EDITORIAL ESSAY: 
CHANGING AGENDAS IN THE 
SOCIOLOGICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC 
STUDY OF DIASPORA JEWS

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Abstract

In this paper I reflect on the changes in Jewish society around the globe that I have observed during the four decades since 1972 when I first began working as a scholar and researcher in Jewish social science. The focus is on why and how in the Jewish Diaspora and even in Israel the output, research agendas and concerns of Jewish sociology and demography have changed over this period and, in particular, over the past two decades. The changes have come about as a result of political and social forces as well as the influences of academic fashion and imbalances in disciplinary recruitment. Since the United States is by far the largest diaspora Jewish population centre, has the most sophisticated and best resourced communal organizations as well as the largest concentration of academics working in the field much of the focus of this essay will be on developments affecting research on American Jewry.

Introduction

One cannot approach the study or analysis of the condition of the Jews without a keen sense and awareness of history: no people or nation was so buffeted by the wars and revolutions of the first half of the 20th century. Observing 1912 from the vantage point of 2012 we can only marvel at the amazing changes in the condition and situation of the Jews geographically, socially, economically and demographically. This transformation means that almost all Jews today reside on a different continent and speak a language different from their grandparents and great-grandparents a century ago. Neither of the most obvious causes of this upheaval — the tragedy of the Shoah and kibbutz galuyot, the triumph of Zionism — had been expected in 1912. Together they resulted in the
dissolution of the majority of the diaspora communities and the reconstitution of World Jewry in North America and Israel.

There is no argument that the Jewish people’s concerns and collective agenda has changed along with their changed circumstances. In the 1970s the Jewish collectivity was still very much concerned with migration and oppression. There were “captive” communities in the USSR and “communities at risk” in Syria and Ethiopia requiring rescue. The Soviet Jewry movement united Jews of all shades of political and religious opinion and academic studies and research were prominent in the political struggle and subsequently in planning the migration process. For example, the Council of Jewish Federations distributed The Class of 1979: The “Acculturation” of Jewish Immigrants from the Soviet Union (Kosmin, 1990) to all the members of the U.S. Congress as part of the lobbying effort to get refugee resettlement grants.

Sadly, this situation has altered due to a history of cutbacks in support for social research over the past two decades, reflecting a wider macro-trend — erosion of interest and support for international and national Jewish organizations. National bodies have lost power and authority to local and “parochial” ones as the need felt among the Jewish public for standardization and homogeneity in Jewish life has attenuated.

Since the 1980s American Jewry has been transformed internally in response to the burgeoning of varieties of “Jewishness” and new ways of being and “doing” Jewish. This is marked by an efflorescence of new and refurbished organizations, institutions, and communities each trying to cater to a niche market. The community at both national and local level has moved from a department store to a boutique approach to meet the Jewish identity needs of its motley constituencies. The Jewish public and donors have narrowed their agendas and concerns over time. Jewish peoplehood is no longer a major focus of loyalty and attention. The Jewish sense of common destiny and solidarity has weakened as the areas of agreement and consensus have eroded just as political and religious differences have amplified.

In reaching this situation, Jews have subscribed to the fashion in the Western world to become pluralistic and multicultural. Compared to 1972 in most countries today Jews are less united and are more likely to perceive themselves as members of different sub-communities. This trend only projects wider socio-economic trends such as the decline in broadcasting and the rise of narrowcasting alongside the decline in communitarianism and the rise of individualism and the sovereign consumer. Judaism, or rather Judaisms, divide rather than unite the Jewish population. Throughout the Jewish world polarization has increased as religious extremism and secular indifference have both grown at the
expense of the middle ground. For example, in Britain the membership of
the mainstream Orthodox communities declined by 31 percent between
1990 and 2010. In the same period the middle-of-the-road United
Synagogue of Conservative Judaism in the U.S. similarly lost ground,
over taken by both Orthodoxy and Reform. More significantly most
American Jewish households are now religiously unaffiliated.
Symptomatic of this fissiparous tendency is the success and triumphalism
of Haredim in Israel and elsewhere; they are the most sectarian, clannish
and localized of Jews in outlook and lifestyles.

In this new 21st century environment many people appear to see little
point in aggregating artificially Jews who do not recognize each other’s
Jewish status or legitimacy. Each grouping looks after its own interests
and constituency. At the same time these increasingly diverse groupings
of Diaspora Jews seem to agree on one point: they consider themselves
secure and in little need of mutual support. Moreover, the State of Israel
no longer appears to be much concerned with them now that their
potential for providing large numbers of immigrants has lessened.
Certainly its Ministry of Education through the educational curriculum
and textbooks shows no interest in making its schoolchildren aware of
their existence.

Jewish Social Research

It is not just that the Jewish situation has changed but the ways we
examine and analyze the changes that have occurred and are still
occurring have changed, too. Some trends are constant. For example,
given the obvious importance for communal and family welfare it is both
surprising and telling that the study of the economics of the Jews has
always been a major lacuna in the field. Presumably the fear of offering
data that could be used by antisemites has constrained such study because
of the detrimental experience associated with the works of economic
historians such as Marx (1844) and Sombart (1911) and their followers.
The exceptions, which trend to prove the rule, have been the work of
Barry Chiswick and the Hartmans on the American Jewish labor force and
occupational patterns (Chiswick, 2007; 2008; Chiswick and Huang, 2008;
Hartman and Hartman, 1996; 2009).

It is probably necessary to state boldly that Jewish social studies are
probably more removed from the mainstream of social science and more
ghettoized than they have been in the past. The record of recent decades
has been one of discontinuity and marginality. Yet in the 1970s many of
the world’s leading social scientists were Jews whose reputations rested
on a broad range of interests. Yet they were often also social scientists of
the Jews. One thinks of Roberto Bachi and Shmuel Eisenstadt in Israel, Seymour Martin Lipset, Herbert Gans, Nathan Glazer, and Sidney Goldstein in the U.S., Maurice Freedman, Morris Ginsberg, Henri Tajfel and Sigbert Prais in Britain. These scholars both encouraged Jewish social studies and made it “respectable” academically.

