



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Fixity and Flux: A Critique of Competing Approaches to Researching Contemporary Jewish Identities*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/123679/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Samson, MGM, Vanderbeck, RM [orcid.org/0000-0003-0274-3505](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0274-3505) and Wood, N (2018) *Fixity and Flux: A Critique of Competing Approaches to Researching Contemporary Jewish Identities*. *Social Compass*, 65 (1). pp. 97-113. ISSN 0037-7686

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768617747505>

---

© The Author(s) 2018. All rights reserved. This is an author produced version of a paper accepted for publication as, 'Samson, MGM, Vanderbeck, RM and Wood, N (2017) *Fixity and Flux: A Critique of Competing Approaches to Researching Contemporary Jewish Identities*. *Social Compass*.' Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

**Names:** Maxim GM Samson, Robert M Vanderbeck, Nichola Wood

**University, Country:** University of Leeds, UK

**Title: Fixity and Flux: A Critique of Competing Approaches to Researching Contemporary Jewish Identities**

**Abstract:** Jewish identities are becoming increasingly pluralised due to internal dynamics within Judaism and wider social processes such as secularisation, globalisation and individualisation. However, empirical research on contemporary Jewish identities often continues to adopt restrictive methodological and conceptual approaches that reify Jewish identity and portray it as a ‘product’ for educational providers and others to pass to younger generations. Moreover, these approaches typically impose identities upon individuals, often as a form of collective affiliation, without addressing their personal significance. In response, this article argues for increased recognition of the multiple and fluid nature of personal identities in order to investigate the diverse ways in which Jews live and perform their Jewishness. Paying greater attention to personal identities facilitates recognition of the intersections between different forms of identity, enabling more complex understandings of the ways in which individuals both define their own identities and contribute to redefining the boundaries of Jewishness.

**Keywords:** Jewish identity, Judaism, performativity, religious pluralisation

**Resumé:** Les identités juives sont de plus en plus pluralisées en raison de la dynamique interne au judaïsme et des processus sociaux comme la sécularisation, la mondialisation et l'individualisation.

Cependant, la recherche empirique sur les identités juives contemporaines continue souvent à adopter des approches méthodologiques et conceptuelles restrictives qui réifient l'identité juive et la décrivent comme un «produit» pour les établissements d'éducation à transmettre aux jeunes générations. Ces approches imposent généralement des identités aux individus, souvent comme une forme d'affiliation collective, sans considérer leur signification personnelle. Cet article propose une reconnaissance de la nature multiple et fluide des identités personnelles afin de comprendre les diverses façons dont les Juifs vivent leur judaïsme. Une plus grande attention aux identités personnelles facilite la reconnaissance des intersections entre les différentes formes d'identité, permettant une compréhension plus complexe des façons dont les individus définissent leurs identités et contribuent à redéfinir les frontières de la judéité.

**Mots clés:** Identité juive, Judaïsme, performativité, pluralisation religieuse

**FIXITY AND FLUX: A CRITIQUE OF COMPETING APPROACHES TO  
RESEARCHING  
CONTEMPORARY JEWISH IDENTITIES**

**Introduction**

Questions of Jewish identity are rarely far from the headlines, whether in relation to national integration, global geopolitics, religious freedom or a host of other contemporary concerns. In France, for example, significant public debate has recently focused on the changing senses of national identification amongst French Jews as a result of rising anti-Semitism (Hall, 2016), while in the United Kingdom practices of Orthodox Jewish education have become subject to intense media scrutiny for allegedly failing to foster ‘British values’ in pupils (Vanderbeck and Johnson, 2016). In the USA, considerable media attention is periodically focused on American Jews’ fluctuating levels of commitment to the state of Israel and the significance of these commitments for understanding voting behaviour (Waxman, 2016). These media reports are often fuelled by surveys and other forms of social research on Jewish identity. Findings from a recent Pew Center report, for instance, received substantial press coverage focused on apparent differences in the characteristics that American and Israeli Jews regard ‘as essential parts of what being Jewish means’<sup>1</sup> (Lipka, 2016).

Social scientists have important roles to play in understanding the changing nature of contemporary Jewish identities. A growing body of research documents the increasing pluralisation of Jewish identities, which are simultaneously marked by long-standing yet nevertheless still evolving categorical distinctions based on movement (e.g. Orthodox, Reform) and ethnicity (Ashkenazi, Sephardi) as well as more individual differences related to, for example,

levels of religious observance and personal philosophy (Kudenko and Phillips, 2010). Explanations for this pluralisation are complex but include processes of globalisation (Gilman, 2011), individualisation (Cohen and Eisen, 2000) and secularisation (Sacks, 1991) that, it is argued, serve to increase individuals' autonomy to self-fashion their identities. Theories of secularisation have been particularly influential in explaining changes to contemporary patterns and processes of religious identification more generally. Although secularisation remains a highly contested concept (Kong and Woods, 2016), there is broad agreement that in many western societies there have been significant shifts in levels of individual identification with institutionalised forms of religion (Bruce, 2013) and that social structures that once represented centres of collective identity have been eroded (Brown, 2001).

Judaism in numerous ways exemplifies these changes. Many Jews in pre-modern Europe lived in relatively insular, internally governed communities in which they were expected to sustain a religious identity (Berkovitz, 1989). Following the French Revolution, European Jews were progressively afforded opportunities to become citizens of their host societies, and as a result were exposed to diverse 'new' ethnic and religious options with which to affiliate, while continuing to be subjected to anti-Semitism that served to re-inscribe a sense of difference (Brenner, 2008).<sup>2</sup> Whereas some Jews developed largely insular movements resistant (though not impervious) to change, many Jews chose to establish new forms of instruction that integrated aspects of the surrounding culture (Cohn-Sherbok, 1993).

