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Masculine Disposition and Cantonist Ancestry

Symbolic Capital within the Jewish Community of Helsinki

1 Introduction

Currently, there are three Jewish congregations in Finland: the Jewish communities of Helsinki and Turku and a recently established Reform Jewish community.¹ In neither congregation does the membership exceed 1500 individuals. The membership of the Jewish Community of Helsinki, being 10 times larger than the one in Turku, is the country's largest operating Jewish congregation. The roots of these congregations, and of Finnish Jewry in general, go back to when Finland was part of the Russian Empire. The first Jews who arrived in Finland and who were allowed to settle in the territory without converting to Christianity were soldiers who had served in the Russian military. The "Cantonists" were young Jewish boys who were educated in "canton schools" for the purpose of later serving in the military (for further reading, see: Torvinen 1989; Illman/Harviainen 2002). Today, individuals whose families arrived in Finland "via" the Cantonist system are still very often referred to as "Cantonists".

While descendants of Cantonist families dominated the Finnish-Jewish scene in the first half of the 20th century, the community went through several changes and often attempted to redefine its notions of social, cultural and religious boundaries with the outside world. This included the identity and practices of the community itself.

Members of the community perceive themselves, and are perceived by other congregants, in a variety of different ways. This has affected both their ritual and non-ritual lives over the course of the past century. Some of these ways have recently been studied in my own doctoral dissertation (see Czimbalmos 2021a), which utilised the framework of vernacular religion (see Primiano 1995; Bowman 2004; Bowman/Valk 2012) to analyse the practices and traditions of intermarried congregants. As the study pointed out, the interplay between the three main

¹ This contribution was finalised before the Reform Jewish community was established.

aspects of vernacular religion, between the “official”, “folk”, and “individual” (Bowman 2004: 6), were present at all levels of congregational practice. “Official” religion, as the *halakhah* or Jewish law that the congregations followed, “folk” religion, in the form of commonly accepted views and procedures, and “individual” religion, in the personal interpretations that certain congregants supported with regard to what constitutes Jewishness (see Czimbalmos 2021a: 63). The study results showed remarkable differences between the practices of male and female congregants: female congregants often employ creativity when “doing Judaism”, as opposed to their male counterparts, who often refrain from such practices and rely on their cultural heritage. Moreover, as the study also concluded, certain congregational practices were established in the community so that male congregants could regain power (see Czimbalmos 2021a: 85–86).

Scholars of various academic fields have used the conceptualisations of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to understand how institutions and organisations function in a given environment (e.g. DiMaggio/Powel 1983; Embirmayer/Johnson 2008). In the Finnish context, Helena Kupari (2016) utilised the Bourdieuan concept of *habitus* (which I will return to later in this article) when studying intermarriages among displaced Karelian women (see Kupari 2016). As Kupari highlights, however, Bourdieu’s social theory has not gained the kind of status within religious studies that it holds in many other fields of study. A central reason for this is that his work concerning religion has often been deemed lacking in sophistication (e.g. Hervieu-Léger 2000: 110–111; Kupari 2016: 14). As Kupari points out, this is despite the fact that Bourdieu’s corpus includes a few texts that explicitly address religion. In these, he primarily argues that the division of labour promoted by urbanisation established the necessary condition for the emergence of an independent religious field. This field is divided up among different religious specialists who control religious knowledge and who compete for religious capital (see Bourdieu 1991; Kupari 2016:13). David Swartz suggests that Bourdieu’s field framework may not be the most suitable for studying congregations, as the analytical perspective calls for situating particular entities within a broader framework with respect to the struggle over the significance of religion (Swartz 1996: 83). Nevertheless, various studies have used Bourdieu’s body of work for analysing how religion specialists accumulate power and frame various contexts (Kupari 2016: 14).

As recent research on the two existing Jewish congregations in Finland points out, the globalisation of Finnish society and the demographic changes that the local Jewish congregations underwent affected their practices significantly over the past century (see, e.g., Weintraub 2017; Illman 2019; Czimbalmos 2021a). The changes – especially within the Jewish Community of Helsinki – indicate specific

underlying dispositions and power structures within these two institutions. The definitions of Judaism and Jewishness are rather complex: Jewish identity and what constitutes Jewishness has been analysed and argued by academics and representatives of Jewish communities worldwide. In the case of the informants for the current study, these definitions vary. For this reason, the study will not attempt to define either of these concepts and aims to present Jewish community as an organisation, which, due to its nature, operates with specific rules that are mainly tied to religious convictions and localised traditions.

I argue that the lines along which the congregational practices were redefined – or intentionally left “untouched” – signal the presence of certain forms of symbolic capital. These forms support the reproduction of power both in the practices and the perceptions of the congregational membership. By mainly drawing on the *Minhag Finland* project’s empirical material (to be discussed at a later point in this article), while also utilising Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital, this study analyses the underlying disposition and power structures within these communities.

2 From the Russian military to the Finnish-Jewish *Smörgåsbord*

The Jewish Community of Helsinki – and Finnish Jewry in general – has its roots in the Imperial Russian Army.² The first Jews who were allowed to settle in Finland without converting to Christianity were soldiers in this military, including those who had been trained in the Cantonist school system. They arrived in Finland from a variety of locations within the Russian Empire, and as such, mainly had Jewish roots in Litvak (Lithuanian) congregations with *Ashkenazi*³ traditions (see Torvinen 1989; Czimbalmos/Pataricza 2019; Muir/Tuori 2019). In a recent historiographical contribution, Simo Muir and Riikka Tuori conclude that those who founded the community had decided that they would create an Orthodox Jewish congregation

² *Smörgåsbord* is a Swedish term, used to describe a buffet-style luncheon. I use it metaphorically in order to represent the diversity of local Jewry.

