MESSIANIC BELIEVERS: REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITY OF A LARGELY MISUNDERSTOOD GROUP

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Headnote

Despite much progress made in understanding multi-cultural and religious diversity, certain ethnic and religious groups continue to be neglected by the psychological community. Messianic Judaism remains a largely misunderstood and ignored expression of cultural and spiritual diversity. Numerous fears and misconceptions persist within both Christian and Jewish communities with regard to this movement. Even less is known about the psychological experiences of individuals committed to Messianic Judaism as they navigate the mazeway of their identity. This article attempts to shed some light on aspects of psychological identity of Messianic believers by first presenting the historical and theological background of the movement and its influence on the current experiences of its adherents. Research on ethnicity and its psychological consequences is then used to elucidate unique aspects of Messianic identity. Finally, practical recommendations for mental health professionals working with this population and a future research agenda are provided.

'How did you become a Christian?" "When did you convert?" are some of the questions this author is frequently asked by well-meaning people in different life contexts. What is a relatively straightforward question for most believers in Jesus evokes for me a number of divergent reactions that produce varying answers depending on the particulars of the situation. Do I take the time to explain that I do not identify myself as a Christian or convert but rather a Jew who believes in Jesus (Yeshua in Hebrew) as the Promised Messiah? By doing so, I risk being misunderstood and incurring the potential disapproval of the person asking the question. Or do I simply swallow my irritation and describe the story of coming to faith in the God of Israel and the Messiah that was sent to redeem the Jewish people and the rest of the world?

While this dilemma might appear trivial to some, it in fact represents part of a larger story that needs to be heard and understood by Christians and nonChristians alike, including mental health professionals working with individuals who identify themselves as Messianic Jews or Gentiles. This article will provide an exploratory look at this growing movement in its historical and theological context, the status of ethnic and cultural identity of individuals who comprise it, and pose issues that professionals in the mental health disciplines in general, and Christian psychology in particular, need to be aware of.

First, Messianic Judaism will be defined and its distinctive aspects described. The historical and theological context for understanding Jews who believe in Jesus and the particulars of Jewish identity will be presented. second, relevant research on ethnic identity and its association with psychological functioning will be reviewed. Finally, implications of this knowledge base for clinical multicultural competency and a research agenda that would include Messianic believers will be proposed.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Messianic Judaism defined

While some differences in emphasis may be found among different constituent groups within the movement, Messianic Judaism is generally understood to be a movement of Jews and Gentiles committed to the Messiahship of Jesus that view the perpetuation of Jewish life and tradition and identification with theJewish people and Israel to be central to their ethnic and spiritual identities (Kinzer &Juster, 2002). The two-pronged aspect of Messianic experience is essential to this definition: simultaneous commitment to the Jewish people and the larger Body of Messiah (Christ) as communities of reference. Recent controversy among various groups within the movement surrounds the relative centrality of each community to the corporate and individual identity of Messianic believers (Robinson &Rosen, 2003; Kinzer, 2000). Additionally, the importance of Torah observance and relationship to Old and New Covenants have been central themes generating dialogue and at times disagreement within various bodies in Messianic Judaism.

Based on one's perspective on these controversial issues, distinctions have been made between Jewish or Hebrew Christians and Messianic Jews (Stokes, 1994). The former largely adhere to Protestant Christianity while embracing selective aspects of their Jewish ethnicity. For instance, they are more likely than Messianic Jews to attend a local church, while celebrating some Jewish holidays or listening to Messianic music. The latter category differs in both conceptual and practical ways. "For the adherents to Messianic Judaism, the requirement of Jews, as Jews, to keep the Law of Moses, is foundational to religious expression and ritual. The Law of Moses, rather than being done away with in the Messiah, is fulfilled and continued ... their religion is Judaism, not modern Judaism to be sure, but a Judaism that attempts to conform to a form from the first century" (Stokes, 1994, p. 42). Since Messianic Judaism as a movement appears to be aligning itself more with the latter model, this article will explore the experiences of individuals whose self-understanding and lifestyle center around being Jews who believe in the Messiahship of Jesus rather than viewing Jewishness as an add-on to their otherwise primarily Christian identity. In reality, however, the lines of demarcation separating the two categories are less clear than stated here and some of the identity struggles experienced by Messianic Jews may also be relevant for Hebrew Christians attending Gentile Christian churches. Moreover, the degree of similarities and differences between the psychological worlds of two groups is a question that awaits empirical examination.

Historical and theological context

For a more comprehensive exposition of Messianic theology and relevant historical background, readers are encouraged to consult other sources (e.g., Kinzer, 2000; Schiffman, 1992). A brief overview of these issues here will set the stage for the discussion of psychological aspects of Messianic experience.

The messianic movement is over 2000 years old, as Jesus and his disciples lived and taught in a Jewish religious and cultural context, bringing the Good News of salvation primarily to all layers of Jewish society. So Jewish was the thrust of the Messiah's message that following his death and resurrection, many of the questions that plagued the Apostle Paul and early followers of the "Way" (Acts 9:2) had to do with the applicability of Torah (Law) to Gentiles who were coming to faith (Acts 15; Galatians 2-3). Moreover, although the term "conversion" is typically used to describe a change from one religion to the other and to signify Paul's experience in Damascus, the Apostle of the Gentiles did not become a Christian but a leader of a new movement within Judaism as a result of his encounter with the Messiah (Williamson, 1982). Instead, he felt called to take the Good News of salvation to Gentiles who previously had been strangers to the God of Israel. Neither Paul nor other early Jewish disciples would have been accused of being non-Jewish, but rather, perhaps unfaithful Jews by virtue of their identification with the Messiah (Williamson, 1982).

