

WORKSHOPS FOR INTERFAITH COUPLES

The Challenge of Creating an Effective Bridge to the Jewish Community

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This study of the workshops for interfaith couples sponsored by the San Francisco Jewish community finds that the groups have the potential to increase the Jewish involvement of these couples. However, the issues of neutrality, group focus, participant selection, and the choice and training of group leaders must be further assessed and refined if the groups are to be more effective in both helping interfaith couples make workable life choices and serving as a bridge to the Jewish community.

An increasing number of Jewish communities around the country are offering time-limited workshops for interfaith Jewish-Gentile couples. These groups are structured and conducted in a variety of formats, ranging from didactic and content-focused to experiential and group process oriented. The Jewish community sponsors these groups in the hope that they will act as a bridge to the organized Jewish community for interfaith couples who might otherwise never make the choice to involve themselves.

Mayer's (1985) and other research indicates that, of those Jewish-Gentile couples who choose to affiliate religiously and culturally, far more find connections with Jewish than with Christian communities. Yet, the largest group of interfaith couples are those who do not clearly identify or involve themselves in either community. These couples choose to create families whose religious and cultural orientation is either ecumenical or ambiguous either because they lack strong feelings about religious practice and group connectedness or in order to avoid conflict in their relationships.

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These findings raise a number of important questions about the possibility of involving greater numbers of interfaith couples as active participants in the Jewish community. Does the tendency of interfaith couples to choose the Jewish community when they do make a choice suggest that there is a pool of currently uninvolved couples and families whose Jewish involvement could be facilitated by various sorts of outreach? Clearly, the numerous outreach programs in existence today operate on that premise. How effective are interfaith couples groups as a form of outreach? Finally, if these groups show promise as a form of outreach, how should they be structured to maximize their effectiveness?

THE GROUPS

This research project focused on the experience of participants in interfaith couples groups sponsored by The Interfaith Connection, a program of the San Francisco Jewish Community Center and the San Francisco Jewish Family and Children's Services. Each group was co-led by two trained therapists, all of whom were Jewish. All of the participants were interfaith Jewish-Gentile couples. The groups were advertised and conducted as neutral settings for couples to explore and clarify

their feelings and attitudes about religious and cultural issues.

Seven groups were conducted between October 1987 and August 1988. Each group consisted of between three and seven couples and met for 2 hours weekly over a 7-week period. Half of the participants were Jewish and half were Gentile.

The general format of the groups was semistructured and group process oriented. Different topics were focused on during each session. For example, one session focused on issues about raising children, whereas another focused on deciding how to celebrate the holidays. The group members were encouraged to interact with each other and share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In some of the groups, but not all, a rabbi came to one of the sessions to speak about Judaism and answer questions.

PROCEDURE

Thirty-seven couples participated in the groups—37 men and 37 women—for a total of 74 participants. Twenty of the couples consisted of a Jewish man and a Gentile woman, and 17 of the couples were made up of a Gentile man and a Jewish woman. A lengthy questionnaire was given to each participant to fill out before the first group session. It focused on the participants' personal, family, and religious backgrounds; their attitudes about religious involvement; their current relationship; attitudes toward the religious education of their children; and their hopes and fears about the couples group they were beginning. Most of the questions were multiple choice, but a number were open-ended. The questionnaires took approximately 2 hours to complete. Six months later a follow-up questionnaire containing the same questions was sent to each of the participants.

We also conducted six hour-long interviews with couples after they had completed the groups to gain a general sense of how accurately the responses on the questionnaires reflected the actual ex-

perience of the participants. The primary researcher also attended a number of meetings of the group leaders to explore their attitudes and beliefs about the groups they led.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

All the participants returned the initial pregroup questionnaires [$N = 74$]. Twenty-six group members returned the postgroup follow-up questionnaires [$N = 26$]—seven Jewish and five Gentile men and seven Jewish and seven Gentile women.

Because of the length of the questionnaires and limited resources, a subset of questions was used in the analysis. The questions for analysis were chosen both because they seemed to capture many of the essential issues facing the couples and they yielded a manageable body of data to analyze. In the analysis of the questions, we were attempting to discover any significant postgroup changes in attitudes or behavior. We were also looking for differences in the participants based on gender and religious background.