Thus, despite the fact that diasporic Jews have historically lived without a centralised authority, Jews today experience increased opportunities to 'choose' an identity, creating more fluid and detached forms of Jewishness (Kudenko and Phillips, 2010). Against this backdrop of ongoing pluralisation, this article provides a critical review of social scientific research on

contemporary Jewish identities, arguing that their complexity is habitually elided through the adoption of approaches that utilise reified categories and descriptors of what characterises ‘authentic’ Jewishness (Zelkowitz, 2013). This type of research also rarely considers in any depth the ‘doing’ of identity as an active process, restricting our understanding of how identities are produced, performed and contested in different temporal and spatial contexts. As a contrast with these more static approaches to Jewish identity, the article engages with a newer strand of social scientific research that – influenced by broader theoretical approaches that emphasise the multiple, fluid and performative nature of identity – offer potentially new insights into the complexity and diversity of contemporary forms of Jewish identity (e.g. Horowitz, 2002; Charmé et al., 2008). The article endorses this latter approach while also recognising that its uptake is inconsistent within academia, and there remains a propensity to emphasise collective identity at the expense of more personal forms. We argue that greater attention to individual identity is valuable not only as a way of collecting multiple personal accounts but also as a way of developing complex understandings of individuals’ attempts at reworking and redefining (rather than simply reproducing) Jewishness.

The article will proceed as follows. The first section illustrates the ways in which previous empirical research has tended to restrict Jews’ individualised expressions of Jewish identity through imposing pre-defined conceptions of Jewishness that are generally skewed towards Orthodox practices and rooted in collective institutions. As the second section highlights, any understanding of identity must analyse the interrelationships between collective social identities and individual identities, with Judaism conspicuously marked by contestation over questions of peoplehood in different social contexts. Finally, the article argues for an enhanced focus on individual identities in order to recognise the personalised ways in which Jews ‘live’ and

conceptualise their identities, an approach with the potential to facilitate an understanding of the personal significance of Jewish identities and the diverse spaces in which these are constructed.

### **The reification of Jewish identity**

Since the mid-1980s, theorists of identity – influenced both by poststructuralist theory and the growth of identity politics – have sought to replace the notion of a ‘unified’ identity with the concept of dynamic, multiple and fractured identities (cf. Hall, 1996; Hetherington, 1998). In an attempt to liberate identities from being epistemologically treated as fixed products and defining forms, social scientists became increasingly influenced by works on performance and performativity as a way of understanding the ‘doings’ of identity (cf. Parker and Sedgwick, 1995). This marked an attempt to move away from the traditional practice of converting the ‘doings’ of life into neat packages of experience, to exploring identity in the making or the doing (Wood, 2012). Theorisations of performance and identity in the social sciences are often derived from the works of Butler (1990, 1993) and Goffman (1959, 1974). Whilst offering contrasting theoretical understandings of performativity, these works have sought to explore the ways in which the performance of individual identities – what people say, do and act-out – is always subsumed within and/or related to performativity (Gregson and Rose, 2000). Performativity, understood as ‘the citational practices which produce and subvert discourse and knowledge, and which at the same time enable and discipline subjects and their performances,’ is key to apprehending the ways in which identities are (re)produced, negotiated and contested in particular spatial and temporal contexts (Gregson and Rose, 2000: 433). Such works move away from a simple mapping of identities onto specific bodies to thinking about how individual identities are (re)produced in dialogue with (or as a reaction against) previously ascribed ways of being. Moreover, intersectional

research has attended to the numerous relational contexts of people's identities (Valentine, 2007) rather than treating them as singular and separate.

Yet, theories of the multiplicity and fluidity of identity have not been embraced by all scholars of Judaism as either useful or desirable (Zelkowitz, 2013). Instead, as Prell (2000) and Zelkowitz (2013) illustrate, a substantial strand of research since the mid-1960s has continued to prioritise certain 'indicators' of religious or ethnic practice or group attachment in order to better 'predict' Jewish identity or identification and thus gauge its 'survival' or 'decline.'<sup>3</sup> Given that these 'indicators' aim to ascertain the extent to which individuals meet researchers' expectations of an immovable Jewishness, they implicitly and inevitably construct some individuals as somehow identity-deficient (Prell, 2000; Charmé et al., 2008), resulting in a 'Humpty-Dumpty narrative' of Jewish identity being somehow 'broken' and needing to be 'fixed' (Zelkowitz, 2013). Reflecting the assumption that some (invariably more 'traditional') versions of Judaism are more 'authentic' than others (Charmé, 2000), these indicators are commonly skewed towards traditional Orthodox practices and attitudes, such as keeping Kosher and lighting Shabbat candles regularly (e.g. Haji et al., 2011; Sheskin and Hartman, 2015) or parental in-marriage and an Orthodox upbringing (Saxe et al., 2013) and often draw rigid distinctions between 'religious' and 'cultural' or 'ethnic' practices (e.g. Friedlander et al., 2010) that fail to acknowledge the personalised ways in which individuals perceive their practices or identities. Such issues are exacerbated by the fact that participant expression is generally restricted to questionnaires, which restrict respondents' freedom to specify details of and motivations behind their practices (Prell, 2000), even though practices such as Kashrut can be spatially and temporally contingent (Scholefield, 2004; Kudenko and Phillips, 2010). Relatedly, the Pew Research Center's (2013) dichotomisation of 'Jews by religion' and 'Jews of no religion' using criteria such as synagogue attendance and Seder