Notably, first century Jewish believers who represented a majority within the ecclesia at the time decided not to impose Jewish traditions on Gentile followers of Jesus on theological grounds (e.g., Acts 15; Kjar-Hansen, 1996). However, tensions between the believing Jews and Gentiles, compromises that had to be made to assimilate the growing number of Gentile believers from the Roman world, and the destruction of the second Temple in 70 AD dramatically changed the existing situation. By the time the Gospels were written, the influence of Jewish adherents and the importance of Torah observance were diminished. Unfortunately, the same broad-mindedness extended by Jewish believers to non-Jews with respect to their distinctiveness was not reciprocated (Kjar-Hansen,

1996). Forced separation between Christianity and Judaism ("de-Judaizing" process) was legislated through church laws, the writings of many Christian theologians, and the sociopolitical climate in the Diaspora. Jewish believers were accused of heresy sometimes solely on account of keeping the Torah (Pritz, 1996). Replacement theology (or supersessionism) became the dominant model of understanding Jewish-Christian relations within the church.

Supersessionism refers to the notion that Jewish people are rejected by God and that the Gentile church replaced them in the economy of salvation, thus making Jewish Law irrelevant in God's eyes (Williamson, 1982). To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of Christian theology's stance visa-vis the Jewish people and the God of Israel, readers are encouraged to review Soulen's (1996) work on the topic. For the purposes of this article, major types of supersessionism and their detrimental effects on Christian theology will be briefly reviewed. Economic supersessionism refers to the belief that everything that describes the economy of salvation in its Israelite form (i.e., Mosaic Law) is obsolete and replaced by the "true" spiritual form (i.e., the church). Punitive supersessionism involves the notion that God terminated His covenant with Israel due to Jews' rejection of Jesus and the gospels. Thus, God's rejection and punishment of the Jews is brought about by their own disobedience. Moreover, Soulen (1996) pointed out that both types of supersessionism lead to a deeper problem for Christian theology of interpreting the Biblical canon in a way that "renders the Hebrew Scriptures largely indecisive for shaping conclusions about how God's purposes engage creation in universal and enduring ways" (p. 31).

Significant changes in the understanding of Jewish-Christian relations are taking place in parts of the Christian church such that supersessionist theology is being rejected and God's faithfulness to the Jewish people is being reaffirmed by some (Soulen, 1996). The recent influx of publications revisiting issues of proper relations between Jews and Christian theology represents evidence of this trend. Nevertheless, the pernicious problem remains and is believed to "distort not only the church's posture toward the people Israel but other aspects of the church's faith and life as well" (Soulen, 1996, p. 4).

Centuries of overt and covert anti-Semitic theology within the Christian Church, coupled with regular waves of anti-Jewish political and social laws in European and Muslim countries, made it virtually impossible for Messianic Jews to maintain their ethnic and cultural heritage. Those Jewish individuals that converted either willingly or under threat of extermination had no choice but to abandon the traditions that had preserved the community for generations. The painful price of conversion did not end there: not only did they cease to be Jews in the eyes of the Church but also in the minds of the Jewish community which has traditionally considered the acceptance of Jesus as Messiah to be a betrayal of one's essence as a Jew.

Consequently, for almost 2000 years Jewish believers in Jesus remained a rather invisible minority in the Church with respect to their distinctiveness as Jews. Nevertheless, several Jewish believers distinguished themselves for either their notable missionary service (i.e., Joseph Scherschewsky) or attempts to revitalize Jewishness in the context of the Gentile Church (i.e., Joseph Rabinowitz). On the whole, "it seems unlikely that any viable communities existed after the fourth century. Individual Jewish believers make brief appearances on the stage of church history throughout the coming centuries, but it is not until we approach the modern era that whole communities begin to appear again" (Pritz, 1996, p. 4). Specifically, in the middle and second half of the twentieth century, a breath of fresh air began to envelope the "dry bones" of Jewry following the devastation of the Holocaust. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, numbers of young Jewish people came to faith in Jesus, and Messianic congregations began to spring up around the United States and the world.

Evidencing the growth and maturation of the movement over the past thirty years, recent estimates suggest that there are at least 150,000 Jewish believers in the United States and 7,000 in Israel (KjarHansen &Skjott, 1999). In 1992, over one hundred fifty Messianic congregations were in existence in North America, and this number is undoubtedly higher twelve years later (Schiffman, 1992). The Messianic movement sees itself as the beginning of the fulfillment of physical and spiritual restoration of Israel predicted by the Old Testament prophets (Hosea 5:15-6:3, Joel 2, Isaiah 4) and the Apostle Paul (Romans 9-11). It affirms a twofold rationale for Jewish believers to identify with the larger Jewish community: first, for the purposes of evangelistic outreach, and second, as

reflection of obedience to their distinct spiritual calling that still applies to New Covenant Jews. Juster (1996) put it this way:

Messianic Jewish theology has therefore concluded that if the apostles, including Paul, continued to live Torah-grounded Jewish lives in Yeshua, and that these apostles are examples for us, it is at least expedient that we do the same. This forms a second reason for living Jewish lives in the New Covenant. Not only is the call to live Jewishly important as a witness for evangelistic purposes. It is also a commitment to living out the mandates of the New Testament commandments and examples, (p. 7)

It is important to note that for Paul and other Jewish apostles living "Torah-grounded Jewish lives" likely deviated from the practices of second Temple Judaism that had built hedges upon hedges around the actual Mosaic Law. Additionally, "the New Covenant assumes the continued applicability of the Law as is fitting to the New Covenant order' [emphasis added] (Juster, 1996). However, Paul consistently professed his loyalty to his people and heritage, lived according to the stipulations of the Law, and did not encourage Jewish believers to forsake it (Juster, 1996).

