

Critiquing the Default Hypothesis: The Importance of Group Identity

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Abstract

The hypothesis that group identity is important in predicting Jewish positive ethnocentrism was tested using survey data from the United States. While intermarriage also predicted positive ethnocentrism, a relative weight analysis showed that the effect of group identity was much stronger. A model in which group identity mediated the relationship between antisemitism threat and positive ethnocentrism was also supported, although the direct effect of antisemitism threat remained significant. Political orientation was also examined with group identity and positive ethnocentrism being associated with conservatism and antisemitism threat and intermarriage associated with liberalism. The results are discussed in relation to the Default and Group Evolutionary Strategy hypotheses.

Keywords: Group identity, Positive ethnocentrism, Antisemitism, Political orientation

1 Introduction

In the article *Still No Evidence for a Jewish Group Evolutionary Strategy*, Cofnas (2023) reiterates support for his so-called “default hypothesis” (DH) contrasting it with MacDonald’s “Group Evolutionary Strategy” (GES) hypothesis (Dutton, 2019b; MacDonald, 1994, MacDonald, 1998). In the current investigation two of Cofnas’ arguments are challenged. First, to refute GES, Cofnas (2018); Cofnas (2019); Cofnas (2023) states that Jews do not have greater in-group favoritism than Gentiles as solely evidenced by Jews’ decreasing endogamy or high rates of interreligious marriage. In this study (also see Dutton (2019a)) it is argued that intermarriage should not be the lone factor considered when assessing religio- or ethno-centrism. Not all marriages are equal. Dutton (2019a) found that Jew-Gentile marriages are more likely to be second marriages — when reproductive capacity is reduced or has ceased. Additionally, these interreligious marriages are twice as likely to dissolve as endogamous Jewish marriages. In the current study it is argued that social or group identity plays an additional, if not larger, role than intermarriage in determining in-group favoritism.

Second, Cofnas’ hypothesis states because Jews are highly intelligent (with a noted verbal tilt) and reside in urban centers they will often be at the vanguard of political, intellectual, and social movements. A caveat being that Jews will shy away from movements that are explicitly antisemitic. This is used to explain Jews’ overrepresentation in progressivism. Thus, to the degree that factors other than intelligence and urban residence account for Jewish political orientation, Cofnas is incorrect in his assessment. As with in-group favoritism, it is hypothesized that group identity is a significant factor in Jews’ being left-wing.

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2 Evidence for Jewish in-group favoritism and reconciliation with intermarriage

C. S. Dunkel and Dutton (2016) constructed a scale of in-group favoritism from items (sample item: How much do you prefer to be with other people who are the same religion as you?) in a large nationally representative U.S. sample. They found that that except for the Baptists, Jews scored higher on the scale of in-group favoritism than members of Christian denominations (e.g., Methodists), despite being less religious. These results were replicated in another large sample with Jews and Baptists scoring higher than Catholics and Lutherans on a similarly constructed scale of in-group favoritism and Jews also exhibiting low levels of religiosity (C. S. Dunkel, 2019). Additionally, when asked how important various identities were, Jews were found to place more importance on ethnic identity than Baptists, Catholics, and Lutherans and more importance on political identity than Lutherans. Despite the replicated findings of high Jewish in-group favoritism, Cofnas (2023) ignored the results in his review of Jewish ethnocentrism even after being confronted about the omission (C. Dunkel, 2022).

This is not to deny Cofnas' assertion of high intermarriage among Jews, albeit with the caveats described by Dutton (2019a), but this needs to be reconciled with the findings of higher in-group favoritism described in the preceding paragraph. It is posited that these two seemingly contradictory findings can be explained by simply thinking about the level at which each occurs. At the level of the individual and in the context of long-term relationships (Li et al., 2002), fitness is maximized by securing a mate with the highest mate value (i.e., high status, physically attractive, intelligent, kind) even if that partner is of a different religious or ethnic group. Note as well that the financial and social success of Jews increases their mate value, widening the pool of potential long-term mates, making intermarriage to an individual from the larger Gentile population more attractive. However, at the small cost of hypocrisy, simultaneously advocating and supporting in-group cohesion would further advance one's fitness. This may be an example of antagonistic multilevel selection, but it is not necessary to rely upon a group selection dynamic. That is, the benefits of in-group favoritism may directly aid the group, but benefits to the individual should also indirectly accrue as the returns of group success are allocated to individuals (e.g., patronage). Soldiers and warriors may benefit the tribe by helping secure additional lands and resources, but may also gain advantage individually by mating with the defeated rival's females. Likewise, negative outcomes may accrue for the individual if the group is diminished in status or is threatened.