In many ways this situation marked the successful fulfilment of Die Wissenschaft des Judentums tradition. In those years the Jews as a collectivity were of scholarly interest beyond just their own constituency. The Jewish experience was often seen as central to the study of sociology and social psychology especially regarding modernization, ethnic relations and immigrant groups. However, in the past two decades as the historic “Jewish Question” seems to have been settled, at least in the eyes of most gentile academics, and Diaspora Jews have undergone embourgeoisement — upward social and economic mobility. They are no longer seen as a “disadvantaged” or “under-represented” minority and have largely vanished from current mainstream concerns with “gender, race, ethnicity and class” and “post-colonial studies.” They have also been largely excluded from the new arena of “diaspora studies” which tends to ignore “white” and western “trans-national” populations. This omission seems politically motivated and similar to the attempt to reconstitute contemporary antisemitism merely as anti-Zionism. The upshot is that Jewish studies today are “ghettoized” and widely regarded as parochial, seen to have little value in formulating paradigms and theory in the social sciences.¹

A significant change in Jewish research has been the rise in the influence and extent of qualitative research in anthropology and ethnography at the expense of quantitative research. Over the past decade especially there has been a decline in the prestige of demography and of interest and output in allied disciplines such as migration, urban studies and the social geography of the Jews. Concomitant with these trends has been an emphasis on micro-studies or case studies favoring sub-populations and small groups rather than macro-studies inclusive of all sections of contemporary Jewry.

This has had some unforeseen consequences. One example is provided by political science. In an age of democracy and globalization, studies of political opinion and voting behaviour in political science are no longer much interested in a numerically small group like the Jews and this is true of the United States, Britain, France, Latin America or the Former Soviet Union. At present, even where there is a focus on the politics of Diaspora Jews, it is more often than not on Jewish communities operating as the “Israel lobby” and such studies are more often to be found in international relations journals than in politics journals.
A major result is that much of current research has become narrowly focussed. Each local federation or synagogue denomination, each identity or interest group — women, elderly, Russians, students, or gay and lesbian Jews — sponsors or undertakes its own studies. Overarching national studies and comparative studies inevitably lose out. Where numbers are smaller, “narratives” and qualitative studies fill the void vacated by hard statistics and social facts. Ethnographic and qualitative studies are easier to “manipulate” than statistics. They are also less objective and their data less verifiable and when numbers and proportions do not count, selection bias is difficult to prove. These studies tend to bear out the old criticism of the anthropologists’ bias towards valorization of their “favourite tribe.” To put it poetically, there is also a fashion to focus on the exotic and erotic. Therefore, some groups are over-researched and others neglected because of fashion or political bias.

In general, the tendency is to advantage religion, especially easily observable and identifiable Orthodox communities. Orthodox women seem to be a particularly popular topic with women academics. In contrast, Reform or secular Jewish men have been neglected. It was only when the Posen Foundation made available a grant to the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry (ASSJ) did a special issue of *Contemporary Jewry* on Jewish secularism (Vol. 30:1, 2010) emerge. As guest editor, I do not wish to undermine the importance of the topic nor question the quality of the peer reviewed papers but it illustrates the problematic of a field dependent on external funding and “soft money”.

This absence of secure funding as well as tenure track career opportunities in universities has resulted in turn in a lack of submissions to peer reviewed journals in the field. The annual *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* sponsored by the Hebrew University has effectively become a journal of modern history and the *Jewish Journal of Sociology* and *Contemporary Jewry* have both struggled for submissions. Since the ASSJ has fewer than 200 members worldwide, many retired, this is unsurprising.

The trend has been for academic Jewish studies at the tertiary level to become centred on the humanities and in departments of Jewish studies with the focus largely on history and religion. In fact, the main academic investment by the Jewish community and its philanthropists has been the establishment of chairs in Holocaust Studies. This has both a practical and a psychological outcome: Jews are portrayed as a people of the past rather than of the present. The careerist trajectory in academia has only intensified this trend as it necessitates training historians and religionists for where the jobs are. The outcome is a lack of academic teaching posts for social scientists concerned with the Jews and a consequent dearth of
This, in turn, means a lack of peer reviewed social science articles and a marked failure to establish degree courses in Jewish social sciences in both Europe and North America. One result of the absence of Jewish sociologists can be observed when the media and community organizations search for academics to comment on contemporary social trends among Jews today they most often turn historians such as Jonathan Sarna and Jack Wertheimer in the U.S. or David Cesarani in Britain.

**Institutional and Resource Constraints on the Field**

Jewish occupational patterns are a very good bell weather of change in the labour market (Kosmin, 1979). One factor in the reduction of Jewish involvement in the social sciences has been the decline in the relative social status and financial rewards of university teaching in most North Atlantic countries even as the higher education “industry” has expanded in size. In addition, the policy of affirmative action in academia and the preference for hiring hitherto “historically under-represented” minorities by western universities has reduced career opportunities for Jewish men (Chiswick, 2008). Those who in a past generation would have been university professors now find employment in high-tech industries or as financial analysts on Wall Street or the City of London.

The entire edifice of quantitative social science has been attacked by ‘post-modernist’ and ‘progressive’ ideas and criticized as being ‘positivist’, ‘empiricist’, and ‘politically incorrect’. Against his backdrop there has inevitably been a toll on Jewish social science with the result that there has been a reduction in the number of quantitatively trained scholars. Moreover, an unplanned by-product of the feminization of the field has reinforced this trend because women are less likely to study statistics at the post-graduate level. For example, of the hundred or so local Jewish community demographic surveys that have been undertaken in the U.S. over the past three decades, only one — Bethamie Horowitz in New York 1992 — has had a female principal investigator. In fact, the pool of leading “demographers”, as the local community leaders refer to them, in 2012 is almost exactly identical to what it had been in 1990 – Bruce Phillips, Steven M. Cohen, Ira Sheskin and Jack Ukeles. There has been no concerted effort by the Jewish foundations or community organizations to recruit, educate and train a new generation of researchers.