ETHNIC IDENTITY

Psychological research on ethnic identity

Diverse definitions of ethnic identity along with various approaches to its study abound (Phinney, 1990). Sociologists and anthropologists have long been interested in the subject. Researchers in the field of psychology have used social psychological, acculturation, and developmental frameworks to understand the dynamic and complex phenomenon of ethnic identity (see Phinney, 1990 for complete review of literature). Most models posit the dynamic and developmental nature of ethnic identity such that its manifestation may vary over time and context, and its achievement involves an active process of exploration and experimentation (e.g., Hogg, Abrams, &Patcl, 1987; Phinney, 1989).

It is generally recognized that categories of ethnic group membership (i.e., Chinese) alone do not account for the powerful ways in which ethnicity psychologically impacts individuals. Instead, with respect to its psychological significance, three factors involved in ethnicity have been implicated: its cultural manifestations (i.e., values and practices), individuals' degree of subjective identification with the ethnic group(s) in question, and the group's status within the larger society (i.e., oppression; Phinney, 1996). The next section will examine potential applications of these aspects of ethnicity to Messianic believers. Now we will turn our attention to research exploring the effect of ethnicity on psychological health.

The importance of being grounded in one's ethnic identity and its positive impact on emotional wellbeing has been emphasized by a number of social scientists (e.g., Smith, 1991). In the last three decades, a gradual move away from the "melting pot" mentality towards the revitalization of individuals' racial and cultural identities has occurred in society and in psychological research and practice correspondingly (Phinney, 1990). Of particular interest to the present article are investigations into identity issues facing Jewish people as well as biracial individuals whose experiences of living between two cultural communities may resemble those of Messianic believers.

Research examining identity development of minority groups points to the existence of what has been termed identity rejection (Diller, 1980) or preencounter phase of identity transformation (Cross, 1978) characterized by an aspect of one's identity not being integrated by the self. For some, this phenomenon may manifest itself in outright denial of part of one's identity (i.e., a biracial individual claiming to be white), for others - in negative attitudes towards one's heritage (i.e., anti-Semitic Jews), and still others, may create conflict.

This process may be the result of numerous factors, including internalized racism and family dysfunction. The potential psychological damage such identity rejection may exert on an individual was well captured by Lewin (quoted in Semans &Fish, 2000) who stated that "difficulties begin when a minority individual wishes to leave his own group to become part of the powerful majority ... he is usually rebuffed by the majority and finds himself unaccepted by the outgroup and unhappy about remaining in the ingroup ... his resulting frustration is turned against himself and his group changing to self-hatred and hatred of his own people" (p. 123).

Many researchers note the vital importance of involvement in a supportive community for the development of a positive racial or ethnic identity (Kerwin &Ponterotto, 1995; LaFromboise, Coleman, &Gerton, 1993). Moreover,

members of disenfranchised groups not only tend to increase their minority group identification in response to perceptions of discrimination, but indirectly experience improved psychological well-being through aligning themselves with individuals similar to them. Thus, common attitudes by the majority may in and of themselves propel minorities to create a new group identity based on deviation from the outgroups (e.g., Schmitt, Spears, &Branscombe, 2003). This process is likely to be more complex when one shares similarities with others on the basis of more than one substantive characteristic.

The experiences of biracial individuals may provide a useful framework for understanding the phenomenon of Jews believing in Jesus. The difference is obvious: while biracial individuals are thrust into a world of racial categories through no choice of their own, Messianic Jews' identification with two seemingly incompatible religious groups involves a decision made at some point in their life. Additionally, skin color and appearance play an important role in the selection of a biracial individual's self-identification (Rockquemore &Brunsma, 2002), whereas for Messianic Jews these characteristics are likely to be less salient. However, all individuals, regardless of their ethnic and spiritual background, assign meaning to and elaborate on their biological givens and personal choices. Thus, potential similarities between these groups may be of conceptual and practical interest.

Research on identity formation of biracial individuals reveals a range of options available to those with mixed backgrounds (Rockquemore &Brunsma, 2002). Singular (i.e., exclusively black or white), border (i.e., biracial as a separate category), protean (moving between racial identities), and transcendent identity (refusal to identify with any category) describe the numerous ways in which biracial persons can conceptualize their identity experiences. The border identity option, characterized by the "ability to hold, merge, and respect multiple perspectives simultaneously," is generally understood to represent the psychological ideal (reported in Rockquemore &Brunsma, 2002, p. 337). While social scientists have attempted to abandon the assumption that biracial identification implies psychic confusion, Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002) pointed out that enduring societal stereotypes about the impossibility of integrating multiple racial identities "should be considered both confused' and 'tragic'" (p. 352).