Nonparametric analyses of the data were used. For the purposes of this research, we treated the .10 level of significance as a meaningful correlation (rather than .05) because of the exploratory nature of the investigation and as a way to develop hypotheses for future research.

FINDINGS: RESPONSES TO MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

The analysis of the responses sought differences between Jews and Gentiles, men and women, and pre- and postgroup. A number of the differences reached our test of statistical significance. They can be grouped in several categories.

Changes in Intentions to Affiliate More with the Jewish Community and Religion

Before the groups were conducted, Jews were more likely than Gentiles to want to be included in the Jewish community.

This difference remained 6 months after the group ($p < .01$). In response to the question, "On the average, how often do you intend to attend a synagogue or other Jewish religious ceremonies in the coming year?" the sample as a whole demonstrated a significant increase in their stated intention to involve themselves in the Jewish community. This shift resulted mainly from changes in the responses of the Gentile partners, whose modal response changed from "never" to "occasionally" 6 months after the group. The intentions of Jews to attend synagogue, however, changed little 6 months after the groups ended.

Before the groups, the Gentile partners were far more attracted ($p < .01$) to Judaism than the Jews were to Christianity. In response to the question, "Currently in your relationship, are you attracted to the religion of your partner?" 78% of the Jews reported that they were either "not very much" or "not at all." The response of the Gentile partners provided a striking contrast: 68% reported that they were "somewhat" or "very much" attracted to Judaism. There was little change after the groups. Both before and after the groups Gentiles were significantly more open to converting than were the Jewish partners ($p < .01$). In response to the question, "If you have not converted, what is your attitude about converting to the religion of your partner?" Jews answered only "will not convert" or "probably will not convert." The uncertainty of the Gentile respondents seemed to decrease as a result of the program; 20% reported being uncertain about the issue of conversion before the group in contrast to 0% afterward. There was, however, no significant increase in the percentage of Gentiles who intended to convert after the groups.

Changes in Religiosity

The groups seemed to have an effect on the participants' religiosity. One question that was designed to measure this effect was "How important to you is the religious or spiritual dimension of life?" Before and

after the groups, Gentiles reported that religion was more important to them than did Jews, although just below significance at the .10 level; before and after the program women attributed greater importance to this dimension than did men, but again below statistical significance. Yet, strikingly, 6 months after the program, all subgroups of participants (Jews, Gentiles, men, and women) reported that the religious dimension of life was more important to them than before ($p < .01$).

Another question, "How important do you believe that religious or spiritual dimension of life is to your partner?" found that before the groups, men felt that religion was more important to their partners than women did ($p < .01$). Six months after the groups, Jews felt that religion was more important to their Gentile partners ($p < .05$).

Changes in Attitudes about Partners Introducing their Religion into the Home

Before the groups, Gentiles were more approving than Jews of their partners' efforts to bring their faith into their home ($p < .01$). After the groups, there was a significant change ($p < .10$), with all participants being more approving of their partners' efforts to bring their faith into the home.

Changes in the Approach to Child Rearing

There were significant changes in response to the question, "What sort of religious education do you plan to give to your children?" ($p < .01$). Before the group, 28% of the respondents answered "none" or "don't know" to this question, but after the program only 4% answered in those categories. Since the percentage answering "Christian" remained relatively constant, most of these uncertain people moved into the "both" or "Jewish" categories.

Before the groups, Jews were more inclined than Gentiles to want a Jewish religious education for their children ($p < .01$); 20% of the Gentiles indicated that they would give their children a

Jewish religious education compared with 0% of the Jews choosing a Christian education for their children. After the groups the differences between the faiths narrowed due to the pattern noted above.

Jews and Gentiles gave significantly different responses to the question: "Do you plan to observe the following religious ceremonies for your children: Bris, Bar or Bat Mitzvah, Baptism or christening, church confirmation?" Jews were more committed than Gentiles to Jewish religious ceremonies for their children ($p < .01$). After the groups there was a trend that just missed significance at the .10 level for there to be less uncertainty in both faiths and for Gentiles to be more open to having their children experience Jewish religious rituals.