3 The source of Jewish in-group favoritism

While Cofnas frames the issue of Jewish ethnocentrism as the default hypothesis (DH) versus group evolutionary strategy (GES), there is not a dialectic, and the current study is not an attempt at synthesis. Disagreement with tenets of the DH are not signals of agreement with GES. GES is premised on ultimate causes specific to high Jewish in-group favoritism. In the current analysis generalized (i.e., not specific to Jews) and proximate causes associated with in-group favoritism are explored. Specifically, the precepts of social identity theory (e.g., R. Brown, 2000) are used to explore an aspect of Jewish in-group favoritism. In his response to Cofnas, Dutton (2019b) distinguishes between positive and negative ethnocentrism. Positive ethnocentrism is behaviours or attitudes that benefit the in-group. Negative ethnocentrism is behaviors or attitudes that disadvantage outgroups. In the current study, only positive ethnocentrism is examined.

Humans readily adopt group membership and show preference for their group based on the smallest of, even arbitrary, boundaries (i.e., Tajfel et al., 1971). Furthermore, group membership becomes woven into individuals' self-concept and consequently self/group favoritism emerges. What is good for the group becomes good for the individual. For example, self-esteem is positively associated with group identification and in-group biases (Aberson et al., 2000). Consistent with these findings and proposed ideas, Weisskirch et al. (2016) found group identity in Jews was positively correlated with self-esteem; and L. M. Brown et al. (2003) found positive associations between Jewish identity and collective self-esteem and collectivism.

A central finding of social identity theory is that group identification strongly influences partiality toward the in-group (Perreault and Bourhis, 1998; Spadaro et al. (2024)). The effect of group identification

on in-group bias may be especially pronounced in minorities (Leonardelli and Brewer, 2001) like Jews (L. M. Brown et al., 2003). The largest intranational number of Jews lives in the United States where they are estimated to be between 2 – 3% of the population. Additionally, competition for resources or threats to the group should act to increase group identification and cohesion (e.g., R. Brown, 2000). Given the history of pogroms against Jews and the genocide of the Holocaust, Jews may be especially attuned to group threats. Indeed, over three quarters of Jews (76%) report remembering the Holocaust is an essential part of being Jewish. In fact, of the list of possible options (e.g., following Jewish religious law) supplied by the Pew Research Center in a survey of Jewish Americans, Holocaust remembrance was endorsed more often than any of the other possibilities (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>). This result has held for several decades (Herman, 1988). These survey results point toward not just the importance for Jews of remembering the Holocaust, but also the importance of vigilance lest it happen again.

This leads to the general hypothesis that perceived threats, in the form of antisemitism, will account for variance in group identity and positive ethnocentrism beyond that accounted for by intermarriage. Consistent with the ideas outlined in the introduction, a mediation model is proposed (see Figure 1) in which group identity mediates the association between antisemitic threats and positive ethnocentrism. Because the dynamics are thought to be independent of those of intermarriage, intermarriage is controlled for in the mediation model.

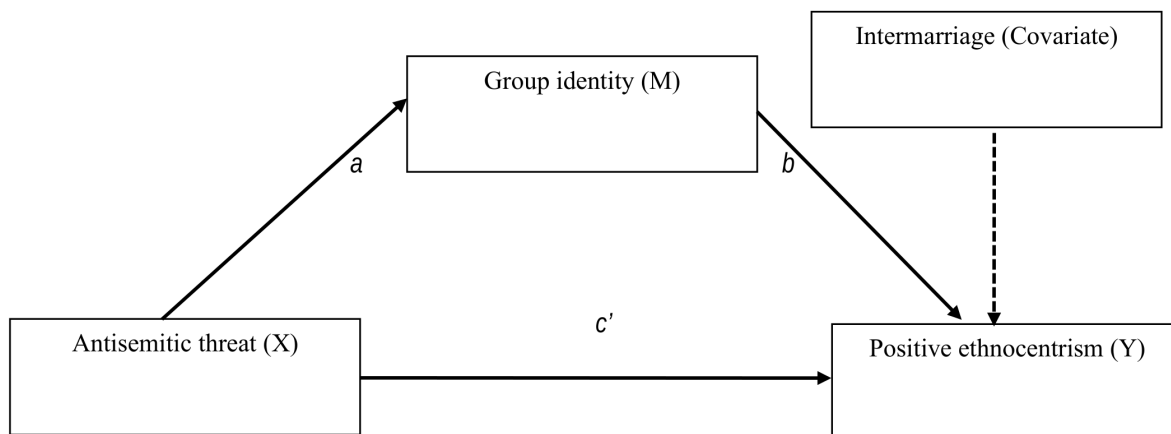


Figure 1: Mediation model predicting positive ethnocentrism.