When applied to the context of Messianic believers, reactions ranging from pervasive misunderstanding to outright rejection by both Gentile Christian and Jewish communities are bound to create psychological and spiritual challenges for this group. However, consistent with research findings involving other marginalized groups, failure to be understood and accepted by either community may lead a Messianic believer to create a new identity supported by those who share his or her background, worldview, and vision. This identity may be akin to the "border" identity-neither exclusively Jewish nor exclusively Christian, but a separate category including aspects of both-elucidated by Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002). Moreover, based on Schmitt et al.'s (2003) findings, this new identity is likely to suppress the negative effects of external prejudicial attitudes on self-esteem. Given the current lack of research on Messianic believers, these hypotheses need to be tested empirically.

Messianic Judaism as culture

This section will examine the first factor proposed by Phinney (1996) that accounts for the psychological salience of ethnicity - its cultural manifestations. To understand one of the two pillars which support Messianic theology and practice -Judaism, a brief summary of beliefs and practices characteristic of the religion is presented here. Interested readers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with more systematic accounts of the topic. The influence of the second pillar undergirding Messianic Judaism, Protestant Christianity, will be briefly discussed in the next section.

Wide diversity characterizes schools and traditions within Judaism, ranging from ultra-Orthodox (Hasidic) groups to secular assimilated Jews. Moreover, debates regarding the definition and essence of the term "Jew" have persisted for centuries (e.g., Cohn-Sherbok, 2000). Traditionally Jews have been considered both a peoplehood and a religion (Stokes, 1994). Modern notions suggest that religious affiliation is no longer a defining characteristic of Jewishness but has rather been expanded to include cultural aspects (Safirstein, 2002). Assimilation and secularization trends within Judaism have contributed to an even narrower definition of Jewishness as not being Christian. It is this very point that leads much of the Jewish community to draw the line of exclusion around

Messianic Jews.

Research indicates that differences exist among the three major branches of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform) on measures of spirituality and social identity (Goodman, 2003). In fact, some suggest that declining religiosity among American Jewry poses a greater threat to their identity than declining social ties (Amyot &Sigelman, 1996). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that American Jews can identify strongly with their cultural group in the absence of religious beliefs and that nonreligious aspects of their identity can be more important than religious ones to collective self-esteem and feelings of membership (Safirstein, 2002).

If one central theme were to characterize Judaism, it would be the importance of roots, ranging from spiritual and historical on a national level to family ties on an individual level. Most Jewish festivals and holidays focus on notions of remembrance and Jews' continuity as a people. For instance, Sabbath is celebrated as a day of rest given to the Jewish people by God. Passover is another example of Jews commemorating their survival and freedom from bondage as a link to the events of exodus from Egypt. Additionally, the importance of traditions developed as a function of Jewish need for selfpreservation in the face of frequently life-threatening circumstances around them. In their qualitative interviews with American Jewish families, Semans and Fish (2000) noted that their participants "feel an obligation to their 'roots,' to their ancestors, to continue this way of life, and to promote Jewish continuity in future generations" (p. 130).

While there is considerable variability among culturally and religiously identified Jews in the type of Jewish traditions practiced and the meaning assigned to them, the following customs mark many individuals' engagement in Judaism. As mentioned previously, Shabbat and holiday observance represent central aspects of the Jewish way of life. Rites of passage such as bar/bat mitzvah and visits to Israel shape identity formation in many Jewish adolescents and adults. Keeping dietary laws (kashrut) and male circumcision are also traditions that are commonly integrated into the Jewish system of praxis.

Another theme that permeates the experience of Jewishness around the world, including the United States, relates to feelings of marginalization and awareness of overt and covert anti-Semitism (Friedman, 2002; Ginsberg, 2002). Some theoreticians (i.e., Click, 1995) argue that much of Jewish consciousness is shaped by the memories of the Holocaust. Langman (1995) proposes that it is "impossible to understand what it is to be a Jew today without understanding the impact the Holocaust has had on Jews throughout the world" (p. 332). In response to experiences of oppression throughout history, some Jewish individuals and families cling more closely to the Jewish way of life, while others hide their identity by trying to blend into mainstream society (Semans &Fish, 2000).

Family occupies a central role within Judaism, as a symbolic and practical place of learning and debate and transmission of values and love. The proverbial "Jewish mother" indeed represents commonly close ties that exist between parents and children and tendencies towards enmeshment within Jewish family systems. Responsibility is another major concept in Jewish ethics which includes one's obligations to family members, friends, and society at large (Miller &Lovinger, 2000). "Tikkun olam"-restoration of the world-is a central motif in Judaism which signifies the moral and ethical commitment of the Jewish people to pursue social justice and transform life's darkness into light. The prophets' call for Jews to be "the light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:6) has undoubtedly permeated various aspects of the Jewish psyche in direct and indirect ways.

Individuals' subjective identification

Now that some of the key themes within Judaism have been outlined, their manifestation within the Messianic Jewish system of praxis will be briefly described. Additionally, the role of Protestant influences and the presence of Gentiles in Messianic congregations will be presented as important dimensions impacting Messianic believers' subjective identifications and self-understanding.

