Don't Hate on the Halfies:
Religious Identity Formation among Children of Inter-Religious Couples

by

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*"Yeah, well, the other side of my family is Christian…so **don't hate on me** 'cause I'm Jewish."*

*"There's, like, the completely non-Jewish…then there's the people who are **halfies**."*

The process of categorizing people into differing groups has been almost instinctual in societies over time, yet breeds varying consequences. Social theory argues that categorization allows individuals to create self-identities and make sense of others (Howard and Renfrow 2003; Stets and Burke 2000). Yet, categorization has also allowed for the creation of social hierarchies and resulting inequality (Dalmage 2000). The social importance placed on categorization, moreover, has historically caused confusion about people of mixed backgrounds. Lacking an even fit into socially constructed categories, such individuals have induced policy debates – such as the debate over whether to include a multiracial category on both the 2000 and 2010 U.S. Censuses – and sparked social research attempting to discern whether and to what extent identity formation processes for people of mixed backgrounds differ from those for people of singular backgrounds (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002).

While the literature on biracial and multiethnic individuals grows, however, there is a limited amount of research focusing on individuals who come from multireligious backgrounds. To date, nearly all published research on the topic has relied on gathering statistics to determine such trends as which of two religions or which of two parents a multireligious individual is more likely to follow. While this research gives us important demographic knowledge about the multireligious population, it does not provide explanation for why these trends occur. By allowing individuals to describe their life experiences and explain how these experiences have molded their self-conceptions, using

qualitative methods is important to gain a full understanding of identity formation among multireligious individuals.

In this article, I ask: How do children of inter-religious couples form a personal, nuanced religious identity? What factors are most significant in the formation of such an identity? How are particular life situations experienced as a result of having a multireligious identity and how do these experiences help to further mold this identity? Extending on previous studies, I seek to discover how multireligious individuals come to develop religious selves. Using interviews, I provide the opportunity for a sample of these individuals to tell, in their own words, what experiences have shaped their understanding of religion and how these experiences have affected the role that religion plays in their lives. Beyond the choices that can be measured in a survey, I ask what has been personally significant to these individuals in forming a religious identity.

To frame this research, I use findings from previous work on mixed background identities as well as theoretical perspectives from symbolic interactionism and identity theory. I argue that applying the concept of cultural exposure from the biracial and multiethnic literature to that of shared meanings and interaction from the theories provides an effective understanding of multireligious identity development. Combining these concepts, however, also builds on the theories' conception of identity formation in general. The goals of this study, then, are twofold: (1) to build an understanding of multireligious identity formation and (2) to further the concept of shared meanings in the symbolic interactionist literature.

In this study, I define religious identity as the way an individual describes his or her own religious affiliation(s) and beliefs and the degree to which religion is important

to the individual. While a distinction can be made between an individual's stated religious affiliation and his or her identity – because, for example, two individuals can state belonging to the same religion and still feel a difference in the significance that the religion has to each – I will use to term "identity" to describe the combination of religious affiliation, belief, and significance, providing space for individuals to categorize their own "religious selves" without confining them to external limitations. In light of the inter-religious identity literature, which claims that Jewish identity is comprised of religion and ethnicity as two main components, my study takes into account aspects of religious practice as well as cultural and ethnic participation in examining identity (Frideres et al. 1971).

Throughout this paper, I use certain words to describe the combining of different religions. I rely on the term "inter-religious couple/coupling" to describe any legally married or unmarried set of parents who ascribe to different religions. I describe the offspring of inter-religious couples as "multireligious" or "inter-religious" individuals. The term "halfies" used in the title of this article is a colloquial term also used to describe multireligious people. While the term does not have a pejorative meaning, I only use it when quoting participants in the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the topic of children of inter-religious couples has maintained popular attention, the phenomenon has attracted little scholarly research. Work on the topic has been focused within religious communities attempting to create policy on how to deal with inter-married people and their offspring. Some research commissioned by religious

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organizations, therefore, aims less at understanding identity formation than on determining what religious communities can do to make inter-religious families and multireligious individuals affiliate with a particular religion or denomination (Liebman and Fishman 2000).

Existing scholarly research on multireligious individuals mainly focuses on statistical trends. These trends include which of two religions multireligious children take on as their own (Nelsen 1990; Salisbury 1970), the effect of parents not identifying with a particular religion (Nelson 1990), which of two parents a child is more likely to follow religiously (Croog and Teele 1967; Landis 1949; Maier 1963; Maller 1987; Mayer 1983; Nelsen 1990; Salisbury 1970; Schmelz and DellaPergola 1988), and whether church attendance increases religious commitment (Croog and Teele 1967; Hoge and Ferry 1981; Salisbury 1970).

These statistically-based studies, while providing important information on the religious trends of children of inter-religious couples, do not address how or why the identities reflected in these trends develop. Ethnicity scholars, however, have argued the subjective nature of identity, claiming that the differences between people in terms of what they call themselves and how important these categories are to them are suggestive of differences in identity (Deaux 1996, 2006; Deaux et al. 2007; Waters 1990). While we can use a survey to ask individuals what they call their religious identity, we are only capturing their claimed identity at one moment in time. Since identity undergoes changes, the only way we can know how individuals come to understand the role of religion in their lives and how life experiences lead them to identify with particular religions (or with none at all) is to ask.