participation – which may be experienced non-religiously – constrains understandings of how religiosity is schematised in different ways by different people. Furthermore, despite the fact that Judaism ‘does not negate the possibility of other covenants with other peoples’ (Sacks, 1995: 120), a ‘Jewish’ identity is often presented as something fixed that can be understood primarily in its relation to a ‘non-Jewish’ (and typically ‘secular’) ‘Other’ (Charmé et al., 2008; Rohrbacher, 2016). For example, Saroglou and Hanique (2006) deem Jewish identity theoretically compatible with a broader, Belgian national identity, but ‘measure,’ compare and consequently reify it using cultural and religious indicators (including importance of God, importance of religion in life, and frequency of prayer) which do not attend to the complex spatiality and temporality of individual religious belief (McGuire, 2008). In these ways, it seems that sociologists have inadvertently ‘invented’ a normative Jewishness that they aim to measure (Prell, 2000), regardless of its relevance to individual Jews, and have facilitated the emergence of a master narrative that utilises ‘nearly identical questions’ and engages in ‘the same survivalist versus transformationist debates’ (Zelkowicz, 2013: 27). Moreover, the persistent use of such measures reflects an underlying reluctance to acknowledge other modes of Jewish identity, even though a single, ‘authentic’ version of Jewish identity is illusory because all identities intersect with multiple others including nationality, gender, sexuality and politics (see Valentine, 2007).

An implication of seeking to measure Jewish identity in this way is that it contributes to a form of reification that allows Jewishness to be marketed (Zelkowicz, 2013; Krasner, 2016). As such, the response to assimilation fears has been evocatively described as a ‘drink-your-milk’ model in which a healthy Jewish identity is assumed to be produced through a diet of Jewish education and experience during childhood and adolescence (Charmé et al., 2008: 117). For example, Fishman et al. (2012) suggest that an ‘intervention’ of Jewish ‘social capital’ is required

for Jewish teenagers so that they can develop a long-term Jewish identity based upon Jewish friendships and education. Moreover, the very title of Graham's (2014a) research *Strengthening Jewish Identity: What works?* is indicative of research that insinuates that a Jewish identity can be produced through the intervention of Jewish organisations and the provision of the 'right' resources. Accordingly, studies of Jewish schools traditionally seek to establish causal links between Jewish education and a number of quantitative indicators of Jewish practice or identification. For instance, Graham (2014b: 51) suggests that communal intervention programmes such as Jewish schools have a 'measurable and statistically significant effect on the sample across all six dimensions [cognitive religiosity, socio-religious behaviour, student community engagement, Jewish values, ethnocentricity and cultural religiosity] of Jewish identity,' but the measures impose certain assumptions of 'Jewish' behaviour (including Yom Kippur fasting and Jewish Society involvement) that may not correspond to all individuals' experiences or perceptions. Such indicators also struggle to distinguish external influences, hence the fact that young people reappropriate adults' perspectives and draw on multiple sources to form personalised and hybrid religious identities (Hopkins et al., 2011) is ignored.

Crucially, these indicators are largely skewed towards public or communal forms of expression. For example, Sheskin and Hartman (2015) emphasise synagogue service attendance, synagogue membership, familiarity with and membership of Jewish organisations and donations to Jewish Federations and charities, thus revealing an assumption of institutional participation, rather than legitimising forms of Jewishness that exist separately from such organisations. This emphasis on collective identity at the expense of individual identities reflects an ideological bias towards the maintenance and strengthening of Jewish institutions given a prevailing assumption that they are necessary to sustaining Jewishness (e.g. DellaPergola, 2011). Indeed, many

commentators who contest claims of assimilation nevertheless tend to present Jewish values and identities as rooted in communal institutions such as synagogues, schools and philanthropies, which are said to remind individuals of their culture and history (e.g. Goldscheider, 2004), despite other research (e.g. Cohen and Eisen, 2000) demonstrating that American Jews (for instance) choose to define their Jewishness in personalised ways, increasingly viewing their Jewishness separately from traditional Jewish institutions. Such tendencies are also evident in non-peer reviewed research into Jewish youth movements and Israel trips, which continues to view collective identities as a necessary objective to which these institutions are intended to contribute, rather than intensively investigating the personal significance of these experiences (e.g. Miller et al., 2013). Consequently, the emphasis of this research is less on the meaning that Jewish identity has to individuals, and more on gauging the impacts of these organisations on a collective sense of presumptive and reified Jewishness.

Even when individuals' perspectives are addressed, most research across various national contexts limits these to collectivities, including the negotiation of community or congregational life (e.g. Buckser, 2003a; Punzi and Frischer, 2016), or places the majority of emphasis upon formal and informal educational experiences (e.g. Horowitz, 2003). Moreover, where research has been extended to other spaces, it has rarely explored individual meanings of Jewishness. For instance, Cohen and Kelman (2007) valuably describe the diverse ways in which young Jews are creatively restructuring their Jewish lives through organisations separate from traditional Jewish institutions, such as theatre companies, music record labels and salons, empowering them to reclaim Jewish identity and community on their own terms, but they largely restrict their interviews to the organisations' leaders, speaking only to a small number of participants. Ariel (2011) demonstrates the involvement of Jews in new religious movements that attempt to reinvent their

faith and amalgamate previously disparate philosophies, but his focus remains on groups rather than exploring individuals' experiences of identity and reasons for affiliating. Shain et al.'s (2013: 3) research into 'DIY Judaism' ('alternative forms of Jewish engagement that bypass the established infrastructure of American Jewish life') has continued to reflect the traditional paradigm of survey-based indicators of Jewishness aimed at measuring largely communal forms of attachment, such as attendance at Jewish organisation-sponsored events, instead of intensively exploring manifestations of and motivations behind individualised forms of Jewish expression. Although Ipgrave (2016) explores young people's inter-religious experiences in a Jewish day schools, she does not investigate what being Jewish means to them personally. Thus, despite some attempts to move away from 'objective' measures of Jewish identity and to focus on new spaces of Jewish involvement, research has rarely afforded individual identities significant attention. Yet, as Hearn (2007) has recognised in the case of nationalism, an overly constructionist, top-down and institution-focused view can disguise or conceal the personal significance of people's identities and subjective responses, resulting in a limited understanding of the interrelationships between individuals and society. In the next section, we focus specifically on the importance of attending to the dynamic interplay between individual and collective forms of identity to better understand contemporary patterns of religious transformation and pluralisation.