For some time after 1986 the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) assumed the leadership mantle of American Jewish social science research in terms of initiatives and output through its own enlarged Research Department and its co-sponsorship of the North American Jewish Data Bank at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, both of
which I headed. The output of its *Occasional Papers* series reflected the communal and federation’s planning agenda of the time, particularly migration, philanthropy, family and marriage patterns, and Soviet Jewish integration. CJF’s most important contribution to the field and the national community was the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) with its pioneering computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) methodology (Kosmin *et al.*, 1991). The reputations and the experiences of the voluntary chairman of the National Technical Advisory Committee (Sidney Goldstein, the Director of the Brown University Population Studies and Training Center) and its vice-chairman (Joseph Waksberg, a former Associate Director of the U.S. Bureau of the Census) assured the quality and standing of the product. Both were experienced practitioners who knew how to design and administer studies, thereby managing to convince the lay-leadership. The project had a sustained academic publication record through the seven volume State University of New York Press series, *American Jewish Society in the 1990s* (edited by Barry A. Kosmin and Sidney Goldstein). Special issues of the *Journal of the Jewish Communal Service* and *Contemporary Jewry*, as well as a conference volume (Gordis and Gary, 1997) augmented these volumes.

Unfortunately this model of supervision leading to an academic publication series was not maintained for the 2000-01 NJPS. The problems and controversies surrounding that survey led yet one more Jewish communal organization to vacate the research business and the field of national surveys. The problems occurred because the United Jewish Communities (UJC) insisted on carrying out a proprietary, custom-made survey and rejected an objective, university-based repeat of 1990.

Why the reluctance to replicate the NJPS’s successful methodology of 1990 and its independent status? First, because of institutional politics UJC was annoyed that CJF had not “properly” exploited NJPS 1990. In a spirit of collegiality the findings of the 1990 survey were made available to “rival” Jewish religious, communal and philanthropic organizations (Kosmin, 1992a). This did not occur with the 2000 survey because UJC (later the Jewish Federations of North America) resented these “free riders”. Second, religious politics played a major role. The professional and lay leadership of the old CJF operated with remarkable integrity and objectivity. They gave the team of social scientists complete autonomy and academic freedom to report the 1990 NJPS data as found. As frequently happens in social research, the results gored some people’s oxen. The much heralded *Ba’alei Teshuvah* movement of the 1980s and the much hyped growth of Orthodoxy (who constituted just 7 percent of U.S. Jews) turned out to be of little statistical significance. Instead the results headlined in 1990 were a 52 percent rate of intermarriage among
people born and raised Jewish and a drift away from religious and communal affiliation among large sections of the Jewish public.

These uncomfortable facts were incontrovertible and their release led to the customary response: “Kill the messenger.” The 1990 NJPS achieved high standing in the wider American social science establishment yet vested communal interests shamelessly attacked it for supposedly exaggerating the rate of intermarriage and counting the wrong types of Jews. Their institutional needs demanded a decline in the rate of intermarriage and they wished to see a higher proportion of Orthodox and traditionalists in the American Jewish population. It was also condemned at the time by Steven M. Cohen who openly preferred “a leaner and meaner” American Jewish community (Cohen, 1996).

Thus, during the late 1990s a political battle ensued over communal policies and funding priorities between the proponents of outreach programmes like Birthright Israel, which aims to recapture the alienated fringe, and those who favoured investment in “in-reach” to the loyal core, mainly by increasing federation subsidies for Orthodox day schools. Once the fundraisers of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) had purged most of the social workers of CJF from the new United Jewish Communities’ structure, the proposed NJPS 2000 study was reengineered to meet the demands of “in-reach.” This meant changes to both the analytical framework and the survey methodology. At the same time, it involved new restrictive definitions of the Jewish population to be interviewed and counted. Finally it meant using a flawed stratification system that focussed the interviewing on geographical areas with “known” concentrations of Jews.

The 2000-01 NJPS brought its sponsors little satisfaction. It was plagued by cost over-runs, lost data and disagreements among experts in the field over methodology and the validity of its conclusions, including the number of Jews in America. In part, its problems arose because it took place in an intellectual vacuum that ignored the historical and international comparative framework that should underpin all major scientific social studies of the Jews. Its sponsors also failed to recognize that the essence of science, especially as applied to national baseline data collection, is replicable data with consistently applied standardized and detailed classification rules.

A dissatisfaction with research involvement led CJF’s successor organization, the UJC, later the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), to downsize and effectively dismantle the CJF Research Department. It also decided against another NJPS in 2011 but not before registering ownership of the title so that others could not claim it. The North American Jewish Data Bank was sent peripatetically from CUNY
to Brandeis University and onward in 2004 to the University of Connecticut. Due to derisory funding and paucity of academic interest the Data Bank will cease to have a university connection and will revert to full JFNA control in 2013. This move will lower its standing as an objective resource in the eyes of many scholars.

The beleaguered NJPS 2000 also failed to produce important policy issues for the communal agenda. Despite a project budget of over $6,000,000 and due to the wastage of resources on poor fieldwork, there was no coordinated publishing programme. The 1990 national survey had highlighted the issue of intermarriage and despite some puerile and ignorant attempts to deny the accuracy of the high rate reported it engendered a wide and lively debate among academics, planners, lay and religious leaders at meetings and conferences. All sectors of the community recognized the significance of the findings for Jewish identity and continuity. The policy responses they formulated led to a communal emphasis on continuity programmes, outreach, day schools, camping and other forms of Jewish education to offset assimilation. These solutions varied according to their authors’ ideology but they had a common concern and purpose.