³ Ashkenazi Jews, that is, those Jews of Central and Eastern European origin. *Sephardic Jews*, by contrast, are from the areas around the Mediterranean Sea, including Portugal, Spain, the Middle East and Northern Africa. *Mizrahi Jews* are the descendants of local Jewish communities that had existed in the Middle East or North Africa.

in Finland. As this form of Judaism was the only one that they were familiar with in their youth, they may have lacked other options (see Muir/Tuori 2019: 12).

After Finland became independent, its Jewish minority gained the right of Finnish citizenship in 1917, and in 1918 the Jewish Community of Helsinki was added to the register of Jewish communities in Finland (see Muir/Tuori 2019: 18). Regardless of the favourable legal conditions, however, the congregation started to face various challenges that primarily concerned administrative matters. In addition to granting citizenship to Finnish Jews in 1917, the Finnish Parliament passed the Civil Marriage Act (CMA), which went into effect in 1918. The CMA allowed Finnish Jews to marry people of other faiths without any obligation to convert to Christianity (see Czimbalmos 2019). Having been granted this freedom, the number of intermarriages between Jewish and non-Jewish citizens started to increase, and intermarriages became part of the everyday lives of Finnish Jews. In addition to the CMA, the Freedom of Religion Act (FRA) was also passed by the Finnish parliament, which caused further complications within the community. According to the Orthodox Jewish law that the Jewish Community of Helsinki followed, a child with a Jewish mother or a person who had converted to Judaism was considered to be Jewish. The FRA, however, defined one's religious denomination based on that of the father: a child was to be a member of the religious community that their father belonged to unless their parents expressly agreed otherwise in a written contract. To create a solution for this problematic situation, the community issued a protocol in which they stated that a child of one Jewish parent is to be registered in the congregation's books. Children, however, whose mothers were not Jewish were not considered Jewish until they underwent conversion as a child. In addition, boys were required to be circumcised even if they were halakhically Jewish, which remained the congregation's practice until March 2018 (see Czimbalmos 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a).

These developments affected the lives of the individuals and families involved, and influenced congregational traditions as well. The rise in intermarriages first resulted in a growing number of childhood conversions, followed later on by a growing number of adulthood conversions within the congregations (see Czimbalmos 2021a, 2021b). Individuals who married non-Jewish women often faced rejection and discrimination, as was also the case for their converted spouses. Naturally, when Finnish society as a whole started to become more international, the demographics of the Jewish Community of Helsinki were also transformed: foreign Jews started to join the community from a variety of backgrounds (see Weintraub 2017; Czimbalmos 2021a) and often shared very similar experiences to the earlier excluded, often marginalised intermarried congregants or converted spouses. Today, the congregation is rather diverse, with members

coming from a large variety of religious backgrounds (see Czimbalmos 2021a). This often results in conflicting opinions about religious practices as well as creative solutions to these issues.⁴

3 Methods and material

The core sources of this study are qualitative interviews (n=101) conducted by Minhang Finland team members⁵ with members of the Jewish communities of Helsinki and Turku – all members being older than 18 years of age – between February 2019 and February 2020 as part of the “Boundaries of Jewish Identities in Contemporary Finland” (Minhang Finland) project. Depending on the preferences of the informants, the interviews were conducted in several languages, including English, Swedish and Finnish⁶. The quotations derived from the interviews that were not conducted in English were translated by me. To make it easier to comprehend the quotations – in the case of grammatical errors, for example – I decided to edit them without changing the overall meaning or content of the quotation itself.

The outline of the interview was semi-structured and mainly reflected on the aspects of Finnish-Jewish everyday life among the congregational membership, while also touching upon their rituals. At the time of our interviews, all informants who took part in the study identified with one of the gender binaries. Among them, there were fifty-four women, and forty-seven men. The interview structure was designed in accordance with the framework for vernacular religion (see Primiano 1995; Bowman 2004; Bowman/Valk 2012). As a result, most interviews were centred around topics such as the congregations’ *minhagim*⁷, or those related to dietary habits, family lives, conversions, and relations with society in general.

⁴ A detailed historical account, as well as an analysis of certain matters mentioned in here can be found in a recent contribution titled *Intermarriage, Conversion, and Jewish Identity in Contemporary Finland: A study of vernacular religion in the Finnish Jewish communities* (see Czimbalmos 2021a).

⁵ The members of the Minhang Finland team: docent Ruth Illman, docent Simo Muir, PhD Dóra Pataricza, PhD Riikka Tuori and the author of this contribution.

⁶ Other languages were also used when interviewing the members of the respective congregations. However, these are languages that have such a minority position within the communities that they would potentially disclose the identity of the informants. They will therefore not be mentioned.

⁷ Plural form of *minhag*: traditions, customs.

In addition to the qualitative interviews conducted within the Minhang Finland project, information derived from a large body of archival materials (such as board meeting minutes, membership and marriage registries, rabbinical correspondence, and other administrative documents) about and belonging to the Jewish Community of Helsinki were included in the study's empirical material. Due to the diverse body of data, thematic analysis (see Braun/Clarke 2006; Braun/Clarke/Terry 2015) was chosen as an analysis method. Previous research has pointed to the existence of various power dynamics within the congregation, which resulted in different approaches to religious practices among the male and female congregants (see for example Czimbalmos 2020b, 2021a). Taking these results into consideration, the analysis was implemented based on preconceived themes that proved to be very much present – both overtly and covertly – in the data set. The key themes that arose from the analysis were *masculine disposition as symbolic capital* and *Cantonist ancestry as symbolic capital*.