### **The dynamic relationship between individual and collective identities**

Krasner (2016) has illustrated how Jewish identity is rooted in Erikson's (1950) concept of 'identity crises.' As he argues, whereas Erikson focused on identity's individual qualities, social scientific research on Jewish identity has tended to impose particular, exclusive assumptions of (generally collective) identity upon individuals, within a context of fear regarding the increased

voluntariness of group belonging. However, Cohen and Wertheimer (2006) are sceptical about perceiving Jewry as only a collection of distinct individuals, and argue that attention must remain on the historic core of peoplehood. Cohen and Wertheimer are right to contend that there must be some form of collectivity to sustain a conception of Jewishness. Despite Hall's (1996: 4) claim that identity is constructed 'only through the relation to the Other,' a common bond must also exist between individuals (Jenkins, 2008), and when asked to define Jewishness, many Jewish respondents in previous studies have used essentialist ideas, such as the notion that one is born Jewish and that this identity is not contingent on observance or socialisation (Cohen and Eisen, 2000; Davidman, 2007). Such attitudes are generally related to Halakha (Jewish law), which arguably presents a much more fixed boundary structure for recognition as a member of the community (based on having a Jewish mother) than found in many other religious traditions. Indeed, Progressive Judaism's extension of Jewish identity to children of Jewish fathers as well as its alterations to religious marriage and conversion procedures have resulted in Jewish identities being 'granted' to individuals who are not considered legitimate by Orthodox groups (Cohn-Sherbok, 1993). In these ways, adherence to Halakha may be considered a religious commitment, yet this law defines Jewish identity as based on descent and unrelated to religious belief or practice, with consequences for the ways in which Jews view themselves and how they are researched. Certainly, the existence of individuals who consider themselves atheistic Jews or 'half-Jews' highlights how a sense of relation to a Jewish collectivity is intergenerationally transmitted, even if this transmission is sometimes only partial (and intriguingly, Halakha does not validate such claims of being 'half Jewish' as it adjudges that Jewishness is based only upon one's mother's ancestry and thus the father's genetics are irrelevant) (Imhoff, 2016). Given that Orthodox Judaism subscribes to exclusive definitions of 'Jewish' that restrict possibilities for personalised

expressions and engagement, it is perhaps unsurprising that many researchers appear hesitant to conceptualise the Jewish faith as a personalised, lived experience: not all Jews believe that Jewish identity is fluid or socially-constructed, even if adherence to Halakha may be understood as such. Perhaps for these reasons, Scholefield's (2004: 238) investigation of the indeterminacy of identity boundaries in a Jewish school is atypical in considering Jewish identity as performance, with the majority of research emphasising 'peoplehood'-based issues such as intermarriage and 'continuity' (e.g. Liebman, 1973; Fishman, 2012).

Clearly then, Jewish individuals frequently conceptualise their identities as being in relation to a wider collective. Nevertheless, Cohen and Wertheimer's overwhelming focus on peoplehood distracts from the divergences that exist within Jewry and sustains the survivalist approach to Jewishness with its concern about belonging to a specific group rather than developing fluid identities, rendering it crucial that research also attend to more individual forms of and negotiations with Jewish identity. Kaplan (2009) and Magid (2013) reveal significant discomfort among young Jews towards ascribed, inherited and apparently immutable notions of peoplehood (and their connotations of authoritativeness and particularism), highlighting a growing tendency to view Jewishness as fluid, voluntary and personally-defined through the reappropriation of diverse influences. Moreover, the emergence of assisted reproductive technologies (particularly surrogacy) has challenged halakhic and ethnicity-based definitions of Jewishness given the difficulties of determining which mother 'passes on' Jewishness (Imhoff, 2016). But perhaps the clearest example of peoplehood's restrictiveness to conceptualisations of Jewishness is the question of religious conversion, with Buckser (2003b) illustrating the resentment that can be created as converts endeavour to 'prove' their claim to a formal rather than experiential Jewish identity, often demonstrating superior proficiency and religious observance than their Jewish-born

counterparts even whilst their Jewishness is disparaged. Relatedly, the ‘JFS case’ in 2009 encapsulates the contestation of Jewishness over questions of peoplehood, as a nominally ‘Jewish’ boy was rejected by the Jewish Free School in London on the basis that his mother had converted into Judaism through a non-Orthodox synagogue, rendering his self-identification and upbringing supposedly irrelevant under Halakha.<sup>4</sup> The subsequent Supreme Court ruling adjudged that school selection based on matrilineal (i.e. genetic) descent is racially discriminatory, emphasising the difficulty in separating religion from ethnicity as required by the Equality Act 2010<sup>5</sup> for oversubscribed voluntary faith schools, and creating a definition of Jewishness disputed across the Jewish community, with Halakha and self-identification both replaced by arbitration in identity matters by the state (Dwyer and Parutis, 2013). In these ways, converts and their children do not fit neatly into defined ethnic categories of Jewishness, and future research ought to explore whether converts nevertheless seek to ‘adopt’ an ethnic Jewish identity or otherwise deem this irrelevant to their sense of self.

