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## **The Internalization of Jewish Values by Children Attending Orthodox Jewish Schools, and its Relationship to Autonomy-Supportive Parenting and Adjustment**

LORI R. COHEN, MARINA MILYAVSKAYA,  
AND RICHARD KOESTNER

*The present study examined the way in which children attending Orthodox Jewish schools internalize the value of both their Jewish studies and secular studies, as well as the value of Jewish cultural practices. A distinction was made between identified internalization, where children perceive Jewish studies and Jewish culture to be an important part of their sense of self, and introjected internalization, where children participate in Jewish studies and Jewish culture because they feel like they “ought to” or because of external pressures. Primary identified reasons for their Jewish studies and Jewish cultural practices were significantly associated with positive self and teacher ratings of adjustment; internalization of secular studies was unrelated to adjustment. The study also found that parental support of autonomy, which involves allowing children some latitude in making decisions for themselves regarding religious issues, was associated with greater identification. Together, these results highlight the importance of autonomy-supportive parenting in promoting identification of adolescents’ Jewish identity.*

Teaching children religious beliefs in a highly secular society is extremely challenging, especially when many of the teachings stand in contradiction

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to the generally accepted cultural norms. While North American Jews are anxious to maintain their heritage, they are often uncertain regarding the best way to do this “successfully” in a way that can be transmitted from generation to generation. As a very small minority (approximately 2% of the total North American population; United Jewish Communities, 2001), it can be very difficult for Jews of any denomination to maintain practices and traditions that differ from the vast majority of society. Jewish North Americans subdivide themselves into at least five major groupings (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and secular), as well as smaller subgroups within these broad categories. Some groups that adhere to more stringent Orthodox practices often deal with the non-Jewish world around them by withdrawing, in varying degrees, from secular society. The less religious try to balance the two, trying to avoid assimilation and intermarriage and yet integrate successfully in the workplace and world at large at the same time. Both strategies have their strengths and drawbacks.

There is evidence that attending Jewish day school is associated with greater likelihood of maintaining Jewish practices. The 2000–2001 Jewish Population Survey (United Jewish Communities, 2001) showed that only 7% of Jews with Jewish day school/yeshiva education marry out of the faith, compared to 43% of those with no Jewish education at all; only 5% of those who keep kosher at home have a non-Jewish spouse. With these numbers as a guideline, one could safely say that the intermarriage rate among the Orthodox is less than 5%. Strictly Orthodox children almost uniformly attend religious Jewish day schools, where they meet only other Orthodox Jewish children. Their homes also limit contact with non-Jewish culture; while there are no published numbers, many (and in some communities, the majority) families have no television or Internet access and have limited secular reading—some do not even get a daily newspaper.

While these numbers may indicate that Orthodox practice provides an “inoculation” against assimilation, like all vaccines, it is not foolproof. In a study of Orthodox Jews in New York, Margoless (2005) notes that the number of Orthodox Jewish youth straying from the religious path (going “off the *derech*,” in Orthodox parlance) is a growing problem that is being noted with considerable alarm in the ultra-Orthodox world. She writes,

. . . most agree that no matter what the percentage of observant Jews who [publically] go off the *derech*, it is only the tip of the iceberg. They are the ones who have left with their feet, whose lack of Jewish connection we see. But there are also those who have left with their hearts, whom we do not see. They continue to observe, but their observance is hollow, with no soul, no heart, no real belief at its core. There are still other who would stop observing if they could, but feel unable to do so due to familial or social expectations. These people are not externally or behaviourally off the *derech*, but we might say they are *internally* off the *derech*. (pp. 25–26)

While the Orthodox have always relied on the religious practices of home and community to retain religious practice from generation to generation, clearly it is not enough. Meanwhile, research has found that upbringing, particularly family climate and early Jewish training, were significant predictors of Jewish engagement in adulthood for both Orthodox and non-Orthodox respondents (Horowitz, 2000). The question of isolating the element or elements that help children develop a strong and internalized Jewish identity is of interest to community organizations, parents, and educators alike.

### SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY

The meta-theory of self-determination examines why, as well as how, people choose various aspects of their identities (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). This theory states that three basic needs motivate human behavior: the need for autonomy (the sense that one controls one's own choices and fully endorses one's actions in life); the need for competence (the sense that one can affect one's own life through one's actions); and the need for relatedness (the desire to feel connected to other human beings). One who succeeds in fulfilling these three needs can be said to have a healthy, well-integrated identity. Of course, the road to self-determination starts in early childhood and is never easy. Parents try to help their children form solid, stable identities with the use of discipline and value systems (Deci & Flaste, 1995). As well, teachers and peers provide children with additional role models and values to help crystallize the various aspects of their personal identities. Children can assimilate these values in a range of ways based on how they perceive the socializing force as well as how these values mesh with their own personalities. This process of internalization is more complex than many parents may realize. Grolnick, Deci, and Ryan (1997) explain the complexity: "Whereas socializing agents can 'teach' their children the values and attitudes they hold dear, the important thing is having the children 'own' those values and attitudes. . . . socializing agents such as parents and teachers face the important challenge of how to. . . support a child's natural tendency to internalize cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors" (p. 135).

Self-determination theory further asserts that people are inherently motivated to internalize the regulation of important activities, even if these activities are in of themselves inherently boring (Ryan & Deci, 2000)—a common complaint of children regarding cultural and religious rituals and activities. Individuals spontaneously strive to internalize such activities because of their desire to relate effectively to their social groups. However, the success of this internalization process can vary. Identification describes the process wherein a regulation is fully assimilated within a person's core

sense of self (i.e., it becomes identified with an individual's values, beliefs, and personal goals, e.g., engaging in Torah study because one truly believes it is an important subject to study). Introjection refers to an unsuccessful internalization in which a value or regulatory process is taken in but not accepted as one's own (e.g., engaging in Torah study because you would be letting your family down if you did not). Identification results in a sense of personal endorsement of one's actions, whereas introjection yields a controlled form of behavior regulation that is laced with feelings of pressure, compulsion, or guilt (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The internalization process, thus, results in regulatory styles that reflect varying degrees of self-determination depending on the successful or unsuccessful resolution of the process.

Previous research based on self-determination theory indicates that the way one internalizes religious beliefs and values can greatly impact how religious practice influences one's well being (Ryan, Rigby, & King, 1993), and that "religious beliefs and activities represent a particularly interesting domain in which to examine internalization because they vary culture to culture and are often central to participating individuals' systems of values and social identities" (p. 586). Because of the centrality of religion in cultural and psychological life, the manner in which it is internalized can have implications for well being and successful adjustment. In a series of studies with four different groups of Christian youth and adults, Ryan, Rigby and King demonstrated that identification and introjection could be reliably distinguished by asking participants why they followed various religious beliefs and activities. The studies also showed that identification was significantly positively associated with a host of adjustment indicators, including mental health, self-esteem, and self-actualization, whereas introjection was significantly negatively associated with the same indicators. Although they focused their studies exclusively on Christian denominations, the authors believe that the distinction between identified and introjected forms of religious internalization should be relevant to all religious development.

Other research in the academic domain suggests that how children internalize the value of studying for their classes can greatly influence their school-related emotions, cognitions, and behaviors. Ryan and Connell (1989) explored academic self-regulation by asking a large sample of primary school children their reasons for doing school-related activities. These researchers distinguished among identified reasons related to self-valued goals and personal importance ("I do homework because I want to understand the subject") and introjected reasons related to achieving self or other approval ("I do homework because I want the teacher to think I am a good student"). Results showed that identification was associated with greater school enjoyment, whereas introjection was associated with greater school anxiety. A subsequent study confirmed that identification was significantly associated with positive emotions while at school, whereas introjection was

associated with anxiety, sadness, and anger (Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993). A similar pattern of results was obtained among gifted third and fourth graders (Miserandino, 1996). In addition to its link with distressing emotions, other studies suggested that introjection may impair children's conceptual learning (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987) and their ability to accurately judge their own academic abilities (Connell & Illardi, 1987).