4 Ethical considerations

The material analysed in the current study involves sensitive data concerning the informants of the study as well as their immediate kin and close-knit community. Participation in the Minhang Finland research was voluntary, and the informed consent of the informants was obtained before proceeding. As agreed upon before the collection began, the data use and storage will be overseen by *Suomen Kirjallisuuden Seura* (Finnish Literature Society), whose office will also serve as the data storage site.⁸ The Jewish Community of Helsinki granted access to their archival sources. In order to protect the identity of the informants, pseudonyms were used to refer to them. Certain interviews from the general Minhang Finland data set have previously been analysed and quoted from.⁹

⁸ The same ethical guidelines were followed by everyone involved in the Minhang Finland project.

⁹ In addition, the pseudonyms are not associated directly with the interview quotes among the list of references. This was to avoid the possibility of revealing the identity of the informants in the event that there were interviews that had been used in previous research.

5 The concept of symbolic capital

Pierre Bourdieu's approach can be summarised through the main concepts in his theoretical apparatus – *habitus*, *capital*, and *field* – that he established to facilitate a relational analysis of social phenomena (see Grenfell 2008: 220–222; Kupari 2016: 13). These essential tools can be used to uncover the mechanics of superiority and inequality in particular social spaces.

According to Bourdieu, the social world can be conceptualised as a series of relatively autonomous but structurally homologous scenes or *fields* where various forms of cultural and material resources or *capital* are produced, consumed and circulated. Naturally, agents and their social positions are located within a given field, which is a space of both conflict and competition (see Bourdieu 1984; Wacquant 1992: 17–18; Navarro 2006: 14; Kupari 2016). The boundaries and parameters of a given field will reflect the field's history of struggles for particular forms of capital (see Swartz 1996). The structure of a field is essentially the product of its history, which is where previous struggles resulted in not only the particular constitution of that field but also in establishing the value of particular kinds of capital (see McKinnon/Trzebiatowska/Brittain 2011: 357). In the Bourdieuan understanding, “capital denotes the different kinds of resources, values, and wealth around which crystallise the power relations in any field” (Kupari 2016: 13). Throughout their lives, individuals strive to maintain capital. Capital can take various forms, and these are essentially determined by the field in which capital is used (see Bourdieu 1986: 252–253). Capital is therefore “a resource, effective in a given social arena that enables one to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it” (Wacquant 1998: 223). As sports players on a field, individuals are in a constant struggle to maintain their capital. Their positions are influenced by the capitals that they can mobilise on the field, though capital cannot be evenly distributed among all individuals. For this reason, they are positioned hierarchically (see McKinnon/Trzebiatowska/Brittain 2011: 357).

Symbolic capital is perhaps one of Bourdieu's most ambiguous and significant concepts (see Steinmetz 2006: 449). In his own definition (1994: 8) he states that “Symbolic capital is any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know it and recognise it, to give it value”.

Similar to all forms of capital, symbolic capital is more or less equivalent to power – whether material or symbolic. They often reinforce one another, and in doing so, maintain the *status quo*. Making capital is an instrument of both “domination and its reproduction in human society” (Rey 2014: 52). Symbolic capital

is not mere wealth that can be gathered and piled up; it is instead “a self-reproducing form of wealth, a kind of ‘accumulated labor’ that gives its owner ‘credit’ or the ability to appropriate the labor and products of others” (Urban 2003: 360). Symbolic capital – like economic capital – is transferable to social networks. It is a form of prestige or honour that is attached to a family (see Bourdieu 1977: 177–179). When individuals or families convert certain goods to symbolic capital, they can successfully expand their power.

When an activity’s domain gains autonomy from social, political, or economic constraints, the autonomisation generates elites who are the holders of a type of relevant capital, and responsible for the specific activity’s legitimate interpretation of representations and practices. The elites’ capital – regardless of its nature – is always a capital of recognition (see Hilgerz and Mangez 2014: 6). This is the case when the field becomes more and more autonomised, and the practical knowledge connected to the field’s specific history or heritage is objectified, celebrated and guarded by the “guardians of legitimate knowledge” (Hilgerz/Mangez 2014: 7).

Religion scholar Terry Rey suggests that *symbolic violence* is also a central concept in Bourdieu’s theory, and thus adds it to the apparatus mentioned above (see Rey 2014). When explaining his suggestion, Rey draws on Loïc Wacquant’s argument that “the whole of Bourdieu’s work may be interpreted as a materialist anthropology of the specific contribution that various forms of symbolic violence make to the reproduction and transformation of structures of domination” (Wacquant 1992: 14–15). The convertibility of different forms of capital is realised through implicit conversion rules that structure and are structured by the various fields of power operating within society, which are processes and rules of distinction (see Gilleard 2020: 3). Dominant groups generally succeed in legitimising their own culture, and as a result, based on subjective perceptions of taste, remain superior to those they consider inferior, (see Bourdieu 1984: 245). Essentially, they exercise symbolic violence and use their legitimate culture to monopolise privileges, exclude individuals from high-status positions, or, to the contrary, assign them these same positions (see Bourdieu/Passeron 1977). The legitimate culture marked and defined by these groups is used to assume privileges and mark cultural proximity (see Bourdieu/Passeron 1977: 31).