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Additional Contributions of Literature on Race and Ethnicity

With limited research on multireligious individuals, the literatures on race, ethnicity, biracialism, and multiethnicity provide some insight into the identity formation process that might be common among all people of mixed cultural backgrounds. In the biracial literature, for example, scholars have argued that social networks are important contexts in which an individual develops a sense of self (Brown 1990; Porter 1991; Rockquemore 1999; Root 1990). These networks create an arena in which individuals interact with others. High quality interactions create positive feelings (Fields 1996). In the case of race, these positive feelings help develop racial self-esteem and closeness with others in the social network (Demo et al. 1987). If this phenomenon carries over to religion, one might argue that the religious social network in which an individual most positively interacts can predict the religion with which s/he identifies.

In her study on the biracial identities of half-white, half-Asian individuals, Khanna (2004) examined the role of cultural exposure in multiethnic identity. She measured cultural exposure as familiarity with a cultural/ethnic language, living in an area highly populated by a particular ethnicity, and exposure to material and nonmaterial aspects of culture such as holidays, music, and values, finding that exposure to these areas influenced these multiethnic individuals to more closely identify with one ethnicity over another. Waters (1990) explains that exposure is significant to multiethnic identity because it allows an individual to form meaningful attachments to cultural practices and memories of the past that are encapsulated by culture. The knowledge gained from

cultural exposure, moreover, serve to create what Swidler (1986) has called the cultural "took kit," which people use to construct action with others.

These cultural aspects of ethnicity are similar to cultural practices of religion. Research on religious identity, in fact, has suggested that one's religious identity increases through exposure to cultural aspects of religion gained by attending religious schools or programs (Kalmijn et al. 2006; Liebman and Fishman 2000). As with ethnicity, the meaningful attachments and memories that come from being exposed to a religion can help explain why individuals would be more likely to maintain affiliations with the religion(s) to which they are exposed.

To be sure, there are noteworthy differences between racial/ethnic identities and religious identities. Literature on biracial identity has consistently shown that phenotype is a particularly salient characteristic both in how biracial individuals see themselves and how others act toward and make assumptions about them (Bowles 1993; Brown 1990; Brunsma and Rockquemore 2001; Fields 1996; Gibbs 1997; Herring 1992; Khanna 2004; Poussaint 1984; Rockquemore 1999; Root 1990). While members of religions have been characterized by phenotypic stereotypes – particularly under derogatory circumstances – the effect of phenotype is unlikely to be as salient for religion as it is with race. When physical appearance does not play as large a role in appraising another, perhaps people put even more stock in others cultural/religious knowledge to appraise whether they are an in-group or out-group members.

Identification and the Symbolic Interactionist Framework

Symbolic interactionism theorizes that individuals acquire and construct knowledge of society and the self through interaction and shared meanings (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959, 1963; Mead 1934). Shared meanings of social situations, the argument goes, are necessary because without a mutually recognized understanding of a situation, individuals would not know how to act in that situation, causing chaos to erupt. Stryker and Vryan (2003) argue that shared meanings not only allow individuals to effectively interact in a situation, but also allow individuals to see themselves as being part of that situation. It then follows that an individual without shared knowledge of a situation cannot effectively interact within it.

According to the theory, interaction is necessary for individuals to create self-identification. Mead (1934) claims that "the self is realized in its relationship to others" (204). Through interaction, the individual is able to gauge his/her similarities and differences to others and see him/herself as belonging to the group with which s/he is most similar. This grouping, moreover, gives the individual a framework through which to compare him/herself to others hierarchically (Mead 1934). As earlier described, scholars have empirically showed the importance of interaction to biracial and multiethnic identities (Demo et al. 1987; Fields 1996; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002).

An extension of symbolic interactionism, identity theory, explains this process as one in which individuals identify social groups and whether or not they are a part of them (Howard and Renfrow 2003). Referred to as "identification," this process is used to show how having a particular identity characteristic allows individuals to see themselves as being part of a group, the so-called "in-group," and viewing those without that

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characteristic as part of the "out-group" (Stets and Burke 2000). There are many characteristics that can initiate this process, including race, gender, and religion.

The caveat in the process of identification is that, in order for an individual to consider him or herself part of a group, the group must be socially recognized (Stryker and Vryan 2003). Despite potentially contrary inclinations, actors are relegated to choosing categories that already exist in which to define themselves. Even if an individual constructs a self-identity in a non-socially recognized category, research suggests that identities loose salience when no group exists to affirm that identity (Smith-Lovin 2007). If, moreover, the claim that one has such an identity is chided by others, individuals seek to hide stigmatized identities and present themselves as belonging to socially acceptable groups (Goffman 1963; Waters 1990). In discussing religious identity, then, it is important to consider whether multireligiosity is a socially recognized category and the consequences that a potential lack of recognition can have for people who have a multireligious background.

In the following sections, I present a method by which to examine identity formation among children of inter-religious couples and the findings it breeds. It is important to note that this study was developed for explanatory purposes. Rather than proposing and testing formal hypotheses, I use descriptive data to explain patterns among individuals in the study and propose a process of multireligious identity formation. This methodological approach is consistent with similar research conducted on biracial and multiethnic identities (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002).