### THE ROLE OF AUTONOMY SUPPORT IN INTERNALIZATION OF JEWISH IDENTITY

Parental support is an important determinant of whether children will successfully internalize important values. Autonomy support refers to the active support of the child's capacity to be self-initiating and autonomous (Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008). Research has found that children of autonomy-supportive parents—parents who allow a child latitude in making decisions for themselves and make a child feel confident and secure—have greater levels of identified motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Downie, Koestner, El Geledi, & Cree, 2004; Grolnick, Deci, et al., 1997). When parents want to encourage children to adopt guidelines and activities, parental autonomy support helps to foster autonomous self-regulation rather than mere compliance. Self-determination theory posits that children are intrinsically motivated to internalize important values in order to connect with the important "others" that surround them; parents can be instrumental in facilitating their child's autonomous internalization of a value system (Grolnick, Deci, et al., 1997). Although much of Jewish religious practice is not necessarily inherently enjoyable or easy, research has found that autonomy-supportive behaviors help the internalization of "boring" tasks through explaining the reasoning for the task, validating feelings related to the task, and minimizing the controls used to administer the task (Joussemet, Koestner, Lekes, & Houliort, 2004; Joussemet, Koestner, Lekes, & Landry, 2005). This evidence indicates that socializing agents do not have to compel individuals to internalize important values and guidelines. However, autonomy can frighten parents when the stakes are perceived to be high; what if the child chooses to adhere to a lesser standard of observance, or leave the faith altogether? For Orthodox parents, their child's very soul can be at stake, making "autonomy" seem a poor strategy at best, and leading parents to resort to more coercive and autonomy-suppressive tactics. Margolese's (2005) research shows that those who "go off the derech" do so for numerous reasons, most of which relate to a lack of autonomy support and diminishment of important relationships. Respondents to her survey indicated that often they felt a parent's love was conditional on religious observance; that religion was "shoved down their throats"; that parents employed coercive methods to ensure religious compliance; and they faced ridicule and scorn

from parents, teachers, and others in their community when their level of observance was not considered “up to scratch.”

While autonomy-supportive practices might seem counterintuitive to some parents, they have been shown to be effective. A study conducted with Israeli youth (Assor, Cohen-Malayev, Kaplan, & Friedman, 2005) has shown that more latitude and less control are positively correlated with internalization of religious identity. Assor and colleagues examined parental practices that led to the successful internalization of religious values. Three autonomy-supportive practices in particular were found to be important: providing rationale for the religious practices and behaviors; demonstrating intrinsic values of these practices; and encouraging critical thinking about religious practice and beliefs. The third practice is especially intriguing, as the more stringently Orthodox tend to discourage aggressive questioning of religious beliefs and practices. The use of conditional love, on the other hand, resulted in introjected internalization and its attendant negative affects, supporting the results of Margolese’s (2005) survey.

In the present study, we consider the way in which Jewish children in two Orthodox schools have internalized the value of studying both Jewish studies and secular studies, as well as the value of Jewish practices. We examine whether students report predominantly identified or introjected reasons for studying and practicing their religion and whether their level of motivation is different than for secular studies. As previous research has shown that identification is associated with better adjustment than introjection (Koestner & Losier, 2002), we also examine whether the different forms of motivation are differentially associated with adjustment outcomes such as teacher reports and self-reports of well being. Finally, given the importance of parental autonomy support in internalizing a value system (Downie, Koestner, et al., 2007), we explore whether there is a link between perceived parenting behaviors and different forms of internalization.