Beyond the specific issues relating to Jewish social research and national surveys in the U.S., a major weakness of Jewish sociology globally over the entire period has been the absence of any institution with a critical mass of academic researchers and teachers capable of training a new generation of scholars. For a time in the early 1990s it appeared that the Center for Jewish Studies of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York which was anchored by the Data Bank might fulfil this role when prominent researchers Egon Mayer, Paul Ritterband, Sam Heilman, Barry Kosmin, Bethamie Horowitz and Ariela Keysar were gathered but funding was not secured to maintain the Center’s personnel or to support the post-graduate students. Around the same time a similar attempt at Brandeis University’s Cohen Center led by Gary Tobin also failed due to lack of resources.

However, Brandeis University has recently renewed its ambitions to fill this lacuna by creating a critical mass of social scientists of the Jews through the establishment in 2005 of the Steinhardt Social Research Institute directed by Leonard Saxe, a social psychologist, together with units such as the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute on women’s studies.

During the last half of the 20th century, Diaspora communities were also the focus of research in Israel so perhaps even more serious and surprising has been the evisceration of the once very prominent and prestigious Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University, which was specifically founded by Moshe Davis in 1959 to focus on the
study of diaspora communities. The institute, particularly its Division of Demography headed by Roberto Bachi, was closely linked to the Zionist movement and cause and was the heir to the pre-war applied social research traditions of YIVO and the WZO established by scholars such as Arthur Ruppin and Jacob Lestchinsky.

The saga of British Jewish sociology illustrates a similar pattern of a field poorly resourced, subject to ebbs and flows in communal support and interest and marked by a lack of university involvement and teaching posts. The unique contribution of British Jewry to Jewish sociology is its time series based on the continuous collection of life cycle event data. This tradition of collecting data on Jewish marriages and synagogue membership statistics under the communal auspices of the Board of Deputies of British Jews goes back to the Presidency of Sir Moses Montefiore in the 1850s. It was enhanced by the statistical work of Joseph Jacobs during the period of upheaval and political crisis consequent to the mass immigration of 1881-1905. With the establishment of the Statistical and Demographic Research Unit under the leadership of Sigbert Prais and Marlena Schmool during the 1960s, the analysis of population statistics was professionalized and extended to births (circumcisions) and mortality statistics in order to estimate population size and trends. Between 1974 and 1985 under my directorship several multi-purpose community studies (Hackney, Sheffield, Redbridge, Barnet) were undertaken, inspired by the American model and aimed at assisting community welfare services. For political and financial reasons (Alderman, 1992) the Board reduced its research activities but much of its research agenda was re-adopted by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in 1995. JPR’s new agenda included a series of population and opinion surveys and applied studies of education, welfare, and culture. Yet, once again, this expanded programme became unsustainable when financial support was reduced after 2005 although with the support of the Pears Foundation, two national studies have been carried out since 2010 (on Israel and Jewish students) and a further nationwide study along the lines of the 2002 London/Leeds work is due for launch in 2012 (Becher et al., 2002; Waterman, 2003).

It was symbolic of an historic watershed when the journal Soviet Jewish Affairs became East European Jewish Affairs (EEJA) in 1991. The World Jewish Congress (WJC) was the original sponsor of the journal in 1971 for in that period the large Jewish communal organizations recognized the importance of intellectual content to advancing their political agendas and so took the leadership in supporting social science research. But the WJC off-loaded its Institute for Jewish Affairs (IJA) and its successor the London-based think-tank the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) was unable to obtain the funding to support EEJA or its
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companion journal *Patterns of Prejudice* and transferred both these journals to commercial publishers. A similar pattern occurred in the U.S. in the case of the American Jewish Committee (AJC). Between 1950 and 1980 it employed a large staff of researchers and established research institutes that sponsored important and influential sociological and political research. However, in recent years its research activities have atrophied due to the absence of support and interest among the lay leadership. The most symbolic act was AJC’s decision in 2008 to cease publication of the century-old book of communal record the *American Jewish Yearbook*.

This cycle of expansion and contraction of research activity due to fluctuations in communal support and interest can be observed across a wide spectrum of countries – the U.S., Britain, Canada, South Africa, Australia, Israel and even Argentina. This pattern obviously needs an explanation. Jewish communal organizations whether international, such as the World Jewish Congress, the World Zionist Organization, European Council of Jewish Communities, or national, such as the various Boards of Deputies, Council of Jewish Federations/JFNA, American Jewish Committee, Canadian Jewish Congress, AMIA (Argentina), CRIF (France), are all dependent on voluntary donations and thus on the eccentricities of major donors. Without the support of the philanthropist Mandell Berman of Detroit, who had an interest in social science, the NAJDB would not have been established and the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey would not have happened. The World Jewish Congress and its two arms, the IJA and Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, were dependent on the good offices of Dr. Nahum Goldmann and his ability to harness German government reparation funds. The Institute of Contemporary Jewry depended on donors, WZO and Israel Government funding and this has gradually dried up.

*The State of the Art: National Data Collection*

The availability of data obviously affects what sociologists and demographers can produce. In many countries, governments do not collect basic census data on Jews so researchers have to fund their own data collection, a very expensive procedure for a “rare” population. Canada, Australia, South Africa and the U.K. since 2001 are in the fortunate position of having a question on religion (Canada also has an ethnic question) in the national census. The census data are both stimulus and anchor for supplementary demographic and sociological studies specific to Jews as was the case in South Africa (Kosmin *et al.*, 1999). Even though in theory the census coverage of the “population at risk” may be
subject to both false positives and false negatives the tendency in practice is towards an undercount of Jews. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of data on individuals and households provided by a national census provides robust and revealing information that can be compared directly with other populations (Graham et al., 2007; Graham, 2011).