METHOD

Sample

I conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen students at a private Southeastern university. The university has a Methodist affiliation, yet less than 5% of the student body is Methodist. Participants were recruited through on-campus advertising and snowball procedures. All students interviewed were 18 to 22 years old and were children of one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent. Since religious communities are in constant change, this age range reflects a sample young enough to shed light on the experience of growing up in religious communities as they are today. This age range, however, also ensures that the sample is old enough to already have a well-formed religious identity by having passed the identity crisis associated with adolescence (Erickson 1968; Lipsitz 1977). These conditions are consistent with previous work in ethnic identity formation (Khanna 2004). I focus on children of Jewish/non-Jewish parents to increase consistency among participants when drawing conclusions applicable to the whole group.

Participants' Religiosity and Religious Self-Identification

I use two descriptors to characterize participants' religious identity: religiosity and religious self-identification. Religious self-identification is based on claims participants make about their own religious affiliation. Since these are objective assessments, I also describe participants using a standardized measure of religiosity. Religiosity describes an individual's level of religious commitment. Religiosity differs from religious self-identification because it provides a sense of how religiously committed participants' are in comparison to one another.

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I used Rohrbaugh and Jessor's (1975) Religiosity Measure to asses participants' religiosity. [1] The measure included seven questions, one of which I deemed ineffective in contributing to my analysis of participant religiosity and did not use. I assigned a point value to each response. I call the number of points the participants received their "religiosity scores." I assigned participants into one of four groupings based on these scores: Low-Religiosity, Low-Mid Religiosity, High-Mid Religiosity, and High Religiosity.

Religious self-identification is based on participants' specific claims about the religion(s) and extent to which they affiliate. Participants differed in their ability to clearly indicate how they self-identify religiously. While some participants were able to make a direct statement of their personal affiliations, others either were unsure of how to categorize themselves or contradicted their own categorizations throughout an interview. I have used the term "leaning" to describe those participants who maintain some uncertainty of their religious affiliation but appear to more closely identify with one. In order to gain a sense of how self-identification was coded, I will provide a sample quote from a participant self-identifying in each of the following categories: Jewish, Jewish-leaning, Christian-leaning, Not Religious.

Seven participants self-identified as Jewish. This was categorized by a clear statement of being a member of the religion, such as Dana's (Jewish, High) claim that "…pretty much, throughout life, like, I'm Jewish. I'll just say it. I'm a Jewish person."[2]

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[1] Minor modifications were made to this measure, including the deletion of the original sixth question and slight wording changes in the fifth question. These questions were particularly oriented toward determining the religiosity of Christians. Changes were made to better measure the religiosity of an individual identifying with any religion.

[2] To aid the reader in recalling the religious self-identification and religiosity of each interviewee, these descriptors will be included parenthetically upon quoting each individual. To preserve confidentiality, I assigned participants' pseudonyms at random.

I categorized two participants as Jewish-leaning. This categorization is characterized by stating *more* of an affiliation with Judaism than another religion without making a direct claim of being Jewish:

> **Liz (Jewish-leaning, Low)**: I like to be able to relate to people and I'm able to from both sides, I guess. I feel a little bit more Jewish than Christian just because…nothing has come from my dad and a little bit has come from my mom, so, I mean, I guess…I never say I'm Christian but…I have said that I'm Jewish, so maybe I feel more of an affiliation with [Judaism].

As with those categorized as Jewish-leaning, participants categorized as Christian-leaning stated more of an affiliation with Christianity without making a direct claim of being Christian. Jessica (Christian-leaning, Low) provides an example of this when she says "I totally would say now I relate myself *more* to Christianity. And I don't mind going to church, but I refuse to go to synagogue. I think it's the most boring thing ever…" [Emphasis added by author.]

I will refer to the four participants who self-identified as "Not Religious" and the one who self-identified as "Agnostic/Atheist" as "Not Religious." As with those categorized as Jewish, these participants directly stated not identifying with a religion:

> **A.H.**: If somebody were to ask you what religion you are, what would you say?
> **Mark (Not Religious, Low)**: People do that all the time. I don't really have an answer, actually. I mean, I say I celebrate Christmas and birthdays, actually, is what I say. But, um, I'm not religious at all.

Table 1 provides religiosity scores and self-identifications for each participant.

Interviews

All interviews were conducted in on-campus meeting rooms. Interviews lasted between 29:15 and 73:17 minutes with an average length of 48:47 minutes. In interviews, each participant was asked a series of questions from a pre-set interview

guide attempting to gauge his or her religious background and experiences that affected

his or her religious identity. Questions were relevant to the specific factors believed to

have the greatest influence on identity formation and to a wider variety of religious

experiences and personal/family background. I developed several broad categories to

provide a flow to interviews:

1. Participant's mother's religious identification and involvement
2. Participant's father's religious identification and involvement
3. Participant's religious identification, commitment, and practice
4. Participant's cultural/religious exposure
5. Religion's expected role in participant's future
6. Relationships with and expressed religious preference(s) of extended family
7. Participant's social network
8. Perception of choice in religious identity formation
9. Characteristics of participant's childhood religious community
10. General life experiences with religion (e.g. perceptions of the role of religion in the participant's life).

In each category, I asked participants a series of questions that directed them to speak on

a particular topic while also providing space for them to extrapolate, discuss personal

experiences, and explain how they interpret these experiences. In some instances, I asked

participants to provide greater detail about certain topics or experiences.

Analysis

I audio recorded all interviews using a digital recording device and transcribed

them from digital .wav files. After each interview, I made notes about issues and themes

that arose and developed ideas and new questions. I used the qualitative analysis

program MAXqda to content code the interviews for analysis. Using the coded material,

I looked for key patterns and themes that emerged. I sought confirmations and

contradictions of these patterns. I also attempted to discern from the interviews general

trends in identity formation that represent a majority of those interviewed. I will explain these trends below and use quotes from the interviews to show how the trends play out in the individual lives of the participants.