4 Group identity and Jewish progressivism

C. S. Dunkel (2020) used aspects of DH and GES as predictors to try and explain Jewish progressivism. Indeed, Jews were found to be significantly more left-wing than Christian religious groups. However, the DH variables of urbanization and intelligence were not significant predictors of this difference. Likewise, the GES variable of in-group favoritism also supported the null hypothesis.

Given that Jews weight politics as especially important in their identity (C. S. Dunkel, 2019), and reasoning that group identity plays a significant role in Jewish attitudes and behavior, the role of Jewish group identity on political orientation is also explored. Specifically, it is predicted that Jewish group identity will be positively associated with a liberal political orientation. The possible roles of intermarriage and positive ethnocentrism are also tested although it is expected that the previous null findings will be replicated.

5 Method

5.1 Participants and data set

Data from the Pew survey *Jewish Americans in 2020* (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>) was used in the analyses. The national sample was administered the survey online and by mail from Nov. 19, 2019, to June 3, 2020. The extended dataset consisted of 5,881 respondents. Further culling was necessary as the sample included individuals who either had a Jewish parent or were raised Jewish but no longer consider themselves to be Jewish and individuals who had some sort of affinity to Judaism (e.g., married to a Jewish partner), but were not Jewish. The final sample included individuals who said their present religion was Jewish or individuals who indicated that they have no religion but consider themselves Jewish and have a Jewish parent or were raised Jewish. The final sample included 4,718 participants (2,406 = male, 2,283 = female, 29 = no answer).

5.2 Measures¹

Group identity

Group identity was measured using a sum of five items. The first item was, "How important is being Jewish in your life?" with responses anchored at 1 = not at all important and 4 = very important. The second item was, "How much, if at all, do you feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish people?" anchored at 1 = not at all and 4 = a great deal. The third item was, "How many of your close friends are Jewish?" with responses anchored at 1 = none of them and 5 = all of them. The fourth item was, "Regardless of whether you have any grandchildren right now, imagine for a moment that you do have grandchildren. How important would it be to you that your grandchildren are Jewish?" with responses anchored at 1 = not at all important and 4 = very important. The fifth item was, "Regardless of whether you have any grandchildren right now, imagine for a moment that you do have grandchildren. How important would it be to you that your grandchildren marry someone who is Jewish?" with responses anchored at 1 = not at all important and 4 = very important. To create the scale the items were standardized (i.e., converted to z-scores) and summed. The internal consistency was $\alpha = .87$.

Intermarriage

Participants who were married or living with a partner were asked, "Did your spouse or partner have a Jewish parent or was your spouse or partner raised Jewish?" Responses were 1 = yes and 2 = no.

Positive ethnocentrism

Positive ethnocentrism was measured using three items. The first item was, "How much responsibility, if any, do you feel you have to help fellow Jews in need around the world?" with responses anchored at 1 = not at all and 4 = a great deal. The second item was, "In the past 12 months, did you make a financial donation to any Jewish charity or cause, such as a synagogue, Jewish school or a group supporting Israel?" with responses 1 = no and 2 = yes. The third item was, "How emotionally attached are you to Israel?" with responses anchored at 1 = not at all attached and 4 = very attached. To create the scale, the items were standardized (i.e., converted to z-scores) and summed. The internal consistency was $\alpha = .74$.

Antisemitic threat

Three sections of the PEW survey were separately totaled and then summed to create a measure of antisemitic threat. In the first section participants responded "yes" or "no" in reference to six separate

¹When appropriate responses were reverse coded from the original scale for clarity so that higher values represent greater agreement.

antisemitic occurrences (e.g., Have you been physically threatened or attacked because of your Jewish background?). The number of affirmative responses across these six occurrences was tallied.

The second section included three items that reference hearing or reading the following: (1) Jews care too much about money; (2) The Holocaust did not happen or its severity has been exaggerated; (3) American Jews care more about Israel than about the United States. Each item was rated using a three-point Likert type scale anchored at 1 = Have not heard someone say this and 3 = Have heard someone say this in my presence. Responses for the three items were summed.