Assumptions that Jewish identity is necessarily rooted in peoplehood risk ignoring the distinctive ways in which Jewishness is understood and lived in other contexts. For instance, ‘Jewish’ in the USSR represented an ascribed racial category based on biology rather than matrilineal descent or religious practice, yet those Soviet Jews who subsequently emigrated to the USA often saw their Jewish self-identification denied by their supposed American Jewish counterparts, who were particularly sceptical of their general lack of public religiosity, as well as usage of the Russian language (Markowitz, 1988), revealing divergences in conceptualisations of Jewishness and compromising supposed claims of common peoplehood. Certainly, self-identification appears to be more salient to Jewishness than matrilineal descent in much of contemporary Eastern Europe, where ancestry, theology and tradition became largely forgotten

during the political upheavals of the twentieth-century (Kovács and Vajda, 1994). Instead, individuals in this region now often conceptualise a Jewish identity as possession of a liberal philosophy or ‘culture’ (and thus able to be adopted by supposed Gentiles) (Kovács and Vajda, 1994), or the expression of ‘virtual’ Jewish identity markers regardless of one’s ‘real’ faith (Gruber, 2002), given their new autonomy to reshape their own Jewishness and integrate multiple identities where previously one’s identity was ascribed (Pinto, 1999). Charmé’s (2012) study of ‘lost Jews’ reveals how questions of authenticity may challenge conventional Eurocentric, Orthodox suppositions that peoplehood and essence are central to Jewishness, and challenges of defining Jewish identity for citizenship purposes in Israel relatedly reveal a rift between those viewing this as a form of cultural belonging (secular) or genealogy (religious) (Rohrbacher, 2016), with implications for such questions both here and abroad. Although many of these studies fail to listen to stakeholders’ perspectives, they hint at the potential for future research to acknowledge the presence of discourses in naturalising identities and to explore the personal meanings that Jewishness has to such individuals.

Clearly, social science research must recognise the dynamic interactions between individual and collective Jewish identities instead of viewing them as dichotomous. Indeed, identity as a concept emphasises how individuals attempt to both share characteristics with others (sameness) and construct or portray their own uniqueness (difference) (Lawler, 2008), and it is long-established that the self is shaped by its social context. Social identities are contingent on specific events and one’s participation in particular evolving contexts, as individuals may define their identities in positional terms (Drury and Reicher, 2000) and draw flexibly on seemingly oppositional ideas when constructing a personal identity. Certainly, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock’s (1996: 115) notion of ‘identity work’ illustrates the situatedness of the processes



involved in constructing an identity both individually and collectively. As such they illustrate how continuous ‘defining’ (social representation) and ‘policing’ (protection of its meaning) occurs at the boundaries of identity, enabling us to refocus attention on individual- as well as collective-level research, the latter of which appears monolithic and immutable alone. Although Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock place particular emphasis on the construction of identities through interaction in response to social-psychological research that has prioritised the self, their work is valuable to understanding the mutual relationship between individuals and society and the ways in which Jewish identity is re-made and re-defined.

This is true even in relation to supposed ‘essentialisms’ such as ‘Jewish identity by descent.’ As Fuss (1989: 4) has recognised: ‘there is no essence to essentialism...essence as irreducible has been constructed to be irreducible.’ Yet, in spite of religion’s mutability (Stump, 2008), researchers have often portrayed Orthodox Judaism in particular as unchanging, such as Klaff (2006: 417), who writes: ‘[t]here is no doubt that in contemporary America a small but strong Orthodox component of the Jewish community continues to maintain the behavior and customs of traditional Judaism.’ Consequently, there is a need for greater acknowledgement of how the boundaries of religious orthodoxies are (re-)imagined by groups seeking to present themselves as the ‘true’ upholders of a religious tradition (Berlinerblau, 2001), as well as the porosity of Jewish-Gentile boundaries (Rohrbacher, 2016). Individual identities are constructed via social experiences, but this does not render one’s agency and psychology unimportant (Layder, 2004), and so further research needs to explore the meanings that being Jewish has to individuals, including those unaffiliated with Jewish institutions. As we explore below, this would also enable an understanding of how the meaning and boundaries of Judaism itself are continuously reconstructed.

## **Towards new understandings of Jewish identity**

A deeper focus on individuals, rather than institution-based forms of identity, would facilitate a stronger understanding of the ways in which people negotiate multiple identities to construct their own senses of Jewishness. Of course, it can be difficult to ascertain the numbers of Jewish individuals who feel proudly Jewish but consider themselves neither religious nor affiliated with a synagogue (for instance).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, several studies demonstrate the potential for individual identities to be moved to the centre of analysis. Davidman (2007) has addressed the ‘lived religion’ of non-institutionally-affiliated Jews who construct a Jewish identity through drawing on often conflicting sources, including from other faiths and spiritual movements, and freely select and rework Jewish traditions without feeling obligated to affiliate with a synagogue or demonstrate religious beliefs, while Lieber’s (2010) research into blogging by Orthodox Jewish women highlights how the Internet is enabling new forms of Jewish identification whilst challenging others. Drawing upon feminist, postmodern and queer theory, Coyle and Rafalin (2000) also illustrate the diverse ways in which LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) Jews attempt to reconcile sexual and religious identities that are constructed as incompatible within some forms of Judaism, whilst Faulkner and Hecht (2011) have demonstrated both the closeting and fusing of LGBT and Jewish identities.