Changes in the Ways That Partners Handle Their Conflicts

Before the groups there was a clear difference ($p < .10$) in how men and women described the way they dealt with conflict over religious and cultural differences. In response to the two questions, "What is the predominant way that you and your partner currently deal with your religious differences?" ". . . cultural differences?" men were more likely to answer "calm discussions" and women were more likely to respond with "emotional arguments." The answers are striking, because the men and women are describing the same transactions in very different terms.

Jews and Gentiles seemed to see the nature of the compromises they made differently ($p < .10$). In response to the question, "When you and your partner currently have differing opinions due to cultural differences, what usually happens?" Gentiles were split equally between "we openly agree to disagree" and "lots of mutual compromise," whereas Jews were divided 11% ("we openly agree to disagree") and 89% ("compromise").

SUMMARY OF THE APPARENT EFFECTS OF THE INTERFAITH GROUPS

Multiple Choice Findings

A number of tentative conclusions can be drawn based on the responses of the participants to the multiple-choice questions. There were differences in the responses of men and women, of Jews and Gentiles, and of participants before and after the group workshops.

Differences Between Jews and Gentiles

The religious or spiritual dimension of life seemed more important to the Gentile partners than to the Jewish partners. Nevertheless, the Gentile partners were consistently more open to Jewish ritual and religion than the Jews were to Christianity. Paradoxically, the Jews tended to feel that they were compromising more than their Gentile partners in terms of making decisions about the religious and cultural practices of their families, even though their Gentile partners seemed to be doing most of the accommodating. The Jewish and Gentile partners' incongruent perception of the same process may be due to the Jewish partners' greater reluctance to allow Christian symbols into their lives. Perhaps the Jews feel that they are compromising their values and beliefs more than do the Gentiles, who in general seem less threatened by the content of Jewish symbols. A small compromise may be experienced by the Jews as larger than the Gentile partners' generally greater accommodations to their Jewish partners. Clearly, the subjective reality of each partner in the negotiation is an important variable.

Differences Between Men and Women

Men and women tended to differ on the importance of the spiritual component of their lives, as well as the process by which

they dealt with differences. The religious or spiritual dimension of life seemed more important to women than to men. Congruent with this trend was the men's perception that religion was more important to their partners than it was to them. There were discrepancies, however, between the ways that men and women saw themselves dealing with differences. Men were more likely to see themselves as handling their disagreements with their partners through "calm discussions," whereas women tended to see those same discussions as "emotional arguments." Once again, we see the discrepancy between whatever objective reality exists in the process of negotiation and the actual experience of those who are interacting.

*Evidence of the Resolution of
"Spiritual Gridlock"*

A variety of the participants' responses suggested that the groups were effective in helping the couples resolve what has been called "spiritual gridlock"—the tendency of interfaith couples to minimize their religious feelings and practice, as well as their ethnocultural affinities, in an attempt to avoid conflict in their relationships (Cowan & Cowan, 1987). Six months after the groups, the couples seemed considerably more comfortable in making decisions about religious and cultural practices for themselves and their children. The responses suggest, however, that the groups may have helped couples resolve their "spiritual gridlock" in a number of ways. For some of the couples, the groups may have been effective in serving as a bridge to the Jewish community, whereas for others, the groups may have helped them decide to create a more ecumenical household with more celebrations of the backgrounds of both members of the couple.

Gentiles were far more open to Judaism than Jews were to Christianity, both before and after the program. Perhaps

because of the initial greater openness of the Gentile partners and the groups' effectiveness in helping couples resolve their ambivalence and negotiate deadlocks, the groups seemed to serve as an effective bridge to the Jewish community for some of the couples. After participation in the groups, couples seemed more open to participating in the Jewish community, primarily because of the greater openness of the Gentile partners to doing so. The groups also seemed to help the participants clarify their feelings about the religious education of their children. The change occurred mainly in the undecided participants, who tended to decide to educate their children Jewishly or in both religions. After the group there was a trend that fell just short of statistical significance for Gentiles to be more open to having their children experience Jewish rituals.

