INTRODUCTION
The focus of this research is to study the overall connection between the experiences of Holocaust survivors and Taglit-Birthright Israel (TBI) participants, both of whom qualified for their experiences through the misuse of pseudo-scientific (racial science/genetics/hygiene) rules, first exploited by scientists within Nazi Germany to qualify citizens of the Third Reich as “Jews.” This portion consists of interviews with alumni or leaders of the Taglit-Birthright Israel program. The intent of the interviews was to uncover the multidimensional effects of one’s Jewish background on the experience of Birthright and Jewish life and to compare those effects to those of Mischlinge in the Holocaust.

METHODS
The interviews consisted of an initial survey followed by questions in six topics: Background, Judaism and Blood, Israel, Birthright, Jewish Identity, and Holocaust. The topics were ordered specifically to allow participants to order their answers in a logical way and so that the connection between Birthright and the Holocaust could be left to the end. Transcripts of the interviews were split into sections according to topic number and analyzed using Voyant tools. After removing common words, the top five significant words (“word mentions”) were tallied and categorized in the following nine categories: Religious (Jewish), Religious (Non-Jewish), Adverse Feelings, Affirmative Feelings, Overall Feelings, Israel, Personal Identification, Genetics/Blood, and Ancestry/Culture. Each “word mention” total was normalized against the number of “significant word mentions.” Interview selection were collected based on the context surrounding significant words.

RESULTS

Participants had a range of demographic identifications. Participants also reported generally positive experiences on their respective Taglit-Birthright Israel experiences, with 75% of participants reporting “fair” or “good” experiences.

Beyond the results indicated by the significant word mention analysis are those results that indicate subject perceptions and thoughts. These are in the form of quotes from subjects, which are not tied to any specific subject; each are relevant to the understanding of each participant’s experiences.

DISCUSSION

Participants in Taglit-Birthright Israel do experience issues of religious identity in that their religious identities do not match their familial or ancestral identities. The participants in many ways felt a dissonance between how they self-identify and how they would be identified based on their parentage. Acceptance in a religious group or by a religious institution made it easier or more comfortable to hold up that religious identity. Ancestry also allowed some to sustain their belief of who they are, but only in the context that they had others to think about and find similarities in in order to validate their own identity.

The word mention results offered tenuous, but meaningful connections and point towards the ideas that the subjects found meaningful in each section, particularly when defining Jewish identity and the significance of Birthright. Each of the subjects’ quotes points to a different reason for why they are Jewish, highlighting much of the nuance of Jewish identity and background. Although it may be important to some, blood and genetics has very little importance in these subjects’ ideas about Judaism. The subjects connect to Israel, but seem dismayed by the limits that are set upon them by the rules for who can emigrate to Israel. The subjects supported more open qualifications for Birthright, citing the need for more inclusion and more room for exploration of Jewish identity. The subjects present the issues found in the rules of the Holocaust, and relate them back to their experiences with Birthright. There is anxiety and disgust for the rules as they are laid out, particularly because of the Holocaust connection.

CONCLUSION

There seems to be no connection between Birthright qualifications and what people perceive as who is Jewish. If the qualifications are made to be more inclusive, can it lessen feelings of anxiety and inadequacy before the trip? While not being of traditional Jewish background could still be anxiety producing when one feels as though they are not “Jewish enough,” if the concept of being Jewish as self-identifying as Jewish is normalized, institutions could decrease this anxiety.

FUTURE WORK

Expanding sample size would yield more diverse results and provide further insight into the questions asked here. Adding pre- and post-tests for Birthright participants would assess pre-trip ideas about these concepts. It is pertinent to investigate feelings of trauma and anxiety related to Jewish identity in order to determine if the same feelings are found in Birthright participants as in Holocaust survivors. A genetic component would shed more light on the results given here.

REFERENCES

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