



Antisemitism on American College Campuses and Its Impact on Jewish Students

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Abstract

The impact of antisemitic trauma has emerged as a significant concern affecting the academic performance and mental health of Jewish students in the United States. Recent studies indicate that experiences of antisemitism can profoundly hinder students' educational pursuits, leading to increased psychological distress and academic challenges. This study aims to delve into the lived experiences of Jewish students grappling with the repercussions of antisemitic trauma and its correlation with their academic struggles. The insights gained from this research are essential for university administrators and educators, as they highlight the critical need for awareness and support systems tailored to Jewish students facing such trauma. Ultimately, this paper summarizes the need to investigate antisemitism in higher education and inform the development of inclusive academic policies and practices that promote the well-being and success of affected students.

Keywords: Psychological Distress; Students; Misunderstanding; Relationship; Memory

Introduction

Antisemitism

Antisemitism is a form of prejudice and discrimination directed against Jewish people, characterized by negative stereotypes, social exclusion, and hostility [1,2]. This ancient form of hatred can be traced back to various historical moments, including religious conflicts, economic scapegoating, and cultural misunderstandings [1,3]. Over centuries, antisemitism has manifested in diverse ways, including discriminatory laws, violent pogroms, and systemic oppression [4]. Its persistence in modern society highlights the ongoing struggle against intolerance and the need for continual awareness and education to combat

this deep-seated issue [5]. According to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), antisemitism is defined as the perception of Jewish people or the expressed hatred towards Jewish people and consists of rhetorical or physical manifestations of antisemitism towards the Jewish community. Moreover, the IHRA stated that antisemitism also includes anti-Zionism hate speech. Antisemitism denies Jewish individuals equal rights as citizens within society, while anti-Zionism denies the Jewish community lawful sovereignty within the united community of nations [6].

The Development of Modern Antisemitism

The emergence and persistence of antisemitism can be better understood by examining historical events that have

shaped its evolution. Throughout history, Jewish communities have faced various forms of discrimination, often entrenched within broader social hierarchies [7]. Societal structures have systematically targeted Jewish individuals, illustrating the complex relationship between these structures and antisemitic beliefs [4,8,9].

Troubling connections between the racial policies of Nazi Germany and the segregation laws of the Jim Crow era in the United States. Notably, Nazi officials admired American white supremacy, seeing it as a model for their own ideologies regarding Aryan supremacy. American eugenicists in the 1930s embraced Nazi ideas about racial purity, which furthered the exchange of discriminatory ideas between the two regimes [10]. This collaboration illustrates a shared commitment to marginalizing minority groups, stripping them of rights and dignity through legal frameworks, such as the Nuremberg laws in Germany and Jim Crow laws in the United States. Both systems enforced prohibitions against interracial relationships and imposed strict definitions of racial identity, revealing that caste systems can operate independently of skin colour. The Nuremberg laws targeted Jews similarly to how Jim Crow laws disenfranchised African Americans, demonstrating that these oppressive systems thrived on societal beliefs that justified discrimination, creating environments of fear and dehumanization [7].

The eugenics movement in the United States sought to improve society through selective breeding, reinforcing the idea of racial superiority as a biological reality. Hitler and other Nazi leaders viewed American racial laws as a model, further entrenching the belief in Aryan supremacy. Consequently, the ideologies rooted in racial science contributed to the marginalization of perceived undesirable communities in both Nazi Germany and the United States, marking a significant development in modern antisemitism [11]. The Nazi party was significantly influenced by its collaboration with the Muslim Brotherhood, which often publicly supported the prevention of the establishment of a Jewish nation. This partnership shaped their strategies and led to the formulation of various protocols that aligned with their mutual objectives [12]. In the context of extremist groups, Hamas operates within the Gaza Strip, aligning itself closely with the ideological tenets previously championed by the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas conducted a terrorist attack in Israel on October 7th, 2023. The invasion included the massacre of over 1200 people, the taking of civilian hostages, and gender-based violence towards women. The Hamas-led terrorist attack in Israel was a point that had initiated a global rise in antisemitism [13]. The Department of Education has indicated that it will continue investigating the hundreds of complaints related to harassment it has received since October 7th, 2023 [14].

Impact on the Jewish Community

The Jewish community has been profoundly affected by antisemitism, leading to complex internal dynamics marked by internalized stigma, internalized racism, and self-hatred. Antisemitism, as an external devaluation force, has positioned Jewish individuals in a way that fosters feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness. This internalized stigma manifests as a pervasive sense of being ostracized, where individuals also subconsciously absorb negative stereotypes about their identity. Such internalization can result in trauma and emotional turmoil, as community members grapple with their self-worth in the face of discrimination.

Additionally, internalized racism plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of Jewish individuals. This concept refers to the acceptance of society's negative views about one's own ethnicity or identity, causing individuals to adopt a critical stance toward themselves and their community [15-21]. Jewish people may find themselves distancing from certain cultural or religious practices, often to assimilate or avoid discrimination. The phenomenon known as self-hatred theory further encapsulates these struggles. Defined as an aversion to aspects of oneself perceived as Jewish, self-hatred reflects the internal conflict individuals experience when confronting societal prejudices [22,23]. Many Jews may feel a sense of shame about their identity, leading to an internal battle that undermines their confidence and sense of belonging [15,19,22]. Often, this internalized conflict is accompanied by a fear of rejection, which compels individuals to seek solidarity and connection within their community as a form of coping. In response to threat of self-hatred, the Jewish community has endeavoured to combat these feelings through initiatives focused on preserving the memory of the Holocaust and addressing contemporary antisemitism. These efforts underscore the community's resilience and commitment to affirming its identity in the face of adversity [23,24].