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were 30 seventh and eighth grade students from a strictly Orthodox girl’s school and 13 participants (9 girls and 4 boys) from a modern Orthodox coeducational school. Of the total population, 32 (74.4%) identified as Orthodox, 6 (14%) as Conservative, 2 (4.7%) as Reform, and one each (2.3%) as Reconstructionist and unaffiliated/secular. Thirty-eight (88.4%) of the participants listed English as their native language, four (9.3%) listed French, and one listed “other.” Participation was on a voluntary basis and required parental consent. Students were gathered in a classroom at lunchtime and asked to fill out the questionnaires. Each signed a coded consent form. The code from the consent form was transferred to the

questionnaire, and the questionnaires and consent forms were kept separate in order to maintain student anonymity. The questionnaires took approximately 15–20 minutes to complete. The researcher was available to answer any questions and offer clarifications. In return for their participation and to compensate for the loss of their lunch hour, the students each received chocolate bars, cookies, and fancy pens. The codes and names from the consent forms were then transferred to teacher rating forms for each student. The teachers answered the questionnaires on their own time and in return received a small gift certificate.

## Measures

The following questionnaires were used to gather the data. Apart from the demographic questionnaire, all measured responses on a scale of 1–5, with 1 being *not at all true* and 5 being *completely true*.

### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Students age, gender, and ethnic background were assessed.

### INTERNALIZATION OF JEWISH AND SECULAR STUDIES

Two 6-item questionnaires regarding regulation for Judaic and secular studies were administered (adapted from Ryan & Connell, 1989). The scale included two items assessing identified religious values (“Jewish/Secular studies are important to me personally” and “Jewish/Secular studies are not important to me at all” reversed). The scale also included four items designed to assess introjection: “When it comes to Jewish (or Secular) studies, I study . . .” (1) “to please my parents,” (2) “to please my teachers,” (3) “to get good marks,” and (4) “because I would feel guilty if I did not.” All four items emphasize motivation based in pressure from others or from controlling factors within oneself.

### INTERNALIZATION OF JEWISH CULTURAL PRACTICES

A three-part questionnaire assessed regulatory styles for the participation in, the maintenance of, and the perceived value of the Jewish culture (adapted from Downie, Koestner, et al, 2004). For each of three statements (“I often participate in Jewish cultural traditions”; “It is important for me to maintain the practices of Jewish culture”; and “I believe in the values of Jewish culture”), participants rated the extent to which they did it for the following reasons: “Because I would feel ashamed, guilty, or anxious if I didn’t—I feel that I ought to do this”(introjected motivation) and “Because I really believe that it is important to do—I endorse it freely and value it wholeheartedly”

(identified motivation). The three statements for each motivation were combined to form a measure of introjected ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and identified ( $\alpha = .94$ ) motivation for Jewish culture.

#### PERCEIVED PARENTAL AUTONOMY SUPPORT

Based on self-determination theory's definition of caring, listening, and understanding, this four-item questionnaire asked participants about their perceived level of parental autonomy support in Jewish religious and identity contexts (i.e., "My parents seem to care how I truly feel about participating in religious practices"; "My parents try to help me find my own way to express my Jewish identity"). This scale was adapted from the autonomy support scale recently developed by Downie, Chua, et al. (2007;  $\alpha = .84$ ).

#### CHILD SELF-REPORTED ADJUSTMENT

A widely-used six-item, questionnaire measuring children's self-concept was used. This scale was used in a very large longitudinal study of American teenagers and the authors reported excellent psychometric qualities (Anderman, 2002;  $\alpha = .79$ ).

#### TEACHER-RATED ADJUSTMENT

Three teachers—one each from Judaic, French, and secular studies—completed a three-item questionnaire for each student participant. Item 1 rated the student's attitude, item 2 student's behavior, and item 3 student's motivation. These nine teacher ratings were combined for each participant to obtain a measure of teacher-rated school adjustment ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means for all of the items included in the measures of internalization of Jewish and secular studies. Paired-sample *t* tests indicated that only on the two identified items were Jewish studies rated differently than secular studies. This indicated that participants were significantly more identified in how they internalized the value of their Jewish studies compared to their secular studies. There was no difference in how much participants endorsed introjected reasons for their Jewish versus secular studies. In both their Jewish and secular studies, participants reported significantly greater identified rather than introjected reasons ( $t(42) = 7.84$  and  $t(42) = 3.41$ , for Jewish and secular studies, respectively,  $p < .005$ , for both). Additionally, participants reported more identified ( $M = 4.13$ ) rather than introjected ( $M = 2.15$ ) reasons for participating in Jewish cultural practises,  $t(41) = 9.49$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 1.** Mean internalization item ratings by Jewish versus secular studies.