At the same time, Jewish institutions may be conceptualised as important spaces for individualised identity construction where particular emphasis is placed on the latter. In particular, the development of non-denominational and cross-communal institutions including day schools (Pomson and Schnoor, 2008; Miller, 2012) as well as broader forms of community (Cohen and Kelman, 2007), which are designed to include individuals expressing diverse but often halakhically-invalidated forms of Jewishness and those who struggle or refuse to be

compartmentalised within narrow, ideological groups, reflects the growing tendency for individuals to determine their own Jewish affiliations (or indeed non-affiliations) and identities, and so provides significant potential to explore individual identities within a broader institutional context. Yet even in more 'traditional' institutions such as Orthodox synagogues, worshippers' practices may be performed individualistically rather than synchronistically (Goldman, 2000), necessitating intersectional research that explores how Jewish individuals perceive their multiple identities. In contrast to the majority of research on informal Jewish education, Kelner (2010) draws upon various, intensive qualitative means to illustrate the potential of Israel tours to facilitate embodied, lived Jewish experiences that bind participants emotionally to place and one another, and describes the often inchoate and subjective identities constructed through the integration of their present situation with their Jewish pasts (as well as their aspired futures). Kelner (2010: 179) argues that such tours represent 'liminal spaces' as participants are enabled to view their Jewishness as paramount whilst simultaneously marginalising alternative constructions of self in that context, whereas on returning home, individuals must once again negotiate multiple identities that may compete with their Jewishness for salience. Kelner's study is therefore valuable in demonstrating how individuals' identity construction represents a continual process of reinterpreting the past, rather than a snapshot of one's feelings at a point in time related to a single experience or organisation. Undoubtedly, other Jews choose to self-identify as Jewish and live their Jewishness in ways they see fit, challenging and extending the boundaries of Judaism (Glenn and Sokoloff, 2010), and hence developing a Jewishness that is meaningful because it is personally chosen (Prell, 2000). By focusing on individuals and individual families in these ways, an understanding of the ways in which Jewish traditions are reworked, often separately from 'official' Jewish institutions, can be garnered.

To this end, permitting respondents to prescribe their own faith identities (e.g. Buckser, 2003a) is interesting in itself, as it offers the researcher the ability to acknowledge the ways in which individuals perceive their self-belonging and the contexts in which these perceptions are formed (Jenkins, 2008). It also enables individuals to express any changes in their religious identities over time, deconstructing notions that people identify with just one religion throughout their lifetime, and that these are mutually exclusive categories (Rohrbacher, 2016). Relatedly, Horowitz (2002: 14) has suggested that rather than asking ‘How Jewish are...Jews?’ a more effective approach would be to enquire ‘How are...Jews Jewish?’ In this way, respondents are enabled to describe and define their own experiences and understandings of their Jewish identity construction, rather than the researcher creating normative indicators of Jewishness for them to ‘meet’ (or not). Using such an approach, Horowitz (2003) discovered that although many American Jews would maintain some mode of Jewish identity, this tended to be focused on community values and relationships rather than religious observance, and would be susceptible to fluctuations in significance over time based on personal events, experiences and relationships. However, Horowitz (2003) avoids suggesting a decline in American Jewish identity, and instead emphasises its reinvention based on voluntary experiences including summer camps and Israel trips. Such nuances regarding the evolution of Jewish life would not have been attained through a rigid conceptual approach and the focus would have instead been on a decline in Jewish (or rather, religious) practice. Thus, instead of being conceptualised as a fixed goal to be attained, Jewish identity can be understood as a ‘journey’ over time, highly responsive (voluntarily or not) to social interactions, experiences and events (Horowitz, 2003) and therefore dynamic and never complete. Gradually, new work is being produced that recognises how traditional identity markers are

contested and that there is no singular Jewish identity (Charmé et al., 2008), a promising development in a field that still too often privileges collective identities.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored competing approaches to understanding the changing nature of contemporary Jewish identities against the backdrop of the increasing pluralisation of Jewish identity and the growth of new forms of personal identification and expression. Empirical social scientific research on Jewish identity, as we have argued, has not always adapted to capture these developments, still often employing restrictive methodological and conceptual approaches that do not attend to individuals' complex and nuanced senses of Jewishness. This research can contribute to processes of reification that constitute Jewish identity as a kind of product, delivered via practices of Jewish education and socialisation. Consequently, much Jewish identity research frequently recycles an image of a unified, collective Jewish identity rather than examining the diverse ways in which Jews 'live' and 'do' their Jewishness.

Although some recent studies have moved away from traditional measures and indicators of Jewish identity, individual identities and their performance continue to be relatively neglected. In response, this article has argued for a greater focus on individual Jewish identities and how they interact with (and potentially reshape) collective Jewish identities. Jewish identity, like all forms of identity, cannot be understood in isolation from its intersections with other identities, and only by attending more closely to individual identities can we better apprehend their lived spatialities and temporalities. Such a focus would also allow for new understandings of the familiar spaces of Jewish institutions and their significance for individuals while also facilitating research in new spaces. Greater attention to individual identities, and the complex ways these interact with

collectivities, is essential if Jewish identity research is to remain relevant to those it seeks to describe.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Measures included Holocaust remembrance and caring about Israel (Lipka, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> It is also important to acknowledge that emancipation varied significantly in means and extent across different national contexts (Brenner, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Certainly, considerable Jewish identity research in the USA (e.g. Liebman, 1973; Goldscheider, 2004) and Europe (e.g. Friedmann, 1965; Finkelkraut, 1980) has debated the erosion, survival or transformation of Jewish identity.

<sup>4</sup> R (on the application of E) v Governing Body of JFS and the Admissions Appeal Panel of JFS and others [2009] UKSC 15.

<sup>5</sup> Schools designated as having a ‘religious character’ under Section 69(3) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 are exempt from Sections 85 (1) and (2)(a-d) of the Equality Act 2010, which forbid discrimination in aspects of pupil admissions and treatment where this relates to ‘religion or belief’ (Schedule 11, Part 2, S.5(a) Equality Act 2010).