Significant diversity categorizes the extent to which Messianic Jewish congregations and individuals implement traditional Jewish practices into their theology and lifestyle (Stokes, 1994). Most make Sabbath and Jewish holidays and feasts an important aspect of their yearly cycle. Traditional elements of Judaic practice (Jewish liturgy, prayers, songs, kashrut laws) are often incorporated into worship services and individuals' routines. Life

cycle events (e.g., bar/bat mitzvah, Jewish weddings) are frequently included in the practices of individuals and congregations. Identification with the larger Jewish community and support of Israel are also fundamental aspects of the Messianic vision that tend to be emphasized through teaching and practical involvement.

Additionally, aspects of evangelical Protestant theology and practice, the second pillar of Messianic Judaism, find their manifestation in Messianic Jewish congregations. Charismatic influences (e.g., practice of spiritual gifts) have been embraced by a significant part of the movement. Extemporaneous prayer, instrumental music, and thematic content of sermons are aspects of a typical Messianic worship service that are more similar to those found in Protestant churches than traditional synagogues. According to Harris-Shapiro (1992), a Reform rabbi who researched Messianic Judaism as an ethnographer, this blending of Jewish and Protestant elements of religious practice leads to syncretism and ambivalence that is part of Messianic Jewish experience. In defense of the theology and practice of Messianic Judaism, Schiffman (1992) asserts, "Messianic congregations see no contradiction between Jewishness and Messianic faith. They repudiate the anti-Jewish bias of the Church fathers and the Jewish tradition that rejects the Messiah" (p. 40). Nevertheless, while theologically and conceptually the two traditions belong together; as will be elaborated later, in the context of existing social structures that shape individual identities, the historical and current chasm that divides Christians and Jews continues to exert significant influence on the spiritual, psychological, and social experience of Messianic believers. It is these competing loyalties and their potential psychological effects that need to be understood by professionals working with this population.

The presence and participation of Gentiles in the Messianic movement is another important issue that warrants reflection. Given that numbers of Gentiles who associate themselves with Messianic Judaism are considerable in most congregations, questions regarding the theological and sociological meaning of this phenomenon have been raised (Kinzer, 2000; Resnik, n.d.; Stokes, 1996). Of particular interest here are discussions of potential motivations for Gentiles' involvement in the movement.

Stokes (1994) identifies three primary reasons for a non-Jewish believer to identify with the movement. The first and arguably "best model for full Gentile participation in Messianic Judaism" (Resnik, n.d., p. 3) is based on love for Israel and the Jewish people. This group of Gentiles is open about being non-Jewish, thus identifying with rather than as Jews (Stokes, 1994). The second group represents Gentile spouses of Jewish individuals who take on aspects of Jewish lifestyle and identity to create a unified spiritual community for the sake of their marriage and children. The third category of Gentiles is attracted to Messianic Judaism as a means of connecting to the Jewish roots of their Christian faith. Some within this group are convinced that all believers in Jesus are called to Torah observance and may be frustrated that Gentile Christianity has largely abandoned many of its Jewish roots. Furthermore, some individuals in this group represent what Stokes (1994) refers to as "want-to-be's." In an effort to identify as Jews, they "conceal their true identity so as to appear to all as having a legitimate Jewish heritage" (Stokes, 1994, p. 47).

Regardless of the motivation behind a Gentile individual's association with Messianic Judaism (perhaps with the exception of marriage to a Jewish spouse), a degree of identity confusion is at some point likely to categorize a Messianic Gentile's experience. In most cases, the Gentile who joins the Messianic movement will be abandoning his or her spiritual group of reference and many, if not all, of the traditions associated with it while adopting new and foreign ones. As the process of assimilating into a Messianic Jewish culture unfolds, the Messianic Gentile is likely to experience identity loss and confusion, misunderstandings of ritual and role, and dissonance as he or she adopts new forms of worship and confronts replacement theology. The typical questions posed to Jewish believers are also a source of conflict and confusion for the Gentile. Finally, identification with a marginalized group can be difficult.

In an exploratory study of Messianic identity, 37% of Gentile participants reported negative effects on their family relationships since they began attending a Messianic congregation. An even larger percentage (57%) of Messianic Gentiles indicated negative consequences for the quality of their relationships with Gentile (presumably non-Messianic) friends as a result of their affiliation with the movement (Yangarber-Hicks &Hicks, in press). These

preliminary findings suggest that the experience of negotiating one's identity as a Gentile in the Messianic Jewish context may be fraught with unique psychological and spiritual challenges.

This section attempted to highlight the complexity of influences facing typical Messianic congregations and individuals comprising the movement. While particular persons may directly deal with only certain influences at a given point in their spiritual and emotional development, Messianic Judaism as a whole and its long-term adherents undoubtedly have to confront the movement's multifaceted nature and make choices about identifying with or rejecting certain aspects of its reality.

The status of Messianic Judaism within larger society

To complete our examination of the experiences of Messianic believers, the third and final factor contributing to the psychological relevance of ethnicity -societal perceptions of the group in questionneeds to be named. As mentioned previously, a significant discrepancy exists between Messianic believers' self-understanding as a prophetic movement initiated by God that represents a fulfillment of the spiritual promises given to the Jewish people and through them, to all the nations, on the one hand, and general societal attitudes of misunderstanding and rejection towards this group, on the other. While some sympathetic voices have been heard towards Messianic Judaism from members of both Gentile Christian and Jewish communities, at this point the movement still represents an enigma to outsiders, and "Messianic Jews are truly dwelling in a no man's land" (Stokes, 1994, p. 117).