Bourdieu’s field theory (see Bourdieu 1993a) is fundamentally about power relations, symbolic struggles and inequalities in resources and capital (see Miller 2016: 351). Bourdieu always considered class to be gendered, and for this reason class and gender are intimately connected. Nevertheless, he continued to pay little attention to the relationship between gender and different forms of capital. Moreover, he also considered capital to be gender-neutral (see Huppertz 2009: 46;

McCall 1992: 842). According to Diana Miller, Bourdieu's theorisation on how gender relates to symbolic capital remains – as Miller puts it – “underdeveloped” in his body of work (Miller 2014: 464). Furthermore, Miller describes how in *Masculine Domination* (Bourdieu 2001), Bourdieu theorises gender relations – solely along the binary – within the dichotomy of a dominant-dominated relationship (see Miller 2014: 464). By ignoring certain gender relations, field theorists tend to ignore an axis of power and inequality (see Adkins/Skeggs 2004; Miller 2016: 351). According to Kate Huppertz, gendered dispositions function as embodied forms of capital. For this reason, she differentiates between “masculine capital” and “feminine capital” (Huppertz 2009). Due to the importance of reputation, honour and esteem from the perspective of symbolic capital, gendering capital is of special importance. As Miller (2014: 563) argues: “A gender-free view of symbolic capital risks overlooking an important dynamic underlying this key form of currency in fields of cultural production”.

In the current study, I argue that the Jewish Community of Helsinki utilises “masculine disposition” as a form of symbolic capital and that in the current case, male and masculine capitals continue to dominate the feminine and female capitals.¹⁰ Furthermore, I argue that when lacking this particular form of capital, congregants accumulate another form of symbolic capital (*Cantonist ancestry as symbolic capital*), which essentially occurs via the utilisation of kinship connections.

6 Analysis

6.1 Masculine disposition as symbolic capital

Since the passage of the CMA and FRA by the Finnish Parliament, the gradual rise in intermarriage rates (see Czimbalmos 2019; Czimbalmos 2021a) has had an effect on the community. Intermarriage is generally not supported by Orthodox Jewish religious authorities (see Hirt/Mintz/Stern 2015), which was also visible in the congregational attitudes at the time. This will be discussed later in this article.

¹⁰ In the current context, masculine capital or masculine disposition equals identifying as a man, and being assigned the male gender at birth. Similarly, feminine or female disposition equals identifying as a woman and being assigned the female gender at birth. The reason behind the binary division is that none of the interview informants identified themselves as not belonging to the binary.

During his rabbinical term, Rabbi Simon Federbusch¹¹ issued a *taqqanah* – a rabbinical statute – which confined the rights of intermarried men and denied them the right to be granted an *aliyah*¹² (see Czimbalmos 2019: 49–50). This resulted in a significant loss of their religious and social capital within the congregation. The decision was essentially the first example of using symbolic violence to exert power (see Bourdieu/Passeron 1977: 20) within the community. As the growing number of intermarriages affected more and more men (and consequentially, their rights to rise to the Torah), there was an attempt to change this “tradition”. However, it remained in practice until the 1970s (see Czimbalmos 2019: 51). Even when men were denied the right to rise to the Torah, their presence was expected and necessary in the community for performing ritual obligations, which require a *minyan* – that is, a quorum of 10 adult Jewish men. Naturally, intermarried women faced social exclusion often and were subject to various degrees of marginalisation within the community. These aren’t as well-documented, however there are examples of women who lost their capital within the community and who were expelled from it by their families (see Czimbalmos 2019; Kieding Banik/Ekholm 2018). There is also proof that they withdrew their membership from the congregation (see Czimbalmos 2019; HrJFH; Ak; NA Bmm; NA Hpl), which may have partially been the result of their social rejection (see Czimbalmos 2021a).

Orthodox Judaism is a gender-traditional branch of Judaism (see Avishai 2008; Avishai 2016). In (non-egalitarian) Orthodox Jewish communities – like the present one – men have certain ritual obligations in the synagogue, some of which do not concern women. In such communities, the official markers of symbolic capital lie in the Jewish law that the congregation seeks to follow, and can be exemplified by the status of children within the community: the status of children as halakhically Jewish is only “secured” if they convert to Judaism, or if their mother is Jewish. In such contexts or, in other words, fields, it is perhaps not very surprising that women often have devalued capital and live on the margins of their communities. Interestingly, however, the Minhag Finland informants prove that although this congregation may be nominally Orthodox, the majority of its membership does not identify themselves as Orthodox Jewish, but rather as traditional Jewish, or secular. Nevertheless, in the current narratives, the congregation is officially Orthodox but welcomes Jews from all denominations.

¹¹ The rabbi of the congregation until 1940.

¹² Granting an *aliyah* is calling on a member of a Jewish congregation to read a segment of the Torah. Receiving an *aliyah* is considered to be a great honour.

When the FRA of 1922 defined a child's religious affiliation according to the father's religion – against the requirements of the Orthodox Jewish law – the congregational membership faced a variety of administrative challenges. They were obliged to list the children in the congregational membership books – without acknowledging them as Jewish. The administrative difficulties and the growing number of halakhically non-Jewish children – who were nevertheless listed in the congregational membership books – led the congregation to establish the practice of childhood conversions as early as the 1950s (see Czimbalmos 2019). In order to maintain an Orthodox Jewish community (that is, a community that accepts matrilineal descent or conversion as a basis of membership), the members of the congregation were essentially forced to reproduce the social order so that it would be consistent with the transformed “practical taxonomies” (Bourdieu 1977: 97) of the period – as was already highlighted in previous research (see Czimbalmos 2021a).