FINDINGS

While the interviews led to a variety of revelations about the nature of religion and multireligious people in the United States, I focus here on the findings most relevant to the process by which identity is formed. Cultural/religious exposure is particularly important in this process. Thus, I begin by describing this exposure and, later, examine how it pervades other aspects of the identity formation process.

Cultural/Religious Exposure

Among this sample, there is a clear relationship between cultural/religious exposure and religious affiliation. All seven participants who identify as Jewish indicated that they have had more cultural/religious exposure to Judaism than to Christianity. The opposite is true of both participants who are categorized as "Christian-leaning." Of the four participants who self-identify as "Not Religious," three had limited cultural/religious exposure to any religion.

The link between cultural/religious exposure and the shared meaning that allows for identification in the symbolic interactionist frame is immediately evident. Cultural/religious exposure gave or denied participants the shared meanings to partake in a religion, especially the ability to participate socially. Jeremy's description of his

participation in a Jewish retreat depicts how his cultural/religious knowledge enabled him

to connect with others with similar knowledge:

> **Jeremy (Jewish, High)**: [I went on a Jewish retreat that] was very cool and it
> definitely took my religion to a different place, because it was more of looking
> into yourself and finding what's important to you…I definitely believe that
> shaped how I practice... I also like just being in a group of people who are going
> through the same learning as you are and trying to mold themselves and find their
> identity within the religion. It was a really cool experience…[and] it's a cool
> place to get to know people who are like you.

In their formative years, social interaction was the participants' primary

connection to religion. Kara's (Jewish, Low-Mid) experience exemplifies this. She says,

"I remember in seventh grade, around the *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* season, every little piece

of gossip happened at Hebrew school because that's where everyone was all the time.

So, I used to just go to Hebrew school with my friends just to be a part of that. I wanted

to know what was going on there, so I used to just go sometimes." Experiences like these

verify the similarity of religious/cultural experiences to ethnic the ethnic ones described

by Waters (1990); positive experiences created meaningful memories.

Participants recognized the self-identification process through the notion of fitting

in. In the interviews, there was a correlation between the feeling of fitting in and the

extent of the participant's cultural/religious exposure:

> **Dana (Jewish, High)**: I just feel like there's something about synagogue that's so
> universal. Like, every state you go to, I feel like, in synagogue, when I hear them
> saying the *shemonah esrei* and the *shema* [Hebrew prayers] I will feel not
> awkward. I will know the words to what everyone in the room is saying. So, I
> feel like there is this universalness to everyone being in synagogue.

Dana senses that she fits in when she's in synagogue because she knows the cultural

practices of the community. In contrast, participants like Kyle felt that they did not fit

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because they lacked cultural/religious exposure to a particular religion, making them feel out of place:

> **Kyle (Agnostic/Atheist, Low)**: There are times at camp, more than anywhere else, that, in church, they'd be like, "Okay, so everyone, moment of silence and let's pray for blank." And, I'd be like, okay, this is kind of weird, I don't really pray and I don't know who I'm praying to here…I don't even know how to pray, I don't think. So, I kind of felt ostracized…

Interestingly, the apparent need to fit in was so acute that numerous participants made statements about being "normal" by not being religious. Anna (Christian-leaning, Low-Mid), characterizes this when she says "I think I represent the majority of people of the 21st century in terms of religion." In this way, even if an individual does not have the cultural/religious exposure required to fit into a religion, they can still have a sense of fitting in. In order to compensate for the feeling that one does not fit in with a religious community, s/he has the ability to claim that s/he fits in with the overall majority of people.

Through cultural/religious exposure, individuals were either provided with or denied the cultural knowledge that would give them a framework for understanding how to interact in a religious situation. In Swidler's (1986) terms, this knowledge served as a "took kit" that enabled interaction. Consistent with symbolic interactionism, if they could interact, they could see themselves as belonging to and incorporate a religion into their self-identities. Without these tools to interact, though, individuals were prevented from engaging in this process. It appears, then, that cultural/religious exposure, through the shared meanings it engenders, catalyzes the ability to fit in, emphasizing its importance in the process of religious identity formation.

Choice

Choice is an interesting concept in multireligious identity formation. Bossard and Boll (1972) claim that "quite apart from parent's intentions for children and the pressures upon them as they grow up…children ultimately decide for themselves" how to identify religiously (307). Waters (1990) also frames her discussion of ethnic identity as "choosing" between ethnic options. In researching this topic, moreover, I frequently heard others espouse the notion that inter-religious couples *should* not push their children into a religion, but rather let the children choose one for themselves. This study, however, shows that this notion is misguided.

The interviews indicate that participants maintained a secure affiliation with a religion when they came from families in which one religion was particularly emphasized as the religion of the family. The decision to infuse a single religion into a family tended to be a conscious decision by parents either upon marriage or when children were born. Jeremy (Jewish, High) explains, "When my parents were getting married it was decided that we would be raised Jewish - with influences from the other religion…[but] definitely the pressure from the parents was to be Jewish and it was always believed that we'd be raised Jewish."