	Jewish	Secular	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
I study ___ to please my parents.	2.72	2.79	-0.42	<i>n.s.</i>
I study ___to please my teachers.	2.56	2.61	-0.29	<i>n.s.</i>
I study ___to get good marks.	3.93	4.12	-1.60	<i>n.s.</i>
I study ___because I would feel guilty if I didn't.	2.19	2.33	-1.03	<i>n.s.</i>
___ is not important to me at all. (reversed)	4.56	3.88	2.82	< .01
I study ___because it is personally important.	4.10	3.52	2.50	< .01

*Note.* In the separate surveys "Jewish studies" or "secular studies" would replace the \_\_\_\_.  
All scales are 1-5; *n.s.* = not significant.

**TABLE 2.** Standardized regression coefficients of self-concept and teacher ratings of school adjustment on introjected and identified motivation.

Predictors	Self-concept		Teacher-reported adjustment	
Motivation for Jewish studies	$R^2 = .17$ $F(2,40) = 4.15, p = .023$		$R^2 = .23$ $F(2,40) = 5.95, p = .005$	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Introjected	-.13	-.96	.19	1.33
Identified	.38*	2.67	.45**	3.24
Motivation for practicing Jewish Culture	$R^2 = .13$ $F(2,39) = 2.96, p=.064$		$R^2 = .02$ $F(2,39) = .41, n.s.$	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>		
Introjected	-.06	-.36		
Identified	.38*	2.40		

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

To examine the effects of identification and introjection of Jewish studies and Jewish culture, a series of multiple regressions were performed on self-reports of self-concept and teacher-reported adjustment (see Table 2). Identification with Jewish studies was significantly positively linked to both scales of adjustment, while introjection was unrelated to either. A separate analysis indicated that when asked about their secular studies, there was no relation between the level of identification and either teacher-reported or self-reported adjustment. These results suggest that identification is uniquely associated with positive adjustment, but only in reference to internalization of religious rather than secular studies. Additionally, identification with Jewish cultural practices was significantly positively related to self-reported adjustment, while introjection was unrelated. Neither type of motivation related to teacher-reported adjustment. As with the pursuit of Jewish studies, following Jewish cultural practices for identified reasons appears to be associated with adolescents' adjustment. Supplemental analyses indicated that all of the results above held true when participants' gender and particular school were controlled for.

**TABLE 3.** Correlations of motivation for Jewish studies and Jewish cultural practices with parent autonomy support.

	Autonomy support
Introjection of Jewish studies	.17
Identification of Jewish studies	.36*
Introjection of Jewish cultural practices	.11
Identification of Jewish cultural practices	.36*

\* $p < .05$ .

Table 3 shows the correlations of parental autonomy support with identified and introjected motivation for religious studies and cultural practice. While unrelated to introjection, parental autonomy support was significantly positively associated with higher identification for both Jewish studies and Jewish cultural practices. This suggests that children who perceive their parents as behaving in an autonomy supportive manner are more likely to have internalized the importance of Jewish studies and Jewish cultural practices in an identified manner.

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined the way in which children attending Orthodox Jewish schools internalize the value of both their Jewish and secular studies and the importance of Jewish cultural practices. It was found that students reported primarily identified reasons for their Jewish studies and that such reasons were significantly associated with healthy adjustment as indicated in teacher ratings and self-reports. The way in which students internalized the value of secular studies was not related to teacher ratings or well being. Additionally, identification with Jewish cultural practices was also related to better self-concept, although not to teacher ratings. The study also found that perceived parental support of autonomy regarding religious and identity issues (e.g., by listening and taking the child's perspective) was associated with greater identification. Together, these results highlight the importance of promoting identification in the way in which Jewish youth internalize their cultural beliefs.