Intersection of Antisemitism, Anti-Israel Sentiment, and Rising Hate Crimes

The intersection of antisemitism and anti-Israel has become increasingly evident in recent years, particularly in academic settings. Scholars argue that framing Israel as a representative of the Jewish people fosters an evolution of antisemitism, where hostility toward the state often serves as a socially acceptable outlet for deep-rooted prejudices [20,25,26]. Historically, Jews have faced significant persecution and displacement, particularly in relation to their connection to Israel, which complicates narratives of colonization and decolonization. Many Jewish communities perceive efforts to decolonize Israel as dismissive of their historical grievances and identity [27,28].

Recent trends have shown a dramatic increase in antisemitic incidents in the United States. These protests frequently propagate a simplified and skewed narrative of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict, portraying Israel as an illegitimate oppressor and actively pushing Jewish students to disavow their identities. Such hostile environments have led to incidents of threats and violence against Jewish individuals, demonstrating a troubling rise in antisemitic attitudes intertwined with anti-Zionist rhetoric on campuses nationwide. This intersection highlights the complexities of historical narratives, identity, and the present-day implications of increased hate crimes against Jewish communities [29,30].

Hotspots on College Campuses

In recent years, many college campuses have become hotspots of tension for Jewish students, facing significant challenges related to inclusivity and safety. Existing literature highlights that marginalized Jewish students often feel unwelcome in academic environments, with a majority indicating feelings of exclusion from campus activities [31]. This growing climate of distress is compounded by a surge in antisemitic threats, including harassment and hostility toward Jewish organizations, leaving many students marginalized in their own academic settings [32,33-35].

Historical factors play a role in this environment as institutional practices, like quotas, have historically limited enrolment for non- White and marginalized students, including those from the Jewish community. Legislative efforts, such as the Antisemitism Awareness Act, aim to address these issues but have sparked debate over the balance between free speech and the need for a safer campus climate. Despite the intent behind such measures, many Jewish students continue to confront serious concerns, from antisemitic slurs to violent confrontations and online threats community [8].

Furthermore, the rise of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement has intensified these tensions, with some campuses seeing proposals for Jewish-Free zones and exclusionary practices against Jewish faculty and students involved in pro-Israel activities. Protestors often hold extreme views on the Israeli- Palestinian conflict, leading to misunderstandings and escalating hostilities that further alienate Jewish students [35].

Campus Antisemitism and Institutional Response

In February 2024, the House Committee on Education formally invited Jewish students to testify about their campus experiences [14]. Many described their campus as

open season for the Jewish community. Existing literature highlights that when university administrators tolerate, ignore, encourage, or fail to address antisemitic harassment, schools are subject to liability under Title VI and could lose federal funding. Additionally, Jewish students alleged that administrators are selectively enforcing university policies to intentionally avoid protecting Jewish students from hatred and harassment. Jewish students feel neglected by university officials who have minimized the impact of antisemitic behaviour in their community and have ignored their requests for protection Act [35]. Many Jewish students are dissatisfied with the responses from administrators regarding their complaints of antisemitic harassment on college campuses, emphasizing the need for proactive measures.

Administrators are encouraged to prohibit and punish speech that involves any amount of harassment and should clearly communicate that antisemitic discrimination in any form will not be tolerated. The safety and security of some Jewish students are compromised, and their ability to obtain an education has been thwarted [14,36]. The current campus environment has encouraged some students to call for the dismantling and eradication of the State of Israel. For many Jewish students, this stance is deeply offensive and is perceived as antisemitic, as Israel is the only nation that is an integral part of their identity. Universities should condemn antisemitism and, in line with their educational missions, engage students in critical thinking that fosters meaningful discussions and learning about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Engaging in productive discussions with groups on campus that assert dominance and label minority groups as inferior can be quite challenging, especially when derogatory terms are used. Additionally, effective counter-speech and constructive dialogue about the ongoing conflict are often hindered by historically inaccurate arguments based on misinformation and unvetted social media influence. Many students are unwilling to seek the truth from online information or reconsider their perspectives, even when presented with verified, fact-checked data that contradicts their beliefs [14,16,36].

The U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism recommended that colleges issue clear and firm statements condemning all forms of hate, including antisemitism, especially in response to antisemitic incidents. Antisemitism should be treated with the same seriousness as other forms of hate. Members associated with the university should be encouraged to participate in critical thinking, use reliable resources for information, and share their opinions while respecting opposing views. Colleges should create forums that include diverse voices in discussions, promote open inquiry, and allow the free expression of ideas, which are all essential to the learning experience. Every student should feel safe on campus, be able to pursue their educational goals,

and actively participate in campus life without facing threats or harassment due to their Jewish heritage [14,16,36,37].

Conclusion

Antisemitism remains a deeply rooted and multifaceted issue that has evolved over centuries, emphasizing the necessity for ongoing awareness and education to combat prejudice against Jewish individuals [4]. The historical parallels between systems of oppression, such as the Nuremberg laws and Jim Crow laws, highlight how societal structures have perpetuated antisemitic beliefs through legal frameworks that marginalize minority groups [7]. Recently, college campuses have become significant battlegrounds for discussions about antisemitism, where Jewish students often face an increase in hostility and discrimination. This environment has detrimental effects on their sense of safety and belonging, contributing to feelings of isolation and internalized stigma [2,5]. Addressing the challenges posed by antisemitism in academic settings is crucial for fostering an environment of inclusivity and respect for all identities. A collective commitment to promoting understanding and tolerance is essential in striving toward a society free from hatred and discrimination [14,16,37].

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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