The value of the national census in revealing new and important information on Jewish populations was revealed by the 2001 U.K. Census, with its voluntary religion question (Kosmin, 1998). The results provided a clear example of the need to avoid making assumptions about contemporary Jewish populations. The national total reporting Jewish was 268,000, very close to the Board of Deputies of British Jews’ 1995 national estimate of 285,000 (Schmool and Cohen, 1998). Since one must assume an undercount for refusals and “No Religion” responses, it immediately appears that the official community underestimated its constituency. Nevertheless, one might expect that the characteristics of the Jewish religious population should be well known to Jewish communal authorities in a geographically bounded country like Britain with low rates of both Jewish immigration and regional migration and a relatively centralized synagogue system with a long history of synagogue membership counts. Yet the census revealed Jews were much more widely spread than community leaders had thought and were found in all but one of Britain’s local government areas. More central to my argument is the fact that 14 percent of the reported Jewish population did not live in areas with previously known concentrations of Jews. Whereas the Board of Deputies estimated 8,350 Jews living in peripheral rural areas, the Census recorded 38,470, off by a factor of nearly five (Graham, 2003).

This British Census example strengthens my argument against the highly stratified sampling design used for NJPS 2000. My criticism was a direct result of my assessment of the problems associated with the 1970 NJPS (Massarik and Chenkin, 1973). I firmly believe we have to adopt simple and straightforward equal-probability sampling strategies in dealing with a largely unknown population. Making assumptions about where Jews reside by relying on the administrative records of Jewish communal organizations is a sure formula for failure. Both the 1970 and 2000 studies ran out of money because they made ill-informed — and thus costly — assumptions about the geographical distribution of the population. In the absence of a reliable sampling frame based upon a national census, a truly scientific approach to national surveys makes no a priori assumptions, thereby giving every unit in the universe equal probability of inclusion. This was the approach adopted for both the 1990 NJPS and AJIS (American Jewish Identity Survey) 2001, where all
telephone households in the continental United States constituted the universe sampled (Mayer et al., 2001).

The 2001 U.K. Census data also suggest why we must cast our net socially as much as geographically wider in our data collection in order to understand the social processes that Jewish communities are undergoing in the contemporary world. Scotland, with its own independent government census operation, incorporated two religion questions in its 2001 census, one relating to the past and other to the present:

What religion, religious denomination or body were you brought up in? What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?

The wording could be interpreted as biased toward eliciting membership rather than merely religious identification and the proportion stating “No Religion” (27 percent) was much higher in Scotland than the simpler What is your religion? version used in England and Wales (14 percent). However, for Jewish purposes the Scottish findings provide insights into the processes of identification in a small English-speaking nation with well-documented synagogue membership statistics: 1,952 household membership units in 2001 in 11 congregations of which 10 were modern Orthodox (Schmool and Cohen 2002).

Whereas 6,448 persons were currently Jewish, 7,446 persons had been raised as Jews indicating that there had been considerable “churning”. Secessions from Judaism far exceeded accessions — 1,785 (exits) versus 787 (entrants). Nevertheless, the number and proportion (12 percent) of entrants (converts) far exceeded the number the community had considered or officially processed. The Ever-Jewish population, which includes Jews by upbringing and converts, totalled 8,133 (7,446 + 787) persons, whereas the permanently or Always Jewish population numbers only 5,661. This means the Ever-Jewish population exceeded the Always Jewish population by 30 percent.

Apostates (the loss to other religions) was 10 percent of the raised Jewish population. The Secular or Cultural Jewish population, which I define as those who reported No Religion or Refused the current question, was about 18 percent. Equivalent statistics for Jews by Religion in the United States provided by the CUNY American Religious Identification Survey 2001, estimate adult accessions or “in-switchers” at 171,000 persons, or 6 percent of the current adult Jewish by religion population, whereas secessions from Judaism are estimated at 291,000 — though in this case the majority went into the No Religion (JNR) category (Kosmin, et al., 2001). Somewhat surprisingly, these comparative statistics seem to suggest a lower rate of churning in the United States than in Scotland,
though the ratios among the sub-categories and the overall trajectories are similar in direction. The Scottish information on the dynamics of identity (a “movie” rather than merely a “still photograph”) is essential for understanding and reassessing the social dynamics of contemporary diaspora societies. It also demonstrates the inadequacy of the one-dimensional “quick fixes”, such as those championed by Leonard Saxe, who advocates reliance on meta-analysis focusing on synthesizing data from more than 150 existing nationwide studies conducted by the government, other agencies and national polling organizations, to replace NJPS type surveys (Tighe, et al., 2011).

Since biblical times we have known that counting any population constitutes a political act. And as in electoral politics, when your side does not have the votes a useful electoral strategy is to reduce the size of the electorate by disqualifying your opponents’ supporters – i.e., suppressing the vote. Similarly one way for certain narrow sectors within the Jewish community to claim greater authority and increased resources from communal fundraising is to increase artificially their share of the population by reducing its overall size. This can be achieved by failing to count adequately “marginal” Jews such as the intermarried, the secular, the unaffiliated and those living outside the large metropolitan areas.

This issue applies most obviously with sample surveys (Ritterband et al., 1998). Any attempt to oversample one segment automatically undersamples another. In measuring the Jewish population much depends on how one responds to “Who is a Jew?” The more halachic the definition the less the pluralism manifested by the enumerated. Of course, there is a corollary: the more exclusive the definition the smaller the size of the population. A preference for Jewish pluralism means more Jews and more pluralism. However, the extent of the social transformation means that we have gone beyond the old retort that it’s not really a “Who is a Jew?” question or even “Who is your rabbi?”. The decisions are made by the mass of sovereign individuals, potential consumers of Jewish services as to whether they wish to self-identify.

In a modern, free society the wider the boundaries and the more inclusive the group the greater the sheer numbers and the diverse sorts of persons involved (Kosmin, 1992b). The more fringe Jews that are recognized as potential members of one’s institution or organization, the greater the variety of Jewish types and the less traditional it will appear in “normative” or “historical” terms. This is particularly true for Jewish demography today due to intermarriage. Should we exclude self-reported Jews on the basis of ancestry or birth who follow other religions — BuJews, Messianic Jews and all those who claim two religions and/or syncretistic forms of Judaism, numbering in the millions (see
(For example, in 2001 AJIS we estimated half a million Christians with a Jewish mother.)