However, this special status has not precluded prejudicial attitudes towards Jews to be extended to Messianic believers. Rosen (1996) states, "Just as Jews who do not believe in Jesus find their identity reinforced through persecution so, too, do we Jewish believers" (p. 7). While identification with the Jewish people is a hallmark of Messianic theology and experience, this stance is commonly unappreciated, unreciprocated, and even questioned by the Jewish community at large (Rosen, 1996). This affiliation and Messianic believers' Torah observance are also regularly met with suspicion on the part of Gen tile Christians. Finally, the challenges experienced by evangelical Gentile Christians in mainstream society are also faced by Messianic believers whose positions on spiritual and moral issues may be viewed as intolerant by the postmodern culture.

Thus, Messianic believers contend with a number of difficult issues as they navigate the misunderstanding stemming from both communities of reference. For many, Messianic Jewish congregations become safe havens where authentic fellowship, support, and validation take place. While currently there is no evidence that individuals who identify as Messianic Jews experience higher rates of psychopathology than other Jews (as reported in Kjar-Hansen, 1996), the unique challenges described above serve as an important context which both clinicians and researchers should respond to with sensitivity and understanding.

IMPLICATIONS

Clinical implications

The need for mental health professionals to develop multicultural competencies has been clearly presented by researchers and practitioners in the field (e.g., American Psychological Association, 1993; Mishne, 2002; Sue &Sue, 2003). Despite the intellectual acknowledgment that race and ethnicity are important aspects of the therapeutic process, many practitioners still struggle with tangible ways of integrating awareness of these issues into their clinical routine (Cardemil &Battle, 2003). Additionally, while growing evidence suggests that the mental health field has made substantial progress in appreciating the roles that race, ethnicity, and spirituality play in individuals' lives, the relative neglect of research on Jews as a culturally distinct group and lack of response to anti-Semitism as an insidious phenomenon within the counseling profession has been noted (Langman, 1995; Weinrach, 2002). Furthermore, comprehensive review of literature indicates the relative lack of scholarship in the social sciences and its absence in psychology on Messianic Judaism.

With these general issues in mind, a multiculturally competent professional would sensitively reflect upon the following areas in working with Messianic believers. First and foremost, increasing one's comfort level in exploring matters of ethnicity and spirituality is an important therapeutic mandate. Cardemil and Battle (2003) suggest the following, "When in doubt about the salience of these issues in treatment, we suggest that therapists initiate

discussion in order to provide an opportunity for direct discussion should it be relevant" (p. 282). Second, personal biases a therapist might have regarding Jewish people in general and Messianic Jews in particular would need to be thoroughly examined to reduce potential harm that they can cause. For Christian therapists, inspecting the teachings concerning the place of Israel and the Jewish people they have internalized from religious institutions for overt and covert signs of supersessionism, triamphalism, or outright contempt is crucial. Therapists' degree of appreciation for different traditions within the ecclesia is likely to be an important predictor of their success in working with Messianic individuals. Strozier and Kohn (1992) suggested that many Christian fundamentalists have ambivalent attitudes towards Jews expressed either in an idealized or debased-but seldom realistic-manner. Thus, as is the case in working with other clinically diverse populations, selfawareness has to be a starting point for mental health professionals.

Third, Stuart (2004) warns against mental health professionals making simplistic inferences about an individual's cultural experience based on their membership in any particular group. Indeed, everyone "is a unique blend of many influences" (Stuart, 2004, p. 5). As with other cultural and religious groups, developing a "complex set of cultural categories" (Stuart, 2004, p. 7) is important in understanding the nuances of a client's background. For instance, knowing that the client was raised in a non-Messianic Jewish family and later accepted Jesus says little about their current level of identification and involvement in the Messianic community. Obtaining a detailed history of the following issues is extremely important in accurately conceptualizing the client's experience: (a) salience and embeddedness in Judaism and Jewish culture prior to coming to Messianic faith; (b) the nature of family and other social relationships with other Jewish individuals before and after; and (c) the presence of other Messianic believers in one's family and immediate friendship circle. Additionally, it is inevitable that individual difference variables, including premorbid and/or concomitant psychopathology, would impact one's ability to navigate the mazeway of one's experience as a Messianic Jew or Gentile.

In addition to obtaining a thorough understanding of these contextual factors and the meanings assigned to them, assessing a Messianic client's stage of ethnic identity development is crucial to accurate conceptualization and design of appropriate interventions. A Jewish individual who recently became a believer is likely to experience some degree of tension, potential shame and guilt related to their nonbelieving family and friends. These feelings may become accentuated if the believer's attempts to share their beliefs with Jewish relatives are not met with enthusiasm. Preliminary findings on aspects of Messianic identity reveal common experiences of rejection and hostility initially faced by Jewish believers from their family and friends (Yangarber-Hicks &Hicks, in press). For Gentile members of the Messianic movement, early feelings of confusion and uprootedness from their previous community of reference (i.e., Christian church) can be similarly expected. Rosen (1996) argues that "one of the keys to a Jewish believer's identity is to accept rejection, to recognize denial for what it is, and to refuse to base one's own identity on the acceptance of others" (p. 7). While this may be an important goal for a mature believer, it is unlikely to be reached quickly and without some struggle. Sensitive therapists can offer Jewish and Gentile Messianic believers empathy and support in this challenging process.