The present study extends the work of Ryan et al. (1993) who distinguished between identified and introjected religious internalization in three important ways. First, the present study examined internalization of Jewish cultural practices rather than Christian ones. Second, the present study included a sample of 11- to 13-year-old children rather than samples of college students and adults (as one might expect that the process of internalization is especially salient in the younger sample). Finally, the present study included not only self-report of adjustment but also teacher ratings of the participants' attitudes, motivations, and behaviors.

This study builds on a great deal of previous work related to self-determination theory, which demonstrates the importance of autonomy support in promoting healthy internalization and positive adjustment. It is important to note that supporting autonomy does not mean being permissive; rather, it refers to providing structured guidance about being Jewish in a democratic manner, which respects children's interests and feelings. Parents cannot assume that children will absorb certain values simply because the parents hold those values dear. They must find a way to make those values relevant to the child as an individual. For example, a parent who tells a child, "You're going to synagogue because I said so!" invites rebellion, especially when a Jewish neighbor and student at the same school spends Saturday mornings playing video games. Examples of an autonomy-supportive attitude would be, "It's natural to not always like going to synagogue, but our family is Jewish and going to synagogue is something we do. What parts of synagogue do you like best? How can we help you enjoy synagogue more?" Such autonomy support in the family context is associated with a host of positive child outcomes in other domains. Observational studies reveal that parents' autonomy support is associated with better motivation and persistence in infants and better internalization among toddlers (e.g. Frodi, Bridges, & Grolnick, 1985; Kochanska & Arksan, 1995). Interview studies in which parental autonomy support was coded reveal that this style is positively linked with children's social and academic adjustment at school (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). Similarly, adolescent reports of their perceptions of parental autonomy support are related to psychosocial and academic benefits (e.g. Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991).

### Directions for Future Research and Practice

This study found that perceived parental autonomy support was related to the integration of Jewish identity in children on the cusp of adolescence. A longitudinal study could help establish a causal link, ascertaining that autonomy-supportive parenting, in fact, leads to better integration of Jewish studies and Jewish practice. Studies that assess actual rather than perceived parental autonomy support could also clarify the direction of causality, ruling out the possibility that children who internalize their Jewish identity perceive their parents as more autonomy supportive. Additionally, future research can examine whether identification with Jewish practices is positively related to well being throughout development, or whether this connection develops at a certain age or is more prominent in one gender than the other. This can be done through replication of the study with younger children and with more gender-balanced samples.

As perceived parental autonomy support has been shown to be associated with higher levels of identified internalization of Jewish identity, Jewish

day schools might look at ways to help parents understand the importance of autonomy support in the religious sphere. This could be done by offering parents guidance or workshops to help parents learn autonomy-supportive ways of discussing religious issues.

In addition to parents, schools and teachers have been shown to play a crucial role in children's successful internalization of important values (Reeve, 2002). Indeed, numerous studies at both the elementary and high school level show that teacher autonomy support contribute to students' autonomous internalization of educational activities and well being and adjustment outcomes (e.g. Ryan & Grolnick, 1986; Patrick et al., 1993; Reeve, 2002). Furthermore, other research has shown that teachers' autonomous motivation for teaching led to more autonomy-supportive classroom practices (Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2007). Based on this evidence, Jewish schools should strive to provide students with autonomy-supportive environments to encourage greater internalization of Jewish values. Future studies should confirm this by examining the specific role that teachers and class material can play in integrating religious studies and practice in a self-determined and self-regulatory manner.

While this study focused exclusively on Orthodox day schools, future studies should be conducted in non-Orthodox schools, such as afternoon and Sunday schools. Unlike Orthodox children for whom Jewish day school is a normal and expected part of life, non-Orthodox children often attend afternoon or Sunday Jewish schools in addition to secular day schools. As such, part time Jewish learning thus competes with other extracurricular activities, such as sports or music classes, which can often be more inherently interesting than learning about one's religion; thus, it would seem important for non-Orthodox children attending Sunday school to properly internalize the importance of their Jewish studies and Jewish religion, with parental autonomy support playing an active role to impart to their children the importance of learning about one's religion. Further research is needed to examine the exact role of identification and introjection of Jewish studies and Jewish culture in non-Orthodox Jews, as well the link with parental autonomy support.

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