The third section contained three items referring to the overall level of antisemitism in the country. The first item was, "Now thinking about the country as a whole, how much anti-Semitism do you think there is in the United States today?" with the four-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 = None at all and 4 = A lot. The second item was, "And compared with five years ago, do you think there is. . ." Responses on the three-point scale were anchored at 1 = Less anti-Semitism in the U.S. today and 3 = More anti-Semitism in the U.S. today. The third item was, "As a Jewish person in the United States, do you personally feel. . ." Responses on the three-point scale were anchored at 1 = More safe today than five years ago to 3 = Less safe today than five years ago. Responses to the three items were standardized and summed. All three section scores were then standardized and summed ($\alpha = .52$).

Political orientation

Political orientation was measured using two items. The first item was: "In general, would you describe your political views as..." Responses were recorded using a five-point scale anchored at 1 = very conservative and 5 = very liberal. The second item was a dichotomous variable signifying the participant's preferred political party. Based on participant responses to other questions concerning the participant's preferred political party, Pew categorized participants as either 1 = Republican/lean Republican or 2 = Democrat/lean Democrat. The two items were standardized and summed. The correlation between the items was $r = .66$.

6 Results

6.1 Positive ethnocentrism

The correlations between the study variables can be seen in Table 1. Group identity, positive ethnocentrism, and antisemitism threat were all positively correlated. Intermarriage was negatively correlated with group identity, positive ethnocentrism, and antisemitism threat. It was positively correlated with liberal political orientation. To further examine the key relationship between intermarriage and positive ethnocentrism, intermarriage was kept as a dichotomous variable and a t -test was run, $t(1987.84) = 25.55$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .99$. The results shows that Jews who marry non-Jews are much less ethnocentric.

Table 1: Bivariate correlations [and 95% confidence intervals] between study variables, $n = 2,969 - 4,454$. Intermarriage is a dichotomous variable. All correlations are statistically significant at $p < .001$.

Measures	1	2	3	4
1. Group identity				
2. Intermarriage	-.54 [-.52, -.57]			
3. Positive ethnocentrism	.75 [.74, .77]	-.44 [-.46, -.41]		
4. Antisemitism threat	.25 [.23, .28]	-.11 [-.14, -.07]	.28 [.25, .31]	
5. Political orientation	-.32 [-.34, -.29]	.21 [.18, .25]	-.30 [-.32, -.27]	.07 [.04, .10]

To test the hypothesized roles of intermarriage and group identity on positive ethnocentrism, first positive ethnocentrism was regressed on intermarriage and group identity. Both intermarriage ($\beta = -.03$, $p < .05$) and group identity ($\beta = .74$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors with a total variance explained of $R^2 = .58$. Next relative weight analysis (Johnson, 2000) was performed. Relative weight analysis assesses the

unique contribution of each predictor to the total variance explained (i.e., the $R^2 = .58$). The online tool at <https://www.scotttonidandel.com/rwa-web> was used for the analysis (Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2015). The results of the relative weight analysis showed that group identity accounted for 83.54% and intermarriage 16.46% of the total variance.

Next, the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2012) was used to test for mediation and following the recommendations of Zhao et al. (2010) the output from the bootstrap test for the indirect effect was used to determine significance. In PROCESS the number of bootstrap samples was kept at the default of 5,000, the confidence intervals were kept at 95%, and the mediation model was set to the specified model (i.e., model 4).

In the model shown in Figure 1, group identity mediates the relationship between antisemitic threat and positive ethnocentrism. Following instructions from Zhao et al. (2010) the indirect path with confidence intervals ($a \times b$) along with the unstandardized regression coefficients from predictor to the mediator (a), from the mediator to the outcome (b), and the direct path from the predictor to the outcome (c') along with a significance test are reported in Table 2. As seen in Table 2, both the indirect and direct paths were significant²

Table 2: Mediation analysis predicting in-group favoritism

Variable	$a \times b$	95% CI	a	b	c'
Positive ethnocentrism	.16	.13, .18	.35	.45	.09, $p < .001$

Note. CI = Confidence interval.

6.2 Political orientation

The results of the correlations, as seen in Table 1, show that group identity and positive ethnocentrism were negatively associated with leftist political orientation, the opposite of the hypothesized direction. Intermarriage and antisemitism threat were positively correlated with leftist political orientation. While a hypothesis concerning antisemitism threat was not advanced, it is included in the subsequent analysis.

Political orientation was regressed on group identity, positive ethnocentrism, intermarriage, and antisemitism threat. The total variance explained was $R^2 = .15$ with the following regression weights for the predictors: group identity ($\beta = -.23$, $p < .001$); intermarriage ($\beta = .03$, $p = .20$); positive ethnocentrism ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .001$); antisemitism threat ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$). Thus all of the variables, sans intermarriage, were significant predictors of leftist political orientation.