Even when acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah is experienced as powerfully liberating and positively life-changing, issues of loss and mourning are likely to accompany the subsequent experience of faith. In this light, the client's dismissal of sadness, anger or other emotions or refusal to acknowledge that aspects of their Jewish (or Gentile Christian) past are missed may indicate that the individual is in an early stage of ethnic identity development. Phinney (1996) suggests that this phase is categorized by lack of attention or interest devoted to examination of one's ethnicity and blind adherence to values and attitudes upheld by others. Ostensibly, Jewish individuals whose entry into the faith was through a Christian church might inadvertently adopt aspects of supersessionism without exploration of alternative perspectives. While many individuals progress to stages beyond this one, psychotherapists need to be aware of potential dangers inherent in remaining in it. In fact, identity rejection or strong negative feelings towards everything Jewish (in the case of Jews who believe in Jesus) or Christian (in the case of Messianic Gentiles) may represent reaction formation or other primitive defense structures created to protect one from the experience of grief, anger, and ambivalence. The ability to experience

and contain multiple competing feelings and motivations pertaining to one's ethnicity is an essential step in achieving a mature identity. The extent to which such ambivalence is central to Messianic believers' process of cultural and spiritual identity development should be examined empirically.

In the context of Jewish believers, confrontation with material that reminds one of one's membership among the Jewish people can evoke profound and surprising reactions for individuals whose ethnic identity otherwise lacks salience. The following example will illustrate this phenomenon. The author's acquaintance, one who is Jewish by birth but who has attended a Protestant church since her salvation, and for whom her Jewish identity is not particularly salient, was surprised by the strength of her emotional reaction when questioned by a student about the accuracy of statistics on the number of Jews exterminated during the Holocaust. This encounter brought to her awareness the degree to which being Jewish was a deeply buried yet important part of her identity.

An experience such as the one described above might push one to further explore previously unexamined parts of one's life, which represents the second stage of identity development for ethnic minorities (Phinney, 1996). Confrontation with historical and contemporary injustices perpetrated against one's ethnic group may evoke anger and potentially a spiritual crisis. For Messianic Jews, reflecting on the traditionally hostile attitudes towards the Jewish people held by the Church may push them to disassociate themselves entirely from the reality of their connection with evangelical Christianity. It is fore seeable that this period of search or immersion is prerequisite to the believer's progression towards the integration of one's sense of identity as a Messianic Jew or Gentile. However, when this stage becomes a "permanent home," to use psychoanalytic terminology, splitting may still be at work. In this case, the therapist's goal may shift towards facilitating the client's development of a secure sense of themselves as Messianic believers in their complexity coupled with an appreciation for the value of others (i.e., Christians, non-believing Jews) as multidimensional individuals.

In describing the process of successful reawakening and integration of Jewish identity, Diller (1980) posited four stages: awareness of negative feelings towards one's heritage, realization of "the psychological impossibility of escaping, avoiding, or denying it," exposure to a different and more satisfying view of it, and "a personal relevancy and purpose in the practice and re-identification" (Diller, 1980, p. 43). A therapist working with a Messianic Jewish individual in stages three and four is likely to benefit from additional education or consultation about the meaning of Jewishness as well as referring the client to external resources in the community.

It has been suggested that ethnic identity achievement or internalization does not represent an end point but instead a continuous process of exploration and refinement with respect to one's ethnicity (Parham, 1989). Therefore, a developmental framework that views Messianic identity as a process potentially categorized by initial ignorance and denial, followed by feelings of pain, grief, and anger, and ultimately acceptance is useful. One should keep in mind that a variety of psychological, sociocultural, and spiritual factors may modify and modulate the experience of individuals in their journey towards developing a vibrant and authentic Messianic identity.

In addition to larger conceptual dilemmas pertaining to one's identity, difficult decisions about aspects of one's lifestyle may be central to a young Messianic believer. Which holidays to celebrate, with whom to socialize, how to raise one's children, and a myriad of other questions may surface in the process of negotiating the mazeway of Messianic Judaism. Additionally, certain religious symbols and beliefs that are central to most Christians' experience of their faith may evoke negative or ambivalent reactions from a Messianic believer. Two examples will illustrate the importance of thorough understanding and sensitivity on the part of a Christian therapist in working with this population.

The first example deals with one of the most important symbols of Christianity-the Cross. One is unlikely to find the cross displayed in a Messianic congregation or home or find a committed Messianic believer wearing one. While most Messianic Jews and Gentiles find the crucifixion and resurrection of Yeshua to be pivotal to their faith system, the cross traditionally creates troublesome associations in the Jewish community as a symbol of anti-Semitic persecutions and thus produces negative visceral reactions among most Jews. Thus, a therapist who personally wears or displays the cross needs to be aware of these potential feelings on the part of a Messianic client and their underpinnings.

The second example highlights a potentially more difficult issue of theological differences that might emerge between an evangelical Christian counselor and a Messianic client. The sharp distinction between law and grace is frequently made by lay Christians, with the former having negative connotations of being obsolete and connected to the Old Testament and the latter-representing freedom brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection and associated with the New Testament. It might be expected that references to law and grace are frequently used in clinical settings by Christian therapists, particularly in working with clients who struggle with such issues as perfectionism, guilt, and shame. A Messianic believer, however, is likely to view aspects of Mosaic Law as representing God's love and grace rather than legalism and rigidity. Thus, clinical interventions aimed at encouraging him/her to focus less on the law and instead experience God's grace may backfire with a Messianic client. Christian theologians have recently begun reexamining traditionally made crude distinctions between law and grace, suggesting that "law and grace are not opposites; there was grace in the giving of the law, and true grace has inescapable principles, as does true love" (Thompson, 2002, p. 7). Therefore, Christian mental health professionals and clergy would benefit from incorporating a more nuanced understanding of these issues and corresponding use of language into their professional interactions with Messianic believers.