In families like Jeremy's, one parent was almost always the force behind the decision of religious upbringing for the children. Gary (Jewish, High-Mid) tells that, "when [my] parents got married, [my mom] wanted to raise Jewish kids. My dad was okay with that because he's not very religious and didn't find same importance in raising kids Episcopalian." His discussion of his father's involvement in his religious upbringing is also typical. He says that his dad "always supported us being raised Jewish and made

it an important concern of his to make sure we were doing all of our stuff for it." Many participants claimed that the parent who did not decide on the family religion either actively supported the decision or was passively uninvolved in family religious life, reifying the choice of religion made for the children.

In some cases, even if parents' did not explicitly state how the children of a family were to be raised, there were subtle hints suggesting this:

> **Jessica (Christian-leaning, Low)**: I did have to go to synagogue when I was younger for, like, *Yom Kippur* or, like, *Rosh Hashanah*, and we would bring Gameboys, we would bring magazines…and we were never given trouble. But if we ever did that for church we would get yelled at...it's kind of like we took church a lot more seriously.

It is noteworthy that parents' choosing a family religion is salient not only when the choice is to have a particular religion, but also when the choice is to have no religion at all. Ryan (Not Religious, Low) says that, in his family, "I feel like it was more expected not to affiliate, but not prohibited from affiliation. If I wanted to affiliate with a religion, I don't really know how I would have gotten there… It was a lot easier not to affiliate than to affiliate."

Ryan is not alone in his claim that his upbringing made it easier to not affiliate. In discussing her parents' stance on allowing their children to choose their own religion, Anna (Christian-leaning, Low-Mid) tells, "I was definitely allowed to make my own choices, but I was never given the opportunity to act on them. As in, as a kid, I don't know where to find a church, I don't know where to find a temple, I don't know where to find a youth group. So, the choice was always there, but because my parents never placed any importance on it, I never had the chance to act on any choice I could have possibly made."

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In nearly every case, interviewees maintained their family religion when parents had agreed on one and did not affiliate with a religion when parents did not. This explains why the notion of children choosing a religion for themselves is misguided. Whether or not they realize it, parents' choices regarding the upbringing of their children directly affect the children's religious identity. The symbolic interactionist notion that identity is gained from shared meanings that result from interaction explains why this is the case. In order for an individual to see himself as belonging to a religion, he must have shared knowledge of that religion. In order to have this shared knowledge, he must have interacted with others in a religious context. In absence of this interaction, an individual will lack both the shared meaning and ability to see himself as belonging. In the previous section, I suggested that cultural/religious exposure also breeds a sense of connection to a religion. Only by parents' exposing their children to a religion do the children gain the cultural/religious exposure and shared meanings to feel connected to that religion. Thus, while all children may be able to choose to not affiliate with a religion, only those with cultural/religious exposure can make the "choice" to affiliate with one.

Multireligiosity as an Unrecognized Category

While no participant identified as multireligious, many remained conscious that their parents' varying religions made them different from others. Simon (Not Religious, Low-Mid) says that his move from New York to Florida as an adolescent made him "realize that I was definitely a minority. Not just the fact that I was an Italian-American or a Jewish-American, but that I was from two religions…a family of two religions. I

definitely felt like a bit of a minority." Jessica (Christian-leaning, Low) had a similar

reaction when asked whether she has a feeling of belonging in a religious community.

She said she belongs in "my own religious community [laughter]…with the half-Jews

and the half-Presbyterians…my family."

As with belonging to a minority through a single religion, participants found

benefits to belonging to minority through multireligiosity:

> **Kyle (Agnostic/Atheist, Low)**: It's easy for me because I'm half-and-half, so I'm
> Jewish when I want to be and I'm not when I don't want to be, which my friend
> makes fun of me for all the time. He says I'm a situational Jew. Because he's
> completely not Jewish. He's not really anything though. He's, like, atheist. And
> I'll always be like…when my Jewish friends are talking about Jewish things I'll
> be like, "Oh, yeah!" talking with them, making jokes, and my friend will just be
> like, "Shut up. You are such a faker." So, it's easier for me because I can choose
> to belong and choose not to belong…which is kind of nice about having parents
> with different religious backgrounds.

> **Liz (Jewish-leaning, Low)**: In my other school I never used to say "I'm Jewish"
> because nobody was Jewish but then when I got to a place where other people
> were Jewish I was like, "Oh, I am, too."

> **Dana (Jewish, High)**: …even just going to [this university] where there's a really
> big Jewish population…a lot of the Christian students, if you talk to them…are
> sort of like, "Those are the Jewish kids." Especially like the ones from Long
> Island or New York. Like, "those are how the Jewish kids from New York act."
> And I can be like, "Well, I'm from Indiana and I'm Jewish and I don't act that
> way," or I can be like, "Yeah, well, the other side of my family is Christian, so
> don't hate on me 'cause I'm Jewish." I feel like I can use the fact the other half of
> my family is not Jewish [to my advantage]. I think it kinda helps having both
> sides…

Despite none of these participants self-identifying with multiple religions, they show that

they are able to capitalize on both of their parents' religions when the opportunity

presents itself. Perhaps this is the greatest distinction between multireligious identity and

biracial identity. While others may make assumptions about biracial individuals based on

phenotypic characteristics, the non-visual salience of religion puts these individuals in a situation where assumptions are not as automatic.