Yet, for other couples, the groups may have served to help them decide to create more ecumenical or bireligious families. Six months after the groups, the Jewish partners seemed to understand better the importance to their Gentile partners of the religious dimension of life and to be more open to having their Gentile partners introduce Christian symbols into their homes. Although the Gentiles seemed more open to Judaism and less indecisive after the groups, the Jews' ambivalence about Judaism seemed intact. A striking change 6 months after the group was that all participants (Jews, Gentiles, men, and women) felt that the religious dimension of life was more important to them than before the groups. Before the groups, Gentiles were more approving than Jews of their partners' attempts to bring their faith into the home. After the groups, both Jewish and Gentile participants were more approving of including their partners' faith in the home. Although some of the couples who could not decide about the religious education of their children decided to raise them as Jews, other couples decided to raise their children as both Jews and

Christians. There was no evidence, however, that the couples were likely to resolve their ambivalence in favor of raising their children as Christians.

Interviews and Open-Ended Questions

We did not attempt to do any sort of empirical analysis of the interviews or open-ended questions on the pre- and postgroup questionnaires. A number of recurrent themes, however, appeared in both these contexts.

The overall reaction to the groups seemed very positive. Many of the participants wished that the groups had extended over more sessions, and a number of ongoing relationships between couples began in the groups.

The groups, however, were experienced very differently by various couples, even within the same group. When participants did express dissatisfaction, it tended to reflect the contrasting motivations that brought them to the groups. The interviews helped us to understand better why the groups served as a catalyst leading to very different outcomes. After participating in the groups, some couples appeared to move farther from the Jewish community; for others the groups seemed to be an effective bridge to Jewish involvement.

A number of couples came to the groups seeking ways to resolve conflict in their relationships, but their lack of interest in becoming a part of any religious or cultural community was fairly clear. They were satisfied with the groups to the extent that they perceived them as neutral and therapeutic. When these couples perceived a "hidden Jewish agenda" in the group process, they reacted with anger, feeling judged and also betrayed by the initial presentation of the group as a neutral forum. For instance, one man complained:

There was definitely a bias toward Judaism and trying to figure out how to get these interfaith couples more involved with Judaism, which was not represented to us before we got into it.

Another woman felt that

She [the group leader] obviously had a Jewish bias, which is a problem in an interfaith group When I was explaining about my son's circumcision and how I felt, she got the wrong impression and she was the only person in the room who got the wrong impression. She kept bringing it back to a Jewish issue, like it was more sanitary and you'll get over it. . . . I was in tears.

The inclusion of a rabbi also disturbed some of the participants:

The rabbi made a scholarly presentation on why we should all be Jewish and how Jesus is a myth. He polarized the group. Couples who had decided to raise their children in both faiths (four out of five couples) felt alienated.

Paradoxically, other couples, sometimes in the same groups, felt that the structure of the groups had been "too neutral." They had been hoping for more of a Jewish focus, having already decided that they wanted to find a place in the Jewish community. They came to the groups to deal with their feelings about that choice and to learn how to include themselves. When they expressed dissatisfaction with the groups, their complaints seemed to focus on the *lack* of a Jewish focus.

One woman, who attended a group in which a rabbi was not included in any of the sessions, felt that it had been run competently, but she wished that the group would have had more of a Jewish orientation. She felt that the leaders were neutral and wished that they had not been:

I don't have any interest in Christianity. We have agreed that we are going to raise our son Jewish. We don't need a neutral forum. We need to become part of the Jewish community. We need groups for couples who are in our position. The Jewish community should not be apologetic about any "hidden agendas."

Another group member described her discomfort with the group:

It was difficult for us to identify with other members on anything but a human level

because we were the only couple in the group who had made a clear decision to raise our children as Jews.

For some participants, however, the goals of the Jewish community in sponsoring the groups and the needs of the couples seemed to be a perfect fit:

We are more open about our differences and much less afraid of their implications. It helped defuse some critical issues and offered useful role models for others grappling with similar issues. I felt very good about my decision to raise our children in the Jewish faith. It reinforced my prior decision. I have become even more enthusiastic about learning more about the Jewish faith/culture.

Clearly no group can be all things to all people. Yet, these findings suggest that refinements in the selection of participants, the structuring of the groups, and the training and supervision of leaders are important variables in their success, both from the viewpoints of individual couples, as well as in terms of their effectiveness as a bridge to the Jewish community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Dealing with Asymmetry in Religious Belief and Group Identity

My cultural background and history includes a strong sense of survival needs for Jews because of the Holocaust. That is why I have a desire and need to raise our future child(ren) as Jews.