Today, the largest and fastest growing group of Jews (37 percent of the total U.S “Core” Jewish population in 2008) is the non-religious segment. These “Jewish Nones” or cultural Jews are largely missing from the organized Jewish community and, in particular, Jewish education. This is obviously a serious threat to the long-term demographic, social and economic viability of American Jewry and is a constituency that needs to be served educationally. However, despite all the innovation in other spheres thus far, there has been little effort to include this population. Yet Jewish communities in Europe between the wars and in Latin America today managed to do this successfully so there are models.

The State of the Art: Local .v. National Surveys

The downside of the recent trend towards narrow studies of particular sub-populations of Jews is the tendency to fail “to see the forest because of the trees.” The primary example of this is revealed by the findings from local area studies in the United States. Like studies of sub-populations generally, local studies of particular geographical areas pose methodological and analytic problems for an objective social science. A persistent pattern in America is that local studies of Jewish populations tend to contradict the findings of the large nationally representative sample surveys (Kosmin and Goldstein, 1998).

For example, aggregation of local population estimates far exceeds national survey counts (Sheskin, 2012). The cause of the discrepancy lies in the technical realm of scientific rigour and precision since the individual studies lack common techniques for sample selection and common core questions addressed to interviewees. In contrast to NJPS-AJIS type studies, local studies tend to be “quick and cheap” surveys yet paradoxically, they provide “good news” from a communal or religious perspective because these surveys simply tend not to be fully representative of everyone born or raised as a Jew. As Jews are not enumerated in the U.S. Census, the duty of counting them has fallen on the Jewish community itself. Accordingly, local community demographic studies in the US are sponsored and paid for by the local Jewish federation, a fund-raising body with a network of local agencies providing services to affiliated Jewish consumers. Clearly the federation has a duty and an interest to pursue research with a practical policy and planning agenda rather than a theoretical or academic one. The federations need to
know about their constituency of donors, other affiliated Jews and potential donors and affiliates. They are not very much interested in the views and opinions of former, self-denying and alienated Jews. Consequently, federation studies are generally focused on the core rather than the periphery of American Jewry. Nevertheless and paradoxically as stated above, since the mid-1990s aggregation of the local estimates has consistently exceeded by over one million the estimates provided by national studies of American Jews.

The focus on affiliated Jews in local studies is also reinforced by some very practical cost considerations. Sampling is more of a problem in conducting representative surveys of small or rare populations like American Jews than the survey itself. In the absence of a roster of all Jews from which to select a sample, complex procedures are used to screen the larger population to identify individual Jews. Comprising only 2 percent of all Americans, locating Jews costs as much as interviewing them. Not being research organizations the federations have to hire researchers and market research fieldwork companies commercially, which are entrepreneurial and economical in their approach. For them, trying to locate hard-to-find peripheral Jews and then trying to persuade them to participate in a communally sponsored survey is not a high priority. Thus local federation studies suffer from the “Casablanca syndrome” by just rounding up the usual suspects. For example, the 1989 Detroit study decided that it was too expensive to sample Jews fully in the peripheral counties, where the federation did not provide services anyway. In Columbus, Ohio in 1990 the federation decided that the student population of Ohio State University, though a permanent feature, was not really part of the local community and so not worth interviewing. In Cleveland in 1996 the poor Jews left behind in the inner City and on the “un-Jewish” west side of the metropolitan area were not properly sampled; only an affiliated sub-sample among them were interviewed. So the Cleveland sample consists of affiliated Jews in peripheral areas and unaffiliated Jews in dense Jewish neighbourhoods (Sheskin, 2001). Unaffiliated Jews living far from the synagogues and JCCs are also missing. Other local surveys even rely on distinctive Jewish surnames (DJN) to locate Jews, hardly a suitable procedure for assuring the representation of intermarried Jewish women though it does substantially reduce the intermarriage rate!

Also at issue is the screening question for inclusion in the survey. NJPS 1990 and AJJS had a four-question screener beginning with “What is your religion?” Anxious to save time and effort, local studies begin by saying they are a Jewish community project and then asking if anyone in the home is Jewish, which unsurprisingly tends to scare off many
marginal Jews. They make the survey even more unrepresentative by their unscientific selection procedure for the household respondent. Rather than select a random Jewish adult (e.g. by using the industry standard of selecting the person with the most recent birthday in the household) these studies tend to try to expedite the process by asking if anyone is immediately available to answer a few questions. The upshot is that the interviewee often ends up being the “most Jewish Jew” in the house — the synagogue attendee or Hadassah member rather than the alienated young adult son or daughter who will not interrupt their current activities to discuss Jewish matters.

In addition, local studies have to meet an interview quota in a short period, biasing the type of households they interview. Households with four or five people present are more likely to answer calls than single- or two-person households since there is more likely to be someone home. So these surveys exaggerate the number of traditional families, omitting divorcees, the unmarried, and the alienated elderly. In contrast, NJPS persisted with up to four calls on different days and hours in order to get replies from these hard to reach people.

So what is the proof that local studies tend to report biased results? The answer relates back to the causes of the over-counts of Jewish populations referred to above. First, local studies usually report Jewish households to be larger or roughly similar in size to non-Jewish ones even though we know that Jews marry later, have fewer children and live longer (alone) than other Americans. Second, they also find much higher proportions and total numbers of donors and synagogue members than the actual communal membership lists and charitable data show. Of course a higher proportion of local children are also receiving Jewish education, more people have visited Israel and the overall attitudes towards Judaism and Israel is highly positive and far above the national average. Their community performs far above average and also has far lower intermarriage rates. Additionally, the local survey reports that their intermarried are even likelier than usual to join synagogues and raise their children as Jews. This is music to the ears of local leaders and great news for the Jews — a credit to our “community”, local federation director, rabbis, and the researchers. Happiness abounds though the evidence is misleading.