Despite this recognition of being different through multireligiosity, the participants' comments also help to explain why none of them self-identify as multireligious. The situations Kyle, Liz, and Dana describe are similar in that they depict presentations of identity rather than actual self-identity. Other participants described drawbacks of being multireligious. Anna (Christian-leaning, Low-Mid) explains that her friends, "shared similar childhoods. They were raised in the Jewish faith. They know more about it. They had their *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah*s. It's not like they discriminate against me in any way or will push me aside for that reason, but I think that it's a conscious distinction that's held between me and most of them…I guess when it comes to, really, who people will stay with and remain friends over the course of lifetimes, and who will be a very large part of their life, I think that does play a role in mitigating me to the side because I don't have the same background." Her story recalls the nature of shared meanings in multireligious identity formation. With awareness of her multireligious background, others assumed she did not have the shared meanings that enabled their interaction. This was true of Jamie, as well:

> **Jamie (Jewish-leaning, Low-Mid)**: One of my closest friends…grew up in a very religious, Conservative [Jewish denomination] family and she'll make comments or she'll say stuff like, "You're not actually Jewish," and I'm like, "I mean, technically my mom is Jewish and, you know, by the Jewish line, yeah, I didn't grow up [Jewish] so much, but you can't sit and make a call like that." She kind of blows it off. Then, if we do get into talking about, like, mixed marriage, she's very like, "I would never, ever marry someone who wasn't Jewish!" [She's] very not sympathetic to the fact that her best friend grew up in a family that did that and it worked out. [She was] just acting like the thought that not having a strict religion is unheard of. The lack of sympathy…or not even sympathy, just understanding that it could be different and that it doesn't have to be in her set way…That's fine, you can make your own decision, I understand

that religion's played a huge part in her life, but then, you know, at the same time…at least look to the other side considering I am your best friend…It makes me a little uncomfortable to, maybe, go to services here, or go with [friends like these] to Passover dinner because I feel like they won't be sympathetic that I don't know necessarily as much as they do or that they don't even think that I should be there… When it does come to the holidays, they just act like, "Why are you even thinking of coming with us?" That turned me off.

Other participants had internalized opinions similar to that of Jamie's friend. Liz explains the identification crisis associated with having inter-religious parents:

Liz (Jewish-leaning, Low): I don't feel like I fit in in any religion. I feel awkward in both. If I go to temple, I don't feel like I fit in there. If I go to church, I don't feel like I fit in there. I feel wrong at both places… Either way I feel like I'm somewhat of the other one, too, so it's wrong to say I'm fully one or the other… Everyone seems to be able to associate with one [religion], [and] as much as I don't want to, it's still hard not to. Even people who aren't really religious still can say "I'm Catholic," or "I'm Jewish," or something and…I can't. I feel a lot different in that respect. Even people who are just as non-religious as me can still say something and I don't feel that I can. I feel that that was my choice. I could say, "I'm Jewish." I could have done that, so it's not someone else's fault…but I just feel a lot different. I mean there are people who are like me, too - I mean, you're doing studies on us [laughter] - but I still think a lot of those kids even associated with one or the other and I just never did, so I feel a lot different in that way… I don't really know what to associate myself with and I don't know what I feel. It would almost be easier, I feel like, if both my parents were the same thing because, even though I'm not very religious, it would put me someplace.

Liz's joke that there must be other people in her situation leads to a somber understanding. She feels alone in her situation, believing that even multireligious others found some way to identify. Ayla (Jewish, High-Mid) similarly claims that she has "never really met people that have had to go through this, because when I try to talk about it people say, like, 'Well, it's not that big of a deal. You're in college; nobody's really worried about religion.' But…it's sort of, like, unless you've gone through it, I don't think it's something you can understand. But I've never really talked to someone who has gone through the same thing."

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Liz and Ayla's comments that they do not know others who have the identity

situation they have allow me to hypothesize that multireligiosity is not a socially

recognized category. As Smith-Lovin (2007) showed, without a group to verify an

identity category, that category becomes obscure. Mindy most directly affirms this

dilemma:

> **A.H.**: Was it hard for you to develop view of religion?
> **Mindy (Jewish, Low-Mid)**: Probably when I was little I didn't differentiate
> between the fact that you couldn't believe in two religions at once. I used to say
> that I was both when I was a little kid. As I grew up, I kind of came to understand
> religion…that it's an either/or thing.
> **A.H.**: You don't think it's possible to believe in two religions?
> **Mindy (Jewish, Low-Mid)**: No. I think it's possible to some extent…to
> incorporate values and beliefs from more than one religion. I mean, if you're
> going to two different religious services and you're strictly keeping two different
> sets of holidays, I don't see how that's feasible… It's not like I'll be like, "Oh
> yeah, I'm Jewish and Christian." I just don't speak in those terms. I don't think
> most adults would respect you if you said something like that. It's just not a thing
> that people identify themselves that way. I don't feel like it's an adult thing to
> say…that you're two religions. Maybe that you grew up that way or that your
> parents are, but…I feel like people are supposed to identify [with one]. It's just
> not the kind of thing that people say.

Perhaps her feeling that adults don't say they belong to two religions is a masked

statement that, because Mindy does not see others who claim to belong to a

multireligious category, she feels compelled, as the "adult" thing to do, to make a choice

to identify with only one religion or with none at all.

The participants' comments on multireligiosity further explain why identifying as

multireligious is so unlikely. Even if an individual gained enough cultural/religious

exposure to have shared meanings in two religions, like Mindy, individuals who initially

believed they could be multireligious would come to believe that this category is not

socially recognized and be compelled to drop this identification. Without a

multireligious group, these individuals would find that this category is not one with

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which they could identify. Ryan (Not Religious, Low) is most poignant when he tells that, since he isn't sure which of his parents two religions he feels identified with and without a category in which to place himself, he's left "just…kind of…in the middle."