The main difference between us is that for Jim, his Jewish belief is primarily cultural and traditional. For me religion is mainly a spiritual relationship between God and your spirit.

The effectiveness of the interfaith couple groups might be enhanced by the inclusion of discussions, exercises, and role plays that help the participants begin to differentiate the concepts of "group identity" from that of "religious practice." Often, the two are merged and confused. Fre-

quently Gentiles have difficulty understanding the wish of their Jewish partners to pass on Jewish identity to their children, especially when that identity seems to have little religious content. The Jewish partners often have trouble explaining the intensity of their feelings about their Jewish loyalties. The Gentile partners' sense of spirituality and religiosity also varies considerably from that of the Jews. At times the same words would have very different meanings for Jew and for Gentile.

The questionnaires demonstrate some aspects of the asymmetry that exists between Jewish and Gentile partners. The Jews' antipathy toward Christianity, the Gentiles' relative openness toward Judaism, and the subjective sense of the Jewish partners that they are compromising more than their Gentile partners (when the objective reality seems the opposite) are all indicators of the asymmetrical negotiations that occur between partners in interfaith relationships. The Jewish partner's guilt about "asking for so much" or "being unfair" is a frequent theme in these relationships. So too are the Gentile partners' resentment at their Jewish partners' "stubbornness" and their fears of loss of autonomy. The fact that the Gentile partners are often attracted to Judaism and Jewish culture does not necessarily ease their fears that they might be yielding too much to their Jewish partners. Modern marital ideology calls for equality between partners, but the process of defining "fairness" is complex indeed in matters of religion and group belonging. What is ultimately unfair to both partners is to create a marital contract that will fail. In order to reach a workable solution, the realities of each person's religious, cultural, and historical experience and feelings must be dealt with, as well as the disparities that exist between the partners.

The Identity of the Group: On Including a Rabbi

Including a rabbi but not Christian clergy at some point in the group's process is

clearly not a neutral act. A rabbi should be included *only* if the groups can be structured and advertised in such a way as to resolve the identity conflict of the group itself. If the groups are really meant to be a purely neutral forum for interfaith couples in the hope that such a setting will ultimately encourage Jewish affiliation, then either both Christian and Jewish clergy should be involved or none at all.

Is it possible that interfaith couples groups could be structured to respect the diverse choices that couples will make, including the decision not to involve themselves in the Jewish community, and at the same time be clear that the *intended* goal of the groups is to act as a bridge to the Jewish community? If the groups could be structured and framed to deal with this apparent paradox, including a rabbi in part of the group process *could* be an important contribution.

Interfaith couples feel that rabbis are the official gatekeepers of the Jewish community. Beginning with their marriage ceremony, the interfaith couple views the rabbi as both a source of potential validation *and* as a source of potential judgment and rejection. Rabbis, through their role as the spiritual leaders of the community, carry great symbolic power. The ways they deal with the interfaith couples can have a great impact, for better or worse, on these couples' choices about future involvement in the Jewish community.

Several of the groups were structured so that a rabbi attended one of the sessions. Although some of the participants felt that the rabbi's presence was helpful, many found that the experience was disruptive to the flow of the group and engendered negative feelings about Judaism. Some of the group members said that they felt lectured down to and told about the fallacies of Christianity.

For causes beyond the control of the organizers of *The Interfaith Connection* groups, a variety of rabbis were involved and the group leaders were not able to develop an ongoing relationship with any

of them. For this reason, it did not seem that the involvement of rabbis in these groups was an effective practice. It is unrealistic to expect any rabbi to be able to drop into an emotionally charged group setting and have it be a successful experience without prior coordination and trust-building between the group leaders and the rabbi.

The inclusion of a rabbi could be strongly beneficial—both for the participants and to serve as a bridge to the Jewish community—but only if the rabbi has the time to develop a positive relationship with the group leaders, is attuned to the nuances of group process, is non-judgmental about the interfaith couples' diverse choices, and is positive about Judaism without being chauvinistic. This mythical rabbi is not necessarily easy to find, but he or she does exist. Most importantly, the rabbi would need to be temperamentally suited for the task and open to developing skills through repeated involvement in interfaith couples groups.

