color” is understood as an imperfect, but useful umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of identities and meanings. Those who self-identified as JoC in this study used the term in a multiplicity of ways: as a racial grouping (e.g. Black, Asian, and multiracial Jews); to indicate national heritage (e.g. Egyptian, Iranian, and Ethiopian Jews); to describe regional and geographic connections (e.g. Latina/o/x, Mizrahi, Sephardic Jews); and to specify sub-categories (e.g. transracially adopted Jews and Jewish Women of Color).

Survey Participant Characteristics

- Almost half of respondents (45%) selected two or more racial categories. A majority (66%) identify as “biracial, mixed, multi-racial” or some combination of those identities.
- Most survey respondents (64%) have at least one Jewish parent: 42% have one and 22% have two Jewish parents.
- More than one-third of respondents (40%) indicated they converted or were converted to Judaism.
- The majority of respondents (65%) were raised Jewish (49%) or raised Jewish and something else (16%).
- Respondents were asked if they identify with any of the following religious traditions. Most respondents (77%) said they identify as Jewish exclusively. Another 21% said they identify as Jewish and with one or more other religions.
- More than one-third of respondents (42%) identify as Ashkenazi.

Discussion Questions:

- What is the stated purpose of this study? What are its limitations and how does it push boundaries?
- What are the challenges of defining “Jews of color?” Is it worthwhile to try to “define” Jewish identity?

“Intersectionality as a Jewish Practice” Yavilah Mccoy

Linked below, this video fo Yavilah Mccoy actualizes much of the information of the previous text. It is highly recommended to watch the whole video prior to teaching this text, however, the recommended section to show for this text study is from 4:27-9:31.

Yavilah Mccoy is an advocate and consultant on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, particularly in the American Jewish world. She speaks about her experience as a fourth generation Orthodox, Black Jew and reflects on the intersection of her identities and how issues of intersectionality affect the Jewish community.

Intersectionality as a Jewish Practice

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean for Mccoy to be “unapologetic” about her identities?
- How does Mccoy want to build “just communities that hold all of us.”

“Brandeis U Professor and a Historian Split Over How to Talk about Jews and White Supremacy” Ari Feldman, The Forward

This Forward article (linked above) outlines a controversy related to Marc Dollinger’s book Black Power, Jewish Politics. His book was meant to challenge normative assumptions about the relationship between Black people and the Jewish community in America and became very popular after the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020. While normally an ivory tower debate about an academic book’s forward would not generate many waves, this incident gained traction because it publicized a difficult framing of the nature of Jews and whiteness.

Be prepared for this text to generate some controversy. The controversy is the point. Dollinger is being intentionally provocative in saying that Jews in American “benefit from white supremacy.” If students are uncomfortable, be sure to take the time to patiently discuss why they are uncomfortable. Even if we may not adopt Dollinger’s language, pay attention to the point he makes by sharing this narrative framing.

Since the police killing of George Floyd in May, Dollinger and his book have been in high demand in liberal Jewish communities grappling with structural racism. Dollinger, a historian at San Francisco State University, has given dozens of Zoom lectures in the last seven months, and his publisher, Brandeis University Press, rushed to put out a fourth printing of the 2018 book with a new preface reflecting the current discourse.

Dollinger penned a 2,400-word essay describing the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, writing that suburban white Jews were increasingly recognizing how their upward mobility had “reinforced elements of white supremacy in their own lived experience.”

Editors at the Press objected to Dollinger linking Jews with the term “white supremacy.” Dollinger objected back

The dispute deepened until the publisher not only sent the book to press without the preface, but also took the unusual step of handing Dollinger back the rights for future printings....

What may seem like an ivory tower debate over semantics in fact reflects an enduring fissure in many parts of the American Jewish world. Black Jews are [pushing white Jews](#), who have long considered themselves uniquely devoted allies in the fight for racial justice, to reexamine how they have [benefited from whiteness](#) and been [unwelcoming](#) or [even discriminatory](#) toward Jews of color within their synagogues, schools and community centers.

The preface dispute in some ways reflects a broader debate over the American Jewish story. Is it one of immigrant achievement aided by democratic and meritocratic values? Or of a white ethnic minority gaining access to the dominant racial caste of a racist society?

Discussion Questions

- What is controversial about Dollinger's narrative that "Jews benefit from white supremacy?" How do you feel about the framing?
- How can we ensure our communities are inclusive and equitable in a diverse Jewish world?
- What role do narratives play in Jewish diversity, equity, and inclusion?