<sup>6</sup> To illustrate, the UK census lists ‘Jewish’ as a religious category and so conceals those who do not identify as such (Graham and Waterman, 2005).

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the two anonymous referees for their insightful comments, and Amy King (University of Bristol) for assisting with the French translation of the abstract. Our gratitude also to the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress for providing access to many of the publications cited in the article.

## **Funding**

This research was supported by an ESRC Doctoral Studentship (No. ES/J500215/1).

## **References**

Ariel Y (2011) Jews and new religious movements: an introductory essay. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 15(1): 5-21.

Berkovitz JR (1989) *The Shaping of Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-century France*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Berlinerblau J (2001) Toward a sociology of heresy, orthodoxy, and doxa. *History of Religions* 40(4): 327-351.

Brenner M (2008) *Kleine Jüdische Geschichte*. München: Verlag C. H. Beck oHG.

Brown CG (2001) *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Bruce S (2013) Post-secularity and religion in Britain: an empirical assessment. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28(3): 369-384.

Buckser A (2003a) *After the Rescue: Jewish Identity and Community in Contemporary Denmark*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Buckser A (2003b) Social conversion and group definition in Jewish Copenhagen. In: Buckser A and Glazier SD (eds) *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, pp.69-84.

Butler J (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler J (1993) *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge.

Charmé SZ (2000) Varieties of authenticity in contemporary Jewish identity. *Jewish Social Sciences* 6(2): 133-155.

Charmé SZ (2012) Newly found Jews and the politics of recognition. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80(2): 387-410.

Charmé S, Horowitz B, Hyman T and Kress JS (2008) Jewish identities in action: an exploration of models, metaphors, and methods. *Journal of Jewish Education* 74(2): 115-143.

Cohen SM and Eisen A (2000) *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Cohen SM and Kelman AY (2007) The continuity of discontinuity: how young Jews are connecting, creating, and organizing their own Jewish lives. 21/64.



Cohen SM and Wertheimer J (2006) Whatever happened to the Jewish people. *Commentary* 121(6): 33-37.

Cohn-Sherbok D (1993) *The Jewish Faith*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Coyle A and Rafalin D (2000) Jewish gay men's accounts of negotiating cultural, religious, and sexual identity: a qualitative study. *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality* 12(4): 21-48.

Davidman L (2007) The new voluntarism and the case of unsynagogued Jews. In: Ammerman NT (ed) *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.51-67.

DellaPergola S (2011) *Jewish Demographic Policies: Population Trends and Options in Israel and in the Diaspora*. Jerusalem: The Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI).

Drury J and Reicher S (2000) Collective action and psychological change: the emergence of new social identities. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 39(4): 579-604.

Dwyer C and Parutis V (2013) 'Faith in the system?' State-funded faith schools in England and the contested parameters of community cohesion. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38(2): 267-284.

Erikson E (1950) *Childhood and Society*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Faulkner SL and Hecht ML (2011) The negotiation of closetable identities: a narrative analysis of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered queer Jewish identity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 28(6): 829-847.

Finkielkraut A (1980) *Le Juif imaginaire*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Fishman SB (2012) Will I have Jewish grandchildren? Cultural transmission and ethical and religious concerns among ethnoreligious minorities. In: Bunge MJ (ed) *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.202-218.

Fishman SB, Fischer S, Maimon D, Roshner S and Bernstein RS (2012) *Learning Jewishness, Jewish Education and Jewish Identity*. Jerusalem: The Jewish People Policy Institute.

Friedlander ML, Friedman ML, Miller MJ, Ellis MV, Friedlander LK and Mikhaylov VG (2010) Introducing a brief measure of cultural and religious identification in American Jewish identity. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 57(3): 345-360.

Friedmann G (1965) *Fin du peuple juif?* Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

Fuss D (1989) *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*. New York: Routledge.

Gilman SL (2011) Introduction: Jewish culture in the age of globalisation. *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 18(1): 1-7.

Glenn S and Sokoloff NB (2010) *Boundaries of Jewish Identity*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Goffman E (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin.

Goffman E (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.

Goldman K (2000) *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Goldscheider C (2004) *Studying the Jewish Future*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Graham D (2014a) *Strengthening Jewish Identity: What works? An Analysis of Jewish Students in the UK*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

Graham D (2014b) The impact of communal intervention programs on Jewish identity: an analysis of Jewish students in Britain. *Contemporary Jewry* 34(1): 31-57.

Graham D and Waterman S (2005) Underenumeration of the Jewish population in the UK 2001 Census. *Population, Space and Place* 11(2): 89-102.

Gregson N and Rose G (2000) Taking Butler elsewhere: performativities, spatialities and subjectivities. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18: 433-452.

Gruber RE (2002) *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Haji R, Lalonde RN, Durbin A and Naveh-Benjamin I (2011) A multidimensional approach to identity: religious and cultural identity in young Jewish Canadians. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 14(1): 3-18.

Hall J (2016) Jews are leaving France in record numbers amid rising anti-Semitism and fears of more Isis-inspired terror attacks. *The Independent*, 25 January, 16.

Hall S (1996) Introduction: who needs 'identity'? In: Hall S and du Gay P (eds) *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: SAGE Publications, pp.1-17.

Hearn J (2007) National identity: banal, personal and embedded. *Nations and Nationalism* 13(4): 657-674.

Hetherington K (1998) *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics*. London: Sage Publications.

Hopkins P, Olson E, Pain R and Vincett G (2011) Mapping intergenerationalities: the formation of youthful religiosities. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36 (2): 314-327.

Horowitz B (2002) Reframing the study of contemporary American Jewish identity. *Contemporary Jewry* 23: 14-34.