Selection of Couples

Another important variable that affects the outcome of the groups is the process by which participants are chosen. Pregroup interviews were used primarily to screen out those couples whose psychological problems would be clearly inappropriate for the groups. Yet, the motivations that brought the couples into the program varied widely, and there were random and dramatic differences in the make-up of the various groups. In a sense, each group developed its own dominant culture and deviant subculture. In some of the groups, the dominant culture stressed the importance of raising children as both Jews and Christians. In those groups, couples who had already decided that they wanted to be part of the Jewish community clearly felt themselves to be outsiders. Conversely, in those groups where more of a Jewish ethos arose, the "ecumenical" couples felt uncomfortable.

The satisfaction of the participants and the effectiveness of the program might be enhanced by creating more homogeneous groups. To accomplish this objective would require a more sophisticated screening of potential group members in order to discover their particular goals, their attitude toward involving themselves in the Jewish community, and the developmental stage of their relationship. In some communities, creating groups designed for a particular kind of couple, such as the one who wants to find a place in the Jewish community, would require more aggressive and more focused advertising. The potential payoff, however, could be the increased satisfaction of groups members *and* greater effectiveness in creating bridges to the Jewish community.

Training of Leaders: Conflicts between the Jew in the Therapist and the Therapist in the Jew

The structure of the groups created some inherent conflicts for the leaders. Ultimately, they had to deal both with their identities as Jews and their identities as therapists in order to conduct the groups effectively. As with any other group of Jewish therapists, they varied in their therapeutic ideologies, in their abilities as group leaders, and in the quality and nature of their Jewish identities. Therapeutically, they ranged from those who had been more psychoanalytically trained and for whom neutrality was a central tenet of their work to those who were more active and interventionist in their orientations. Jewishly, they ranged from those who were actively involved in Judaism and the Jewish community to those who were more openly ambivalent about their own connection to the Jewish world.

The context of the groups therefore raised a number of important questions. How careful did the leaders have to be in maintaining neutrality? Could they reveal the nature of their own Jewish identities and still be seen by the group members as

respectful of the autonomy of each couple in making their own choices? How would they deal with their fears that the group members might perceive them as Jewishly chauvinistic, or, on the other hand, as being ambivalent about their own Jewish identities? Could they serve as Jewish role models or did they have to somehow (impossibly) obliterate their Jewishness for the sake of the group? How were they to deal with the incongruence between the advertising of the groups as a neutral setting and the fact that both group leaders were Jewish and that rabbis, and not Christian clergy, were attending some of the group meetings?

There are no simple answers to these complex questions. They are posed primarily to suggest the impossibility of neutrality, the complexity of leading these kinds of groups, and the importance of inservice training and consultation to help group leaders deal with the inherent contradictions in their roles.

CONCLUSION

For some of the participants, the groups served as a welcoming and nonjudgmental bridge to the Jewish community. Couples were able, through the supportive encouragement of other members and group leaders, to reveal their conflicts more clearly, work them through, and make decisions about the religious and cultural orientation of their families. Some of those decisions involved greater participation in the Jewish community.

For other couples, it is likely that the groups served as a kind of group psychotherapeutic experience and helped them to improve their relationships. Many of these couples, however, were no closer to involving themselves in the Jewish community than they were before the groups. A number of couples may have been helped by the groups to feel more comfortable about having both religions or neither religion in their family life. For some of these couples, the groups seemed to catalyze

the beginnings of a subculture of interfaith couples. Not really comfortable in either Jewish or Christian worlds, these couples found comfort, as do most humans, in the company of others who shared their fate.

These groups were designed, at least implicitly, on the assumption that providing interfaith couples with a neutral setting to discuss their differences and concerns would increase their Jewish involvement. This partly empirical and partly qualitative and impressionistic study suggests that the groups show promise in being able to achieve that goal. More experimentation, however, with complex issues of neutrality, group focus, participant selection, and in the choice and training of group leaders is needed to enhance the success of these groups. Only

then will these promising and stimulating groups reach their full potential, both in helping interfaith couples make workable life choices *and* in serving as an effective bridge to the Jewish community.

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