The *taqqanah* of Federbusch lost its validity in the 1970s (see Czimbalmos 2019), and even though male congregants often described being pressured into marrying Jewish women, the examples of the congregational archives prove that they very often did not opt to do so (NA). With very few exceptions, it appears that female congregants experienced much harsher exclusion and consequences for their intermarriages than their male counterparts. Nevertheless, two male congregants from Cantonist families remember some negative consequences that male congregants faced when they got married or contemplated marrying someone of a different faith: Itzak recalls being told – before he got married – that he was not allowed to marry anyone else but a Jew, whereas Moishe, who decided to get married to a non-Jewish woman during that same period, faced the rejection of his own family when his mother said *kaddish* after him.¹³ Due to the high number of intermarriages in the 1970s, Mordechai Lanxner¹⁴ organised the community's first large adulthood conversion group in 1977 (see Czimbalmos 2021a: 58). The participants at the conversion that spring were mainly women who were married to male Cantonist congregants, or underage woman who were in a relationship with a male Cantonist.

In theory, when the FRA was changed in 1970 and made conform with the *halakhah*, the congregation earned a certain amount of additional autonomy. This was because they were no longer obliged to register children of non-Jewish

¹³ The term specifically refers to the “The Mourner's Kaddish” – a part of the mourning rituals in Judaism in all prayer services, including funerals. “Saying Kaddish” unambiguously refers to the rituals of mourning.

¹⁴ The deputy rabbi (1968–1973), then rabbi (1973–1982) for the Jewish Community of Helsinki.

mothers in their membership books, and the traditions they had established continued to exist (see Czimbalmos 2021a: 63; Czimbalmos 2021b). In *Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field* (1991) Bourdieu states that “the autonomy of the religious field asserts itself in the tendency of specialists to lock themselves up in autarchic reference, to already accumulated religious knowledge in the esotericism of a quasi-cumulative production, destined first of all for its producers” (Bourdieu 1991: 9). In the field that is currently being studied, this translates to establishing – and institutionalising – a system where due to the small size of the Jewish marriage market, intermarriages became acceptable – if not encouraged – and intermarried men could remain legitimate members of the congregations. This was in contrast to their female counterparts, who within the community faced social rejection or exclusion, or various forms of symbolic violence. Up until March 2018, the circumcision of male children – regardless of whether or not they are halakhically Jewish – was a prerequisite for accepting children into the Jewish school or congregation. Eva, a mother of two, explicitly commented on this matter when discussing circumcision, which she perceived to be unnecessary, since “if the mother is Jewish, the child is Jewish”. Leia, a young woman of Cantonist ancestry, talked about the requirement of circumcision, for which she said she “doesn’t see any reason why she would do that” other than to make her child a member of the congregation. Maya, another female informant, talked about issues of certain individuals exercising “power”. She illustrated her point by talking about two examples that were particularly hurtful for her. One was her son’s *bar mitzvah*¹⁵, where she was initially told to sit at the threshold of the door to the congregation’s *minyen room* – the place where the event took place. Eventually, she did not comply with the request and decided to sit inside the room. The other one was at the funeral of her mother, where a member of *Chevra Kadisha*¹⁶ wanted to forbid her from shovelling soil onto the coffin, which she eventually did do by holding the shovel with her son. The examples of these women show that the congregation’s male members continue to hold a very specific symbolic capital within the community, one that is predominantly connected to their gender.

Undeniably, in an Orthodox Jewish community, its religious law or traditions may be used as tools for justifying or denying women the right to specific actions – as was the case with intermarried men after the *taqqanah*. In the case of women’s involvement in services and many other matters related to “Orthodox Jewish practice”, there is room for discussion about Jewish law and its

¹⁵ Coming of age ceremony.

¹⁶ Lit. “Holy Society”. A group of Jewish men and women who are responsible for preparing the deceased for their burial.

interpretations. In the current case, for example, even though the Orthodox understandings of the Jewish law are applied, particular importance is attributed to patrilineal ancestry. One example that illustrates this can be seen in certain liturgical interpretations, the most intriguing of these perhaps being the one connected to the process of calling male congregants to the Torah. For this, Jews are traditionally “divided” into three main tribes: *Cohanim*, *Leviim* and *Yehudim*.¹⁷ From the liturgical perspective, this is especially relevant, as in Orthodox congregations, Cohanim, Leviim and Yehudim are called up to the Torah in this particular order. The statuses of Cohanim and Levi’im are inherited via patrilineal ancestry. Therefore, if a Cohen or Levi marries a non-Jewish woman, their future (male) child will lose his father’s status as a Cohen or Levi, and as such, will even fall into the tribe of Yehudim following conversion to Judaism. Regardless of this perception of the halakhah, children of Leviim from halakhically non-Jewish mothers are being called up to the Torah as Levi’im, which is proof that masculine disposition is a form of symbolic capital within the community.

Therefore, the struggle that started with the growing number of intermarriages, and thus, the growing number of halakhically non-Jewish children in the congregation, resulted in certain rules that essentially allow individuals of masculine disposition to dominate the field – regardless of whether or not those rules are in accordance with Orthodox Jewish law. Specific authority, a “characteristic of the field in question” (Bourdieu 1993b: 73), has been successfully monopolised by those who possess masculine disposition – the congregation’s symbolic capital.