Other subtle but meaningful differences are likely to distinguish Messianic and Gentile Christian usage of religious language and terminology. The following represents a sample of these differences, with the first term indicating typical Christian usage and the one in parentheses-the term utilized by Messianic believers: Jesus (Yeshua), Christ (Messiah), Christian (believer), cross (tree), and Church (Body of Messiah).

Thus, therapists' sensitivity to these theological as well as linguistic differences is helpful. Awareness of resources available to Messianic believers (i.e., congregations, literature, conferences) and potential referrals to community leaders that can provide them may facilitate the process. When asked about resources that would facilitate their growth, Messianic respondents expressed a need for tools that would help Messianic believers deal with feelings of grief, loss, and identity struggles as well as competent therapists sensitive to the context in which their Messianic clients live (Yangarber-Hicks &Hicks, in press). Finally, "Jewish believers in churches still have need for outlets of Jewish expression. This needs to be recognized by Messianic congregations, Jewish missions, and their churches and all should seek to provide as many helps as possible" (Schiffman, 1992, p. 164). It only seems appropriate to add mental health professionals to this list.

Research suggestions

Possibilities and directions for pursuing a research agenda that includes Messianic believers are numerous. Only a few potential questions will be suggested here. First, investigations into the developmental nature of Messianic identity and into various ways of negotiating it (akin to different identifications within a biracial identity) would be useful. In particular, empirical studies that test the validity of traditional models of identity development in this population are needed. Specifically, one could compare multiracial individuals and Messianic believers on measures of ethnic identity and psychological well-being. Second, examination of psychosocial variables impacting one's experience as a Messianic Jew or Gentile would be beneficial both to researchers and practitioners. Third, comparisons among Messianic believers, Gentile Christians, and non-Messianic Jews on existing measures of spirituality, psychological well-being, and ethnic identity would broaden our understanding of all these groups. More specifically, investigations comparing Jewish believers who attend churches with those affiliated with Messianic Jewish congregations could fruitfully focus on psychological, spiritual, and sociological characteristics and experiences that contributed to the preferences and identity of each group. Finally, cross-cultural research examining similarities and differences among North American, Israeli, European, and other Messianic communities would be extremely valuable in clarifying the role of cultural context in their identity experiences. Studies exploring ways in which other persecuted religious minorities (i.e., Christians raised in primarily Muslim countries and families) negotiate the challenges of their complex ethnic and spiritual identities and their impact on mental health are warranted.

This article presented the historical, theological, and sociocultural background relevant to understanding psychological issues pertinent to the experience of Messianic believers. Existing research on ethnic identity was

utilized as a framework for conceptualizing the unique challenges facing Jews and Gentiles who identify with the Messianic movement. Finally, issues that might emerge in the treatment process and ways in which clinicians working with this population can utilize this information were presented. Ultimately, it is hoped that this article will pave the way for social scientists interested in religious and cultural diversity to further their investigation of Messianic Judaism for the purposes of scientific inquiry, provision of clinical care, and personal growth.

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Appendix

APPENDIX
Glossary

Bar/bat mitzvah - Hebrew for "son/daughter of the commandment". Ceremony marking the boy's 13th and girl's 12th birthday and their entry into adulthood and responsibility before God and the community.

Believer - the term used by Messianic individuals to refer to all followers of Yeshua, both Jewish and Gentile and those attending Christian churches and Messianic congregations. It is preferred to the term "Christian."

Hebrew Christian - old term for Messianic Jew. Currently used to distinguish Jews who identify primarily as Christians, tend to attend churches, and have mostly abandoned their Jewish heritage from Messianic Jews.

Kashrut - dietary laws given to the Jewish people by God in the Torah. Rabbinic Judaism later elaborated on them to create an extensive system of dietary specifications. Messianic believers vary as to whether and to what degree they choose to follow kashrut.

Messianic Jews -Jews who believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah who fulfilled Old Covenant prophecies, and consequently live out their faith in the context of their Jewish heritage and lifestyle.

Replacement theology/supersessionism - long-standing aspect of Christian theology which asserts that God rejected the Jews as His chosen people and that the Church replaced them in the economy of God's salvation. Replacement theology is no longer wholeheartedly embraced by substantial segments of world Christian community.

Shabbat - day of rest (Sabbath) observed by Jews and Messianic believers starting at sunset on Friday and ending at sunset on Saturday.

Tallit - a prayer shawl worn by adult male Jews during weekly and holiday services.

Torah - Hebrew for "instruction." The first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai.

Tikkun olam - Hebrew for "restoration of the world." In contemporary Jewish thought it often refers to the calling for Jews to participate in bettering the world through the pursuit of social justice.

Yarmulka/kippah - the skullcap worn byjewish men indicating their piety.

Yeshua - the Hebrew name for Jesus of Nazareth often used by Messianic believers.

DETAILS

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