In contrast to all this, good national surveys interview and report upon the isolated elderly, young adults, the intermarried and apostates as well as the affiliated middle class suburbanites. Accordingly, they — even including NJPS 2000 — tend to produce a more sober and sobering report than local studies. In fact, extrapolation of the NJPS series numbers for synagogue members and UJA have produced figures very close to the real
numbers drawn from administrative records for the relevant years. That national studies produce thought-provoking data, especially when translated into percentages and “market penetration” is perhaps a cause of the increasing unwillingness to fund them.

There is a clear intellectual and practical case to be made on behalf of properly conducted local studies and segmented micro-studies as long as the researchers do not strain to generalize them to the macro-level. There is an obvious tendency for different types of Jews to cluster in certain localities or neighborhoods and the strictures of Shabbat travel for observant Orthodox and Conservative Jews has residential implications so the proportion in any given location of all or any of these varied types and combinations of Jews is very specific. But clustering is also true for other social characteristics and this is important for Jewish education policy and practice because schooling is delivered locally.

The State of the Art: Longitudinal Studies and the Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Methodologies

The search for cause and effect is the holy grail of social science since causal models should be the theoretical basis for empirically grounded social policy. The most widely acknowledged research design to move survey research beyond mere correlations and on to the direct investigation of causality is the longitudinal study of a panel or set group of individuals. Well-formulated and effective longitudinal studies have had great success as evaluation research projects in health and education studies and as effective tools for policy-making. However, research studies on Diaspora Jewry have relied on cross-sectional surveys, a photo sequence rather than movie approach.

There is one exception, the Four-up and Eight-up studies led by Kosmin and Keysar on the B’nai Mitzvah Class of 5755 (1994-95). The course of its development is worthwhile recalling because the methodological approaches and innovations stand as an important attempt to integrate and combine quantitative and qualitative methods into a longitudinal study. It shows the emergence of an integrated design combining open and closed questions and participatory discussions to produce statistical rigour alongside rich explanatory narratives. It also illustrates the challenges and opportunities caused by changes in communications technology and in the attitudes of the Jewish public towards participation in social research. This project led to numerous publications and presentations. (Appendix A constitutes a full bibliography of the reports.)
This pioneering project launched in 1995 attempted to replicate the famous British longitudinal generational study sponsored by the BBC ‘Seven Up’ media series. The survey series followed the development of Jewish identity from ages 13 to 22 among a cohort of Americans and Canadians who grew up in Conservative synagogues. The first phase, the Bar-Bat Mitzvah Survey, was just one part of a larger project to study the whole Conservative Movement (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism) in 1995. This was conducted under the auspices of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and directed by the historian Jack Wertheimer and was funded by the non-Jewish Pew Charitable Trust. It began as a study of a representative panel of over 1,400 young American and Canadian Conservative Jews. It consisted of CATI telephone interviews with 13 and 14-year-old boys and girls who had recently celebrated their rite of passage, the bar/bat mitzvah and, in a separate telephone interview, with their parents. It is noteworthy that the 1995 first wave collected data directly from the young people, unlike typical social surveys in which the parents report on their children. The first-phase findings provided an important baseline to understand the religious development of this cohort, generating rich data on family background, socialization of the youngsters, and their aspirations for the future.

In order to determine the impact of the high school years, the youth panel was re-interviewed in 1999 in the Four-Up study when they were 17 to 18. To track changes, the High School Survey (again conducted by telephone) included many questions repeated from 1995, as well as asking new questions pertaining to high school students. The High School Survey had a very high level of cooperation and response (89 percent) from teenagers to a survey that offered no incentives for participation.

In 2003, the same cohort of young people was interviewed once more at 21 and 22 in the Wave 3 Eight-Up College Years Project study. Interviewees were in their junior and senior year of college. This wave integrated both quantitative data collection (a third-wave telephone survey) as well as two types of qualitative data collection with insights from the students. This qualitative material was collected to flesh out the telephone surveys. Several in-depth focus group sessions were conducted on college campuses, which were complemented by online bulletin board “chat room” sessions that took place over six days with some of the students who had also been interviewed by phone. Online research is ideal for contemporary college students who are widespread geographically. It allowed hearing the voices of students in remote colleges in the U.S. and Canada and even allowed for the participation of students who spent a semester abroad. It is also convenient for a generation that spends much time online. The online sessions generated a wealth of thoughtful remarks.
far beyond expectation. Students conversed about a different broad topic each day and every day a different set of questions was posted covering a specific topic, including the family, religious life on campus, and plans for the future.

The methods used in Wave 3, which like Wave 2 was funded by the Avi Chai Foundation, allowed us to accumulate hundreds of quotes and personal stories of dozens of college students. But these narratives cannot stand alone and need to be placed within the findings of a scientifically designed representative survey of that population to be better understood, as is the case with the 2003 College Years Survey.

In all, 969 students participated in all three waves of the longitudinal study. By tracking the same individuals, it has been possible to follow their personal progress and character development and discern patterns of change in attitudes and behaviors that would have been far more difficult to detect in cross-sectional studies of different groups of young people interviewed at different times. Due to the wealth of fascinating data, we have been able to observe how a large cohort of students has grappled over the past decade with the most pressing concerns of the day. We also can infer answers to critical research questions on the changing roles of the family, religious school, peers and other socialization agents such as youth groups, camping, and the campus environment in shaping young people’s Jewish lives.