CONCLUSION

The experiences of the sixteen participants in this study help fill gaps in the multireligious identity literature. Using the findings above, I propose a process of religious identity formation and explain the contribution of this study to the literature.

A Proposed Process of Religious Identity Formation

Contrary to popular belief, the process of religious identity formation for children of inter-religious couples is activated by parents choosing a religion in which they would like to raise a child. When parents share the same religion, the choices available to them are to raise children in their own religion or to raise children without religion. For inter-religious couples, the choice is somewhat different. The evidence in this study suggests that, in inter-religious couples, either one parent will express a desire to have children raised in his/her religion and the other parent acquiesces, or the parents do not make an active attempt to raise their children in any religion.

The parents' choice is crucial to the religious identity formation process because choosing to raise children in a specific religion leads parents' to expose their children to that religion. Through attending religious school, ritual services, life-cycle ceremonies, and other community-oriented activities, children gain cultural/religious exposure to the parents' chosen religion. This cultural/religious exposure, in turn, allows the children to

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learn the shared meanings of that religious group. These shared meanings serve as a cultural "tool kit," enabling effective interactions with in-group others and, through those interactions, allows the children to feel a sense of belonging to the religious group and thereby identify with it. Figure 1 depicts this process visually.

Choosing to let their children pick a religion for themselves is equivalent to choosing for their children not to be raised in a religion. In both cases, parents' do not engage their children in the community-oriented activities where cultural/religious exposure is gained and which lead to the development of shared meanings, thereby preventing effective interaction and identification. This is not to say that these individuals lack a religious identity. As participants in this study have explained, having no religious affiliation can be a salient identity and one which enables feeling a sense of connection with non-religious others. Lacking cultural/religious exposure, however, prevents identification with a religious group.

Why Multireligious Individuals Cannot Identify as Multireligious

Table 2 summarizes the process described above. Using this process alone, as the table depicts, we might determine that there is a hypothetical situation in which multireligious individuals can identify with two religions.[3] If an inter-religious couple decided to actively expose their children to both of their religions, enabling shared meanings in both religious groups, then maybe the children could gain a sense of identity with multiple religions. In order for this to occur, however, this identification would also have to be recognized by others.

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[3] This situation can only be described as hypothetical because it is unseen both in this study and previous research on multireligious individuals.

This study has shown that this does not happen. Comments made by numerous participants express both that others do not accept the category of multireligious as viable and, furthermore, that the participants themselves understand society as lacking this category. Thus, even if a multireligious individual considered identifying as such, as Mindy did in her childhood, s/he would ultimately have to drop this identification by coming to understand that such a category does not exist.

In truth, as the race and ethnicity literature shows, identity categories change over time. At some other time, multireligiosity might come to be seen as a socially accepted category of religion. Without this social acceptance, however, even the hypothetical situation of having cultural/religious exposure to multiple religions will not currently allow an individual to identify as multireligious.

Contributions

The study makes several new contributions. First, it provides a sense of the experience of developing a religious identity as the child of an inter-religious couple, both articulating some of the mechanisms of this development and giving an intimate portrait of sixteen individuals for whom this process has been relevant. Though the words of these participants, I was able to propose a process by which multireligious individuals develop a religious self-identity. I was further able to explain why the ideas that an individual can choose between two religions or that an individual can identify with multiple religions are misconceived.

The major success of this study is applying the concept of cultural exposure, primarily developed in the biracial and multiethnic literature, to religious identity

formation. My findings show the importance of cultural/religious exposure as a factor in religious identity development because of its use as a forum through which religion is disseminated and a tool by which one is able to fit into a religious community.

Beyond activating the process of religious identity formation, though, this study also suggests why exposure can further the concept of identity formation developed in the symbolic interactionist literature. Exposure seems to be the missing link to shared meanings in this literature. In order for individuals to develop shared meanings that lead to interaction and identification with any identity category, they must first have enough exposure to that group to understand its practices, culture, or other important features. Entering a group without any previous exposure, this study suggests, prevents individuals from building the shared meanings that are necessary for effective interaction.

Finally, this study provides relevant information for those raising children in a multireligious context. This study can provide parents a sense of the effects of their choices about their children's religious upbringing. The study, furthermore, can aid clinicians working with people of multireligious backgrounds by increasing their understanding of the unique life experiences and factors that play a role in their identities and self-concepts.

Limitations

While this study provides a sense of the mechanisms that are involved in religious identity formation, there are limitations to this study that must be recognized. The first limitation is the size and make-up of the sample population. Any time a small group of participants is used, the number of perspectives on the issue at hand is limited. Also

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limiting the findings of the study is the homogeneity of the participants. Because all participants are students at a small, private university and children of parents relatively high in socioeconomic status and education, the experiences of these students could differ greatly from those of individuals from different backgrounds. Thus, we must, at present, situate these results as being applicable to members of this demographic.

In addition, I focus primarily on children from Jewish/Christian couples. Studying children of a variety of inter-religious combinations would provide more comprehensive findings, and may also shed light on differences among varying inter-religious combinations. Certain combinations of religions, for example, may be more theologically similar or less theologically contradictory than others, which may make it more possible for children of such inter-religious couples to adopt more of a dual-religious identity. Only work with a broader sample population would inform us of whether or not the trends that I find would be salient across inter-religious pairings.

