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# Intergenerational religious transmission mechanisms among second-generation migrants: The case of Jewish immigrants in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

Do religious transmission mechanisms work differently for immigrant groups that experience different modes of acculturation in the host society? Recent studies about religious transmission among Muslim migrants in Europe found that religious practices at home during childhood are the strongest predictors of the preservation of religious practices among young people, whereas external socialization platforms (friends, schooling) have less of an impact. These studies also found that Muslims encounter barriers to integration into Western societies. Such hostility might push them to adopt a separatist mode of acculturation that includes preserving their religious identity. To determine whether these findings can be generalized to other groups that have an integrative mode of acculturation, we investigate intergenerational religious transmission mechanisms and attitudes toward endogamy and religious transmission to one's children among second-generation Jewish migrants in America. Utilizing a sample of 1480 second-generation Jewish migrants from Israel and the Former Soviet Union (FSU) from the large scale Taglit-Birthright database, we found that practices at home have the strongest explanatory power for preserving religious practices among young people currently. In contrast, Jewish socialization activities have little or no impact on the continuity of religious observances. Interestingly, despite reported differences in the literature between Jewish immigrants from Israel and the FSU, place of origin was not a statistically significant factor in explaining intergenerational religious transmission mechanisms. These findings largely accord with the results reported in the studies about second-generation Muslim migrants in European countries, suggesting that religious transmission mechanisms work similarly despite different modes of acculturation.

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## 1. Introduction

Until the 1990s social science research tended to concentrate on the conditions that facilitated the assimilation of various minority groups into the host country. The processes through which long-term intergenerational identity was transmitted received little scholarly attention (Barkan, Vecoli, Alba, & Zunz, 1995; Fishman, 1985; Ganz, 1982; Gordon, 1964; Herberg,

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1955; Warner & Srole, 1945). Today, with the advent of globalization and its subsequent impact on transnationalism, the processes of intergenerational identity transmission, namely, the preservation of ethnic identification, and values and practices from the place of origin, are given more scholarly attention. However, the degree of transnationalism in the second generation and intergenerational transmission mechanisms, particularly the interplay between transnationalism and religion in second-generation migrants, remains relatively understudied and highly debated (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007).

In addition, research about the transnational nature of the second generation remained relatively small due to the until recently widely accepted (yet misleading) assumption that children of immigrants who were born and brought up in the receiving country are integrated and therefore should not be treated as transnationals (Levitt, 2009). Although some recent studies have emerged about second-generation transnationalism, they are generally qualitative and focus on topics other than religion (Allievi & Nielsen, 2003; Lee, 2008; Levitt, 2007, 2009). A comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of intergenerational religious transmission tested with empirical data still lies ahead of us (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012).

In the current work we use a large database to shed further light on this issue. Specifically, we compare second-generation youngsters from two different places of origin who belong to the same religion and socialize in the same hosting environment: former Israeli Jews and Jews from the former Soviet Union (FSU) in the US. We explore the question of whether their religious practices result from the influence of their parents or their socialization with their peers. In addition, we consider the findings in light of the studies about Muslim identity in second-generation immigrants to Europe (Alba, 2005; Güngör, Bornstein, & Phalet, 2012; Maliapaard & Lubbers, 2013; Timmerman, Vanderwaeren, & Crul, 2003; Voas & Fleischmann, 2012). However, Muslims in Western countries face particular suspicions and barriers to integration<sup>2</sup> in the host society (Joppke, 2004; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). Consequently, they often adopt a separatist mode of acculturation, preserving and even strengthening their religious identity as a consolation for their failure to integrate into their places of residence. In contrast, American Jews, at least in recent decades, have been considered part of the American Judeo-Christian culture, so they have not suffered from similar degrees of hostility and suspicion from the wider society (Alba, 2006; Huntington, 1996). Comparing our findings with those of studies on Muslim immigrants in Europe will help us determine whether we can formulate generalizations about the processes of intergenerational religious transmission among second-generation migrants. In particular, we seek to determine whether different modes of acculturation in the host society (separation vs. integration) result in different religious transmission mechanisms.

Recently, Gezentsvey-Lamy and colleagues produced several publications that constituted a significant contribution to knowledge on ethno-cultural continuity of Jews and other ethnic minorities in English speaking societies (Gezentsvey Lamy, Ward, & Liu, 2013; Gezentsvey Lamy, in press; Gezentsvey, 2008). Developing a framework for studying long term acculturation, these studies advance the concept and measure of Motivation for Ethno-cultural Continuity (MEC) among ethnic minorities, and stress its influence on the decision of members of minority groups to maintain their culture through endogamy in comparison with other factors – similarity, attraction to in group members and social network approval (Gezentsvey Lamy et al., 2013).

Importantly, these studies emphasize the aggregation of personal choices, at the individual level, to transfer cultural content to future generations. Also, they explore motivation for ethno-cultural continuity in liberal host societies that are tolerant to the assimilation/integration of Jews and other minorities, including to miscegenation (Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the US), and therefore assume that external factors (host culture receptivity) are less important than internal factors (individual choice) in the intention of participating minorities (Jews, Chinese, and Maori) to maintain their culture through endogamy, and correspondingly to select in-group dating at the behavioral level (Gezentsvey Lamy, in press). Finally, Gezentsvey's studies demonstrate that minority groups that belong to small peoples (Jews, Maori), who are more concerned about their future existence, show stronger motivation for ethno-cultural continuity than members of large people (Chinese) who do not encounter existential fears (Gezentsvey Lamy et al., 2013).

Notwithstanding the scholarly contribution of these studies, the current piece intends to advance our knowledge in complementary respects. Most importantly, we differ from Gezentsvey et al. in that we wish to investigate the influence of an external factor, the level of receptivity of the minority religion and culture in the host society, on transition mechanisms. This is especially true in the case of Muslims in western societies in the 21st Century, (but also of European Jews, Ben Rafael, 2014) that encounter difficulties to integrate despite being a large people. Second, while Gezentsvey discusses a more general conception of ethno-cultural identity, we emphasize a certain attribute of identity—religion, and wish to find out how religious practices are maintained through time. Third, Gezentsvey's studies concentrated on minority groups whereas the current research concentrates only on members of immigrant groups with recent migratory experiences. We believe that these additional aspects will facilitate further understanding of the phenomenon of intergenerational cultural transmission mechanisms.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that there is a considerable variation in the use of terminology depending on discipline. While sociologists such as Gans (1992), Alba (2005) and Connor (2010) discuss processes of integration and assimilation into the host society, social psychologists such as Berry (1997) refer to different strategies or modes of acculturation, of which assimilation and integration are a part. In order to avoid misunderstandings and keep the consistent terminology, we follow Berry (1997), which is a basic and often quoted source. This terminology is used widely in articles published on this theme (e.g., Gui, Zheng, & Berry, 2012; Kunst & Sam, 2013; Ward & Kagitcibasi, 2010; Ward, 2006). According to this literature, there are four possible modes of acculturation: Assimilation, Separation, Marginalization and Integration.

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