6.2 Cantonist ancestry as symbolic capital

The gender-traditional nature of Judaism and the domination of those who possessed a particular kind of symbolic capital – in this case masculine disposition

¹⁷ According to the Jewish tradition, Jacob had twelve sons: their descendants grew into the Twelve Tribes of Israel, among whom the Land of Israel was divided when Joshua conquered it. After the death of King Solomon, this land was divided into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Ten of twelve tribes were lost, and the remaining ones became known as “Jews” as an indication of the fact that they descended from the tribe of Judah. Many other Jews from the other tribes also lived in Judah, but over the years, their own separate identity seemed to have ceased, with one exception: the tribe of Levi, within which there were descendants of the High Priest (Aharon), who are today known as Cohanim. Thus, today there are three groups within the Jews: those descending from Aharon (Cohanim), those from the tribe of Levi (Levi’im) and the others, with no particular ancestry connected with either of these, to that of Yehudim. In many non-Orthodox denominations of Judaism, the ties to these tribes have essentially little or no importance in practice.

— was a key and defining theme in the interview and archival materials. Another key theme was identified through the analytical process. Masculine disposition in itself may be “enough” for upholding certain positions or practicing certain traditions in the congregation, but there is another kind of symbolic capital that enables one to exercise power among its members. This form of capital is rooted in the “unique history” of the congregation. As such, it pertains to its founders, “the Cantonists”, and is therefore referred to as *Cantonist ancestry as symbolic capital* in the current study.

A male informant, Shimon, who joined the congregation after converting to Judaism, described this phenomenon as the following: “...these Cantonist [men] do not call their children converts, even if they, by all means, are converts. They have this kind of a matter of honour [issue]”. Solely by having male relatives of Cantonist ancestry can individuals accumulate symbolic capital, a “capital of recognition” (Hilgerz/Mangez 2014: 6) within the communities. Various examples derived from both the archival and interview materials indicate that the capital accumulated via ancestral ties started to become present in the congregation as a form of symbolic capital, in addition masculine disposition. This capital could be accumulated not only via inheriting it (that is, being born in a family with Cantonist roots), but also via acquired kinship relationships, such as marriage. This is exemplified by the gradual social acceptance of women who converted, for example, in the 1970s. Prior to this period, conversions were not frequently practiced in the community.

One informant, Chaya, recalls not feeling included in the community and even being referred to as a “mistress” up until her son’s *bar mitzvah*. At the event, she impressed the older male community members in powerful positions with her reproduction of traditional “Finnish-Jewish dishes”, and as such re-created one of the embodiments of Finnish-Jewish “Cantonist culture”. With this action, she became in a sense a carrier of symbolic capital. Another informant, who joined the congregation in similar circumstances, talked in her interview about how her peers and their husbands were often not greeted, in the latter case because they were married to converted women. Both women talked about a lengthy learning process that proceeded their conversions, which entailed studying the Jewish law and local traditions, the latter including recipes and dietary customs specific to the Helsinki community. With their learning came a form of symbolic capital and an embodied, particular disposition that confirmed their adherence to the – to use Bourdieu’s analogy – “rules of the game”. Through the “practical mastery of the specific heritage” (Hilgerz/Mangez 2014: 7) – even without identifying as a man – they were therefore able to accumulate the other kind of symbolic capital.

A couple of years after the first local adulthood conversions in the 1980s, immigrants started to arrive in Finland as the country became more global. Some of them described the Jewish Community of Helsinki as a rather, – in their view – hostile environment. Various informants and congregants reported that the local families and individuals accumulated cultural items and regarded their traditions as the only legitimate ones. Even after the influx of new congregants at the end of the 1970s, it was still somewhat unusual for non-Finnish born Jews to arrive in the congregation. For this reason, when a new person appeared, the congregants' reception was rather cold, as they were “not used to” having “outsiders” in the community.

One woman, Sarah, who in the 1980s came the community from another Askhenazi community, recalled being corrected when she used the Southern Yiddish dialect to pronounce certain words, whereas the dialect spoken in Helsinki was Northeastern Yiddish.¹⁸ As Schwartz describes, “privilege and prestige can be transmitted intergenerationally through forms of cultural capital” (Swartz 1996: 76), which is essentially what Sarah and the earlier quoted Shimon observed among certain Cantonist families who produced the “elite”. They were (and are) the honourable, prestigious ones who remained in influential positions within the congregation, either in an official or non-official capacity. Sarah referred to this as a “fallacy”, where locals claimed to have represented the “old-line, traditional religious Finnish Jews”, overpowering other congregants whose Jewish ancestry originated outside of Finland. In her view symbolic capital has also been accumulated by congregants who joined the community at a later stage –in 1977, for example – after becoming romantically involved with a Finnish Jew of Cantonist ancestry.

In a similar vein, many informants mentioned the case of Jews who arrived in Finland from the former Soviet Union, or congregants who arrived later from other countries (such as Israel) as expats, and how they had similar experiences. Regardless of whether or not they were in theory Jewish according to halakhah, they were not recognised as legitimate (enough) congregants as they did not possess the other form of symbolic capital – in other words, the symbolic capital of Cantonist ancestry. Adam, a member who joined the community after arriving in Finland from abroad, remembers that shortly after he and his family joined the congregation, he often heard congregants talking about the Israelis, asking “Why

¹⁸ In a personal conversation, the expert of the topic, Simo Muir, clarified that the Yiddish spoken in Helsinki was in fact a variety of sub-dialects of North-Eastern Yiddish. I would like to thank Muir for this important remark. For further reading, see: Muir, Simo (2004): *Yiddish in Helsinki. Study of a Colonial Yiddish Dialect and Culture*. Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society.

did they come here?” or “Why did they leave Israel? They should be living in Israel”. Moishe, a congregant of Cantonist ancestry, also reflected on this issue:

[...] but then there have been like immigrants, who then have brought in something new and different. With all the respect, when you give your pinky finger, it doesn't take long that your whole hand is gone. I am not a believer. I am not a believer in any way, but traditions and old things are so important to me! And I think about my children: what kind of a community will they get? It's different from what I had, or what kind of a congregation I lived in. And that's not what I want. I want those traditions in the synagogue, and those traditions connected to [the community], to be the same.