It is also important to note that, because the study was specifically advertised as seeking children of "Jewish, non-Jewish" couples, I may have inadvertently sent the message that I was seeking Jewish-identifying participants. While this was certainly not the case, this is also a possible explanation for the high number of Jewish-identifying individuals included in the study, and must be taken into account when considering the findings of the study.

This high occurrence of Jewish-identifying participants may also have a theological explanation. Of the Jewish and Jewish-leaning participants, all but one had a Jewish mother and non-Jewish father. Most traditional branches of Judaism abide by a policy of matrilineal descent, wherein the religion of one's mother determines one's own

religion. The relationship between Jewish identifying participants and Jewish mothers

may result from the salience of this notion when developing a sense of religious self.

This relationship, moreover, may suggest that mothers are the primary provider of

cultural/religious exposure. Further research is necessary to determine this with

certainty.

Future Research Directions

Despite the limitations, the insight this study provides into the identity formation

process of multireligious individuals is unique in this body of literature. The study,

moreover, breeds several directions for future research.

First, as mentioned above, slightly different results may come from different

pairings of religions. The biracial literature has debated the question of

overidentification, where biracial children may be compelled to identify with either

majority or minority races for various reasons (Faulkner and Kich 1983; Gibbs 1997;

Herring 1992; Lyles et al. 1985; Sebring 1985). Future studies should examine how

salient minority status is as a determining factor of religious identity, and whether, as was

the case in this study, there is a trend towards identifying with minority religions. If this

is the case, future research, moreover, may want to examine identity formation in

children of parents of two religious minorities.

Second, scholars may seek to examine the affect of religious theological

differences on the ability to identify as multireligious. Research has suggested that

theological dissimilarity hinders marital success and well-being (Chinitz and Brown

2001; Curtis and Ellison 2002). It would be relevant to ask whether people are simply

less likely to marry if their religious outlooks are too opposed, preventing the situation of raising children in a context where two parents are committed to distinct religions. In situations where religious theologies are more similar, would it be easier for children to both gain cultural/religious exposure to two religions and develop a multireligious identity that is socially accepted? This might be the case for children of Jewish-Buddhist couples, as evidenced by the recent development of the religious category "JewBu" (Boorstein 1998).

Finally, differences between multireligious identity and biracial/multiethnic identity can continue to be explored by further assessing the role of phenotype. The historical term "passing" was coined as the phenomenon of people pretending to be – and being accepted as – one race, despite their biracial background (Davis 1991; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002). Symbolic interactionists refers to "passing" and similar phenomena as impression management (Goffman 1963), or as Howard and Renfrow (2003) describe "masking stigmatized identities with more socially acceptable ones (274). If "passing" occurs among biracial people in spite of the tendency for others to make phenotypic assumptions, it is likely that the ability to "pass" is even more common with religion, a non-visually salient characteristic. My future work will examine the ability of mixed background individuals to hide or flaunt different parts of their backgrounds in different contexts to benefit from impression management.

There is still work to be done in the field of multireligious identity formation. What I have contributed is simply one piece of the growing puzzle, helping to explain the *experience* of growing up in a multireligious environment. Yet, as inter-religious coupling continues to play a role in our society and reactions to members of these couples

and their offspring continue to intensify (Fishkoff 2007), the study of religious identity

formation among the children of inter-religious couples will continue to be an important

and relevant area of inquiry.

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Table 1. Parents' Religions, Religious Self-Identification, and Religiosity Scores of Participants

Participant	Religion of Mother	Religion of Father	Self-Identification	Religiosity Score
Anna	Eastern Orthodox	Jewish	Christian-leaning	5
Ayla	Jewish	Islamic	Jewish	9
Brandon	Jewish	Protestant	Jewish	10
Dana	Jewish	Catholic	Jewish	17
Gary	Jewish	Episcopalian	Jewish	9
Jamie	Jewish	Unitarian Universalist	Jewish-leaning	7
Jeremy	Jewish	Methodist	Jewish	17
Jessica	Presbyterian	Jewish	Christian-leaning	2
Kara	Jewish	Roman Catholic	Jewish	7
Kyle	Lutheran/Episcopalian	Jewish	Agnostic/Atheist	2
Liz	Jewish	Methodist	Jewish-leaning	1
Mark	Catholic	Jewish	Not Religious	1
Mindy	Catholic	Jewish	Jewish	7
Rob	Methodist	Jewish	Not Religious	3
Ryan	Jewish	Christian	Not Religious	2
Simon	Jewish	Catholic	Not Religious	6

NOTE: All participant names are pseudonyms.

Table 2. Process of Religious Identity Formation for Multireligious Individuals

Parent(s) Decision	*Effect of Decision*	*Likely Child Identification*
Choose One Religion for Children	Cultural/Religious Exposure to Parent(s) Chosen Religion	Identification with Parent(s) Chosen Religion
Choose No Religion for Children OR Allow Children to Choose Religion	No Cultural/Religious Exposure	Inability to Identify with a Religion
Choose to Expose Children to Multiple Religions*	Cultural/Religious Exposure to Multiple Religions	Potential Ability to Combine or Choose Between Religious Identities

*This situation does not apply to any participants in this study; 'Likely Child Identification' is hypothesized.

Figure 1. Visual Representation of Link between Parent(s) Chosen Religion and Identification