The lesson for Jewish sociology is the need to tailor our methodologies to social realities. Once a useful tool, telephone surveys are increasingly difficult to undertake due to representational and sampling problems associated with the growth of cellphone technology and the reduction in landline penetration. For quantitative research, we shall have to rely increasingly on advanced web-based online surveys to reach large numbers of respondents. Online focus group discussions, which were highly successful in the College Years Project, seem extremely suitable for research on the technologically savvy younger generation. It is also necessary to assess the social impact on Diaspora Jews resulting from the communications revolution of the past two decades. The Internet and other social-networking technologies may hasten the weakening of social boundaries, accelerating intermarriage by exposing to the wider world young, unattached members of previously sheltered religious groups or by tempting in-married couples to stray. On the other hand, Facebook and other online social sites make it easier for far-flung members of minority groups to find each other and form new types of virtual Jewish communities.
Conclusion

Considerable sociological imagination is required to do a reliable job of researching contemporary Jewry. Many of the conceptual and practical problems that arise in an attempt to identify a sample of Jews are not unique to the Jewish group and arise whenever one asks people in our individualistic, privatized, and pluralistic societies to assign themselves to one specific group at the expense of alternative identity options.

Particularly in an environment where individuals may hold multiple notions of self, and hold membership in multiple, non-continuous communities and associations, establishing any fixed notions of identity is problematic. One of the hallmarks of contemporary American society in particular is that individuals can lay claim to a variety of identities, like so many “screen names” in cyberspace, with varying degrees of commitment to each. The relative salience of these diverse identities can fluctuate with the psychic economy of the individual as a result of evolving circumstances. In such an environment, it becomes difficult to speak of anyone’s identity as a permanent fixture of the self. (Kosmin, et al., 2001, 31)

Sidney Goldstein and I suggested with regard to the multi-stage 1990 NJPS study that:

The screening process used in sample surveys, though scientific in method, is basically subjective in nature. We use questions involving terms or groups as keys in order to unlock doors, but we cannot predict who will enter. There are no correct answers in a fluid and dynamic society. Instead, as in this case, we are able to rely on measuring the variation in responses across groups; and across time when we have the luxury of multiple screenings. (Goldstein and Kosmin, 1992, 242)

It has become obvious that the reason that Jewishness is hard to define in 2012 is that it is multifaceted. There are different Jewish populations for different purposes (Lerer et al., 1997). There is no consensus across the Jewish world as to which membership criteria are paramount. What was largely theoretical for NJPS 1970 (Massarik and Chenkin, 1973), touching only a few cases, affects hundreds of thousands of people today across the Jewish world due to vast increases in the rates and numbers of intermarriages over the last few decades. It has been demonstrated very clearly how different Jewish populations with very different social characteristics emerge using different identity criteria (Goldstein and
Kosmin, 1992). This social reality has raised the question of when the inclusion of peripheral populations or, as Schmelz and DellaPergola (1996, 437) termed them, the “extended” and “enlarged” Jewish populations, makes theoretical and practical sense. For political purposes, such as in connection with antisemitism, where most of the perpetrators use a wide definition of their target population, the Jewish community should also be more inclusive. The same thinking should apply on the analytical level for social indicators on Jews residing in “mixed” households. For instance, it would be inaccurate and unhelpful to exclude gentiles from analyses of household composition, since it would artificially create one-parent families. The same logic applies to economic and occupational data. Gentile partners’ incomes cannot be excluded without making the data meaningless.

Other cases involve close judgment calls as to the relevance of including or excluding certain sections of the total household population. Since one person’s Jew is, literally, another person’s gentile, an assessment of what constitutes the “population at risk” may well involve ideological assumptions. That is inevitable. However, the key responsibility of social scientists of the Jews today is to be transparent about such issues and decisions in their research designs and analyses.

Over the past few decades, the quality and volume of Jewish social research has been much affected by the interplay of mostly adverse political, social, economic and disciplinary factors. To this mix has been added a further burden imposed by the need to research a rare population with unfixed or nebulous boundaries. This creates a complicated series of methodological challenges in locating, sampling and interviewing the population which in turn requires a larger than average investment in resources. It appears unlikely that Jewish resources alone can or will fund large projects and government and university funds are unlikely to plug the knowledge gap.

However, in the U.S. the research vacuum will be filled in 2013 by a national survey of Jews under the auspices of The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, an arm of the Pew Charitable Trusts, a massively-endowed private foundation, which interestingly has Evangelical Christian links. Since this $2 million study plans to include an oversample of Orthodox respondents, it may not be as scientifically objective or as neutral as some might wish. How it will deal with or even whether it will cover secular or cultural Jewish “Nones” is presently unknown. The Pew goal is to fit the Jewish survey into its research series on other American religious groups so one can assume that the emphasis in the questionnaire and analysis will be on Jews as one “faith community” among others and certainly not as a sui generis “people” (Kosmin and Lachman, 1993).
As a result Jewish social research on the most important Jewish Diaspora population effectively will lose its autonomy and breadth of vision. In effect, it will have been absorbed into a narrow sociology of religion framework.

Bibliography


EDITORIAL ESSAY - CHANGING AGENDAS IN THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC STUDY OF DIASPORA JEWS


Appendix A

**PUBLICATIONS RESULTING FROM THE B’NAI MITZVAH CLASS of 5755 LONGITUDINAL STUDY**


Notes

1 Only perhaps in Canada does scholarship on the Jews remain within the mainstream of ethnic and multicultural studies. This probably results from the analytical work of Louis Rosenberg at the Canadian Jewish Congress and, more recently, the work of Jim Torczyner and Morton Weinfeld of McGill University, and Jack Jedwab at the Association for Canadian Studies. Their research and lobbying efforts secured a Jewish category in both the religion and ethnic-origin questions of the Canadian Census and thus a long-term time series (1921-2011) on Canadian Jewry. These two questions thus combined the two modern European Jewish identity traditions and so aid the production of a more inclusive (and accurate) count of the Jewish population, one that allows secular and cultural Jews to identify themselves on their own terms (Torczyner & Brotman, 1995). It is interesting to note that this took place within Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism, with its echoes of the Habsburg Austro-Hungarian Empire.

2 In his presidential address to the survey methodologists of the American Association for Public Opinion Research at their 2003 annual meeting, Dr. Mark Schulman recommended our longitudinal study as an example of how 21st century social science research ideally ought to be carried out using both qualitative and quantitative components.