Further in our discussion, he said that he understands the change and is in favour of it in general, but new melodies and liturgical traditions are not “changing the community for the better”, since they do not affect the everyday life of the community. He also highlighted that he does not attend the synagogue's services very often. Nevertheless, he found it important to preserve the “old things” that he had been used to since childhood. Many of the Israeli immigrants arriving in Finland have Mizrahi or Sephardi backgrounds. This means that the liturgical traditions that they are familiar with – if they are familiar with any at all – are significantly different from the Ashkenazi ones that the community adheres to: they lack the previously mentioned “practical mastery of the specific heritage” (Hilgerz/Mangez 2014: 7) that the possessors of Cantonist symbolic capital require. A young woman, Chaya, who was raised in this congregation but does not have Cantonist ancestry, talked in detail about how, as a child, Cantonist ancestry was referred to as superior. She was judgemental of the practice of belonging to certain traditions without re-evaluating them, or without having sufficient understanding of them. She concluded her interview by saying that “tradition is peer pressure from dead people”, suggesting that the congregational membership has changed considerably, and thus certain traditions could also be subjected to modification. Undeniably, members who had Cantonist roots, such as the informant Moishe – and perhaps others who have similar feelings about adjusting or adapting these traditions to the congregational membership's requirements – have not recognised that individuals who were raised in other communities may have equally sentimental feelings about their own local traditions, and by not being allowed to practice them, feel that they are at the margins of the Helsinki community. Consistent with Bourdieu's theory on religion, congregants who hold Cantonist ancestry as a form of symbolic capital often appear to be striving to legitimise their own culture (that is, their own traditions) based on their subjective perceptions of what they consider right or wrong. This is informed by their own experiences (see Bourdieu 1984: 245). Of course, not all informants addressed the topic with such negative views. Isaac, who is from a Cantonist family,

talked about the Israeli “influx” in a somewhat positive manner, which according to many, is not a common perspective amongst congregation members with Cantonist ancestry.

[...] most of the Israelis who moved to Finland had a Sephardic background, and many of them came from very traditional religious homes. So, one thing that was a very positive contribution to the community’s religious life was that we got people to go to the synagogue who could read the Torah and so on. But of course, the way they read the Torah, and the way they sang the traditional songs, were a little bit different from our Ashkenazi tradition. And that brought about some discussion and maybe also some problems and so on. And it also brought some changes to some traditions...

One of the early “Israeli arrivers”, Samuel, said that many of his peers who were brought up in Sephardic communities considered the synagogue “too Ashkenazi”. In his opinion, many of them were married to non-Jews and were “afraid to join” the community, knowing that they will be marginalised cultural producers without any ancestral ties to local families. This was regardless of whether or not they have more liturgical knowledge than their Cantonist counterparts. He was traditionally from an Ashkenazi environment and did not feel uncomfortable in the congregation, but was nonetheless aware of the importance of Cantonist ancestry. Hanna, who has Mizrachi roots and joined a community years after the first “influx” of foreigners, remembered a case from recent years where a community member was not even allowed to read the Torah according to his tradition, and was thus denied the prestige associated with this practice:

The community could be more open and not so Ashkenazi. [...] It will not hurt if once there would be a prayer in a Sephardi way, and if it was allowed to read the Torah, for example, the Yemen[ite] way. [...] Because it’s still reading the Torah, it’s not about how you read it. And some want to read it according to their own traditions. So it should not be “not as good” as the Ashkenazi way and not allowed in here.

People in the congregation with Mizrachi or Sephardi backgrounds have been attempting to organise “non-Ashkenazi” services, but they are rarely, if ever, allowed to hold them. Even with a certain form of capital – the capital of masculine disposition – they are still left on the margins. They can fulfil certain ritual obligations, but only in ways that are accepted by those in positions of power. Denying these possibilities to the congregants seems to stem from the idealised and unique Finnish-Jewish identity rooted in the traditions of – as one young informant named Levi put it – “the forefathers”. That is to say, in the traditions of the Cantonist men who founded the congregation over 100 years ago.

Interestingly, however, certain traditions of Sephardi origin were eventually accepted in the community. One example of this the *Ne’ila* at *Yom Kippur*, which

was introduced by a male congregant and involves singing *El Nora Alila*¹⁹. Despite the initial reluctance and the perhaps not so positive initial reception of *gerim*²⁰ in the community, today converts form a big part of the congregational membership. Benyamin, a member of Cantonist ancestry, explicitly referred to the growing number of converts who did not have any familial or ancestral affiliation to Judaism: “Of course, when you go to the synagogue nowadays, you notice right away that there are only five-six Cantonist families around. The rest are Israelis, or Finnish converts, even downstairs among the men”.