The results of the relative weight analysis showed that each variable accounted for the following percent of the total R^2 : group identity (39.38%); intermarriage (12.74%); positive ethnocentrism (35.39%); antisemitism threat (12.49%). In contrast to the regression weights, the relative weight analysis suggests that intermarriage may be worth considering when accounting for Jewish political orientation.

7 Discussion

The overarching goal of the study was to bring data to bear on the debate concerning Jewish ethnocentrism. A model is proposed that is at odds with aspects of both DH and GES. For example, it is proposed that the DH's use of intermarriage as the indicator of ethnocentrism is severe construct underrepresentation. Relying on foundational findings of evolutionary and social psychology, it was proposed that group identity is an additional and more important variable. Further reasoning based on the findings on social identity, it was proposed that a perceived threat, in the form of antisemitism, would act to further increase ethnocentrism. Because DH and GES largely deal with the political ramifications of Jewish ethnocentrism, political orientation was also explored. It was hypothesized that group identity would be associated with a liberal

²Using the steps outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) also indicated partial mediation.

political orientation, while null results were predicted for intermarriage and ethnocentrism. No hypothesis was advanced for antisemitic threat, but because it was found to be significantly correlated its relation to political orientation was explored as well.

In support of DH there was a significant negative relationship between intermarriage and positive ethnocentrism, with Jews whose partners were not Jewish scoring lower. However, group identity had a stronger association as indicated by the results of regression and relative weight analyses. Also consistent with hypotheses, there was support for a proposed model in which group identity mediated the effect of antisemitism threat on positive ethnocentrism. However, unexpectedly the direct effect from antisemitism threat to positive ethnocentrism remained significant (see proposed explanation for the direct effect in the subsequent paragraph).

It was predicted that group identity would be positively associated with a liberal political orientation, but the opposite relationship was found. Group identity was positively associated with a *conservative* political orientation, as was positive ethnocentrism. Intermarriage and antisemitism threat were positively associated with a liberal orientation. This pattern of associations remained in regression and relative weight analyses, with the exception of intermarriage in the regression analysis. These results are interpreted as running counter to those predicted by GES as heightened Jewish ethnocentrism is expected to manifest in progressive social movements detrimental to the majority population. Indeed, in retrospect it is well established that more conservative (e.g., orthodox) Jewish groups are more likely to vote for Republicans. Their values may be more similar to those of other conservatives (e.g., importance of religious freedom), or they may believe they have more influence within the Republican party.

The antisemitism threat-liberal political orientation relationship was small in effect, but intriguing given the result runs in the opposite direction of the relationships found with the other variables. It is speculated that the association may be a function of the awareness or sensitivity of liberals toward incidences of sexism, racism, and antisemitism (Rios et al., 2024). Or, as analyzed/advised by Lewin (Lewin, 1997), Jews should strategically align with other minority groups to advance their interests. This dynamic may be enhanced under threat (perceived or real).

8 Conclusions and limitations

Along with Dutton (2019a), the results of the current study further disconfirm the foundational position of DH that intermarriage is the sine qua non for gauging Jewish ethnocentrism. As such the results indirectly support, as intermarriage can't be used to refute other findings, the position that Jews have a greater degree of ethnocentrism than Gentiles. This does mean that support for GES is gained. In contrast to GES, Jewish ethnocentrism is explained by group dynamics applicable to any ethnic or religious group. The results are specific to Jews only in the sense that they behave within a specific historical and sociological context. There is no need to postulate an evolved genetic predisposition, although the results do not preclude such a dynamic. The results and impetus for Jewish group identity and positive ethnocentrism seem very much in line with Lewin (1997)'s description/prescription in *Bringing up the Jewish Child*:

He will see that the main criterion of belongingness is interdependence of fate. Young American Jews may abhor Jewish national mysticism, they may not be willing to suffer for cultural or religious values which they do not fully understand, or perhaps even dislike, but they must be sufficiently fact-minded to see clearly their interdependence of fate with the rest of the American Jews and indeed with the Jews all over the world. (p.184).

Future research could address several of the study's limitations. For in-group favoritism, only one side of the coin, positive ethnocentrism was examined. Negative ethnocentrism could be examined as well. Given the mixed findings for political orientation, it may be important to explore differences between branches of Judaism and/or opinions on individual political issues. Lastly, the study is correlational meaning that causation and even the direction of influence is indeterminable. For example, while the hypothesized model suggests antisemitism threat and group identity play a role in positive ethnocentrism, it is quite likely that positive ethnocentrism also acts upon antisemitism threat and group identity.

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Conflict of interest

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Data sources

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