Horowitz B (2003) *Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity*. New York: UJA-Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York.

Imhoff S (2016) Half Jewish, just Jewish, and the oddities of religious identification. *Supplement Series for the Journal of Religion & Society*, Supplement 13: 76-89.

Iprgrave J (2016) Identity and inter religious understanding in Jewish schools in England. *British Journal of Religious Education* 38(1): 47-63.

Jenkins R (2008) *Social Identity*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Kaplan DE (2009) *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kelner S (2010) *Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism*. New York: New York University Press.

Klaff V (2006) Defining American Jewry from religious and ethnic perspectives: the transitions to greater heterogeneity. *Sociology of Religion* 67(4): 415-438.

Kong L and Woods O (2016) *Religion and Space: Competition, Conflict and Violence in the Contemporary World*. London: Bloomsbury.

Kovács É and Vajda J (1994) Leigazoltam a zsidókhoz: A „társadalmi zsidó” identitás kialakulásának eletttörténeti gyökereiről. *Thalassa* 5(1-2): 228-246.

Krasner J (2016) On the origins and persistence of the Jewish identity industry in Jewish education. *Journal of Jewish Education* 82(2): 132-158.

Kudenko I and Phillips D (2010) Multicultural narratives and the construction of identity: the British Jewish experience. *Space and Polity* 14(1): 65-80.

Lawler S (2008) *Identity: Sociological Perspectives*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Layder D (2004) *Social and Personal Identity: Understanding Yourself*. London: SAGE Publications.

Lieber A (2010) A virtual veibershul: blogging and the blurring of public and private among Orthodox Jewish women. *College English* 72(6): 621-637.

Liebman CS (1973) *The Ambivalent American Jew: Politics, Religion, and Family in American Jewish Life*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America.

Lipka M (2016) A closer look at Jewish identity in Israel and the U.S. In: Pew Research Centre. Available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/16/a-closer-look-at-jewish-identity-in-israel-and-the-u-s/> (accessed 24 June 2016).

McGuire MB (2008) *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Magid S (2013) *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Markowitz F (1988) Jewish in the USSR, Russian in the USA: social context and ethnic identity. In: Zenner WP. (ed) *Persistence and Flexibility: Anthropological Perspectives on the American Jewish Experience*. USA: SUNY Press, pp.79-95.

Miller H, Terret M and Shimron T (2013) *What is the Outcome of Israel Experience on a Young Person's Jewish Identity and Relationship to Israel?* London: United Jewish Israel Appeal.

Parker A and Sedgwick EK (1995) Introduction: performativity and performance. In Parker A and Sedgwick EK (eds) *Performativity and Performance*. London: Routledge, pp.1-19.

Pew Research Center (2013) *A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews*. Washington DC: Pew Research Center.

Pinto D (1999) *The Third Pillar? Toward a European Jewish Identity*. Budapest: Central European University, Jewish Studies Lecture Series.

Pomson A and Schnoor RF (2008) *Back to School: Jewish Day Schools in the Lives of Adult Jews*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Prell R (2000) Developmental Judaism: challenging the study of American Jewish identity in the social sciences. *Contemporary Jewry* 21(1): 33-54.

Punzi E and Frischer J (2016) Voluntary work with sporting activities for Jewish children and teenagers: commitment to inclusiveness, Jewish identity, and a future Jewish life – an interview study. *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 15(3): 419-435.

Rohrbacher A (2016) Invisible fences: the construction of “insiders” and “outsiders” in Jewish historiography. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 28(4-5): 337-364.



Sacks J (1991) *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality & Society in a Secular Age*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Sacks J (1995) *Faith in the Future*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd.

Saroglou V and Hanique B (2006) Jewish identity, values, and religion in a globalized world: a study of late adolescents. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 6(3): 231–249.

Scholefield L (2004) Bagels, schnitzel and McDonald's— 'fuzzy frontiers' of Jewish identity in an English Jewish secondary school. *British Journal of Religious Education* 26(3): 237-248.

Schwalbe ML and Mason-Schrock D (1996) Identity work as group process. *Advances in Group Processes* 13: 113-147.

Shain M, Fishman S, Wright G, Hecht S and Saxe L (2013) "DIY" Judaism: how contemporary Jewish young adults express their Jewish identity. *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* 55(1-2): 3-25.

Sheskin IM and Hartman H (2015) Denominational variations across American Jewish communities. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54(2): 205-221.

Stump RW (2008) *The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Valentine G (2007) Theorizing and researching intersectionality: a challenge for feminist geography. *The Professional Geographer* 59(1): 10-21.

Vanderbeck RM and Johnson P (2016) The promotion of British values: sexual orientation equality, religion, and England's schools. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 30(3): 292-321.

Waxman D (2016) *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict Over Israel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wood N (2012) Playing with 'Scottishness': musical performance, non-representational thinking and the 'doings' of national identity. *Cultural Geographies* 19: 195–215.

Zelkowitz TE (2013) Beyond a Humpty-Dumpty narrative: in search of new rhymes and reasons in the research of contemporary American Jewish identity formation. *International Journal of Jewish Education Research* 2013(5-6): 21-46.

### **Author biographies**

Maxim G M SAMSON is a doctoral student in the School of Geography, University of Leeds.

Address: School of Geography, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK.

Email: gymgs@leeds.ac.uk

Robert M VANDERBECK is Professor of Human Geography, University of Leeds.

Address: School of Geography, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK.

Email: [r.vanderbeck@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:r.vanderbeck@leeds.ac.uk)

Nichola WOOD is Lecturer in Critical Human Geography, University of Leeds.

Address: School of Geography, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK.

Email: [n.x.wood@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:n.x.wood@leeds.ac.uk)