“Even downstairs among the men” is an explicit reference to the men who convert to Judaism without having been affiliated with a Jewish woman – which was and is still a relatively rare phenomenon in the congregation (see Czimbalmos 2021b). By “Finnish converts”, he is referring to those women who converted to Judaism after meeting their local Jewish spouses. As such, he – perhaps unintentionally – distinguishes between the converts (both men and women) who accumulate symbolic capital through their family relations – either via marriage or via patrilineal ancestry. David, whose Jewish ancestry is non-Cantonist, is reflecting on the prestigious position of the elite families when he says:

[...] [the congregation] in Helsinki has been a very closed community. [...] here, there is this very special situation, that if someone comes from a – so to say – “Cantonist” family, then he is automatically Jewish if he keeps his surname [...] in Helsinki, the cultural aspects of Judaism [Jewishness] are emphasised.

Along with David, Abraham mentioned that the capital valued in the congregation is not strictly connected to any sense of liturgical knowledge that they would consider important within the community. According to Abraham, congregants of Cantonist ancestry attempt to “preserve their culture” without sufficient liturgical or halakhic knowledge and solely based on their kinship connections to the community’s founders:

[...] if someone tells, “My grandfather was a fiddler”, the same person cannot say that he is also a fiddler – unless he is able to play the violin. Like, if you want to be a fiddler, it is not enough that your grandfather was a fiddler. If you can’t play the violin, you can’t say that you are a fiddler!

¹⁹ A liturgical poem, that begins the Ne’ilah service at the conclusion of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. Though it is mainly recited as part of the Sephardi and Mizrachi liturgy, it has also been adopted into Ashkenazi services.

²⁰ Converts.

Essentially, his fiddler metaphor not only touches upon the often-debated question of “what constitutes Jewishness” (see, e.g., Illman/Czimbalmos 2020), it also reflects on the issue of capital and the “practical mastery of the specific heritage” (Hilgerz/Mangez 2014: 7) that is objectified in the congregation. This aspect was and is frequently addressed, especially by those who joined at a later stage in their lives – either because they arrived in Finland as adults or because they decided to convert to Judaism, which in many cases means that they had to complete rather intensive studies before the *giyur*. Deborah, a young convert, explicitly addressed the current congregational membership division and talked about “certain groups” within the community. She also addressed the issue of converts who have no kinship relations with these groups and who end up at the margins of the community as a result. In response, they establish their own circles, which then results in the congregation having three different groups: “the Cantonists”, “the Israelis” or the “converts”. In practice – she said – “you become a member of the Cantonist or Israeli group if you marry someone from the group” – which is in line with the earlier experiences of women who married Cantonist men in the 1970s, and thus accumulated the valued capital by putting up with the traditions of their spouses’ families.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that two particular kinds of capital had been accumulated in the Jewish Community of Helsinki over the course of the past century: masculine disposition and Cantonist ancestry as symbolic capital.

Members of the Jewish Community of Helsinki strove to maintain these two distinct forms of symbolic capital. The result, as Bourdieu also concluded, is that they are by and large determined by the field and context in which they are used (see Bourdieu 1986: 252–253).

Due to the controversies that arose from the Finnish law and the Jewish law at the beginning of the 20th century, intermarried Jewish women and men alike suffered from a loss of power and exclusion within their community (see Czimbalmos 2019; Czimbalmos 2021a). The congregation’s leadership, along with the guidelines they received from certain rabbinical authorities, established a system that ensured that Jewish men regained their power within their congregation (see Czimbalmos 2021a: 65–66), which established their gender as a form of symbolic capital within their communities. As the examples in this study show, the Jewish Community of Helsinki utilises masculine disposition as a form of symbolic capital, and in the current case, male or masculine capital continues to dominate the

feminine or female capital. Furthermore, when lacking the necessary masculine disposition, congregants can accumulate another form of symbolic capital, Cantonist ancestry, by utilising kinship connections and acquiring the “practical mastery of the specific heritage” (Hilgerz/Mangez 2014: 7). These forms of capital allowed male congregants and those who joined their families via kinship relations (such as marriage) to maintain the *status quo* and reproduce their domination within their congregation.

Via the reproduction of these two forms of symbolic capital, certain members of the different congregations reproduce “structures of domination” (Wacquant 1992: 14) within their community. The dominant groups, that is, Cantonist men, or those who can acquire Cantonist capital through marriage, for example, have succeeded in legitimising their power within their congregation through the subjective perceptions that they attributed to their ancestry. As such, by denying certain individuals the ability to change certain traditions or the “rules of the game”, for example, they are able to keep their power and legitimacy while also exercising symbolic violence within the Jewish community. By applying specific “conservation strategies” (Bourdieu 1993b: 73) as a means of monopolising capital, they are the ones who determine the power relations within the field.

Naturally, the examples only represent one part of the bigger picture and are based on the experiences of individuals who volunteered to take part in a broader research project. For these reasons, they cannot be considered universal. Nevertheless, they can indicate an underlying phenomenon or narrative in the congregation that may result in certain members leaving the community altogether or not attending its events frequently. As the examples I’ve given point out, the two main types of symbolic capital that are accumulated in the Jewish Community of Helsinki are also connected to experiences of social exclusion. Both forms of symbolic capital are shared by certain members of the congregation and are considered culturally superior. The symbolic profit gained through the transmission of these forms of capital is the ability to maintain the boundaries of the community and its unique identity, where the form of desired symbolic capital essentially stems from masculine dispositions and the accumulation of Cantonist ancestry. Through the production of these forms of symbolic capital – and as a result, symbolic boundaries – inequalities are produced (Lamont/Pendergrass/Pachucki 2015: 851) within the community.

The textual sources of the current study, as well as the individual narratives of the informants, echo the experiences of exclusion and marginalisation of those who failed to accumulate the Jewish Community of Helsinki’s two kinds of symbolic capital.

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