

Splitting the Difference and Moving Forward with the Research

Bruce A. Phillips

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Abstract Because they are looking at different populations, both Cohen–Kelman and Sasson-Kadushin-Saxe can be said to be correct. The AJC studies used by Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe vastly under-represent adult Jews of mixed parentage who have low attachment to Israel. As this population grows, it will lower Israel attachment overall. Among Jews-by-religion Israel attachment is holding steady and apparently increasing with age. Both arguments would be more compelling and useful if the mechanisms underlying Israel attachment were elaborated.

Keywords Israel distancing hypothesis

This fascinating and important exchange centers on the classic methodological problem of separating age effects from period effects and cohort effects. Winston Churchill aptly explained age effects when he quipped, “If you’re not a liberal at twenty you have no heart; if you’re not a conservative at forty you have no brain.” In other words, people become more conservative as they grow older. Many cross-sectional attitudinal studies find older respondents to be more conservative than younger respondents. Period effects are the impact of major historical events on those who experienced them, regardless of age. The Great Depression and 9/11 are events that are known to have shaped American public opinion. Cohort effects are similar to period effects, but they primarily impact persons who were at an impressionable age when the event took place. The “Lost Generation” fought in and was disillusioned by the carnage of World War I. The “Silent Generation” (the term comes from a 1951 *Time* cover story) grew up during the Depression and World War II and was unusually fatalistic and conformist.

B. A. Phillips (✉)
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, CA, USA
e-mail: bphillips@huc.edu

Observing that older Jews are more attached to Israel than younger Jews, Cohen and Kelman argue for a cohort effect in which younger cohorts have become progressively less emotionally attached to Israel. Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe, on the other hand, explain this age difference as an age effect in which Israel attachment becomes stronger over the life course. Because age effects can only be differentiated from period and cohort effects through a longitudinal analysis, Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe follow specific birth cohorts over time using American Jewish Committee data that replicate questions on Israel. They conclude that individual birth cohorts viewed over time become more attached to Israel as they grow older and progress through the life-cycle. Cohen and Kelman in turn critique the AJC studies themselves. They contend that because the American Jewish Committee surveys used by Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe are limited only to “those who say that their religion is Jewish,” these studies miss the growing population of Jews “who identify as Jewish, but see their religion as... none.” Had these secular Jews been included in the AJC studies, they argue, the distancing phenomenon would have been evident.

Based on my own intermarriage research, I agree with the Cohen–Kelman critique, but I also find that the life-course explanation put forward by Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe has merit with regard to Jews-by-religion. Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe report that between 15% and 24% of the respondents in the AJC surveys they used were intermarried. This is less than half the intermarriage rate for respondents in the 2000–2001 National Jewish Population Survey. The respondent rate (calculated directly from the NJPS data) is different from the individual rate reported by Kotler-Berkowitz and Cohen (2003) because the individual rate includes the spouses. Two Jewish spouses married to each other produce one in-marriage, while two intermarried Jewish respondents produce two intermarriages. In other words, the AJC surveys under-represent intermarried respondents. Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe recognize this and compensate by weighting the intermarried respondents more heavily in their analysis but they are missing an important category of intermarried Jews: Jews of “mixed ancestry.” Jews of no religion are overwhelmingly of mixed ancestry (Phillips 2010). Because the AJC surveys include only Jews-by-religion, they exclude a category (Jews of no religion) that consists largely of Jews with a non-Jewish parent. As Perlmann (2007) notes, Jews of mixed ancestry have decidedly lower attachment to Israel than Jews of “single ancestry” (i.e. two Jewish parents). Cohen and Kelman are thus correct in arguing that as this sub-population increases in size, it will negatively impact Israel attachment in the aggregate. This is known as a “compositional” effect, meaning that as the composition of the population changes so will the balance of attitudes. Most political scientists agree, for example, that identification with the Republican Party will decrease proportionately as the growing population of Hispanics reaches voting age. Americans as a whole will not be changing their party affiliation, but the growing population of Hispanic voters will tilt future elections toward the Democratic Party. By the same process, the growing population of mixed-ancestry Jews (as a result of increasing intermarriage) will decrease the overall levels of Israel attachment in the Jewish population.

For Jews-by-religion, who are overwhelmingly of exclusively Jewish parentage, Israel attachment does seem to be holding steady. From this perspective, the debate

between Cohen and Kelman, and Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe arises because they are talking about two different populations. Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe are talking about Jews-by-religion only while Cohen and Kelman are talking about the impact that increasing numbers of mixed-ancestry Jews will have on overall measures of Israel attachment. Jewish attachment to Israel is not decreasing per se, but the kinds of Jews least attached to Israel are growing in number. They are growing in number because intermarriage has increased: 61% of the respondents age under 40 in the 2000–2001 NJPS were of mixed ancestry as compared with 41% of respondents age between 40 and 59 and only 26% of the respondents age 60 and older.¹

The distancing hypothesis is laden with policy implications, and both author teams write as public intellectuals. Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe report that the distancing hypothesis has been used by Walt and Mearsheimer (2006) to discredit the “Israel Lobby” as being unrepresentative of American Jewry. Cohen and Kelman (2007) argue that distancing from Israel on the part of American Jews might influence the Israeli government to be less swayed by the opinions of American Jews with regard to issues such as conversion and Jewish status. Because Israel has been so integral to Jewish identity since the mid-twentieth century, finding ways to re-attach American Jews to Israel emotionally would also strengthen American Jewish life.

Because the issue of Israel attachment is so heavy with policy implications, both papers would have been enriched by elaborating the processes underlying Israel attachment. Does Israel provide American Jews with a sense of physical security? Is it related to the Holocaust? Is attachment to Israel an expression of tribal identification with the Jewish people? Does Israel, as Herzl argued, make Jews normal? Does Israel attachment arise from religious upbringing? Is distancing a measure of assimilation? It might be that there were questionnaire items that could have been used to address these questions. If not, the inclusion of such questions should be considered for further research. Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe argue that Israel attachment increases over the life course, but do not discuss why this should be so. Is it associated with age-related increases in religiosity observed among Americans as a whole (Roozen 1996)? Can the life-cycle effect be explained as a by-product of formal affiliation? Communal affiliation increases when the first child is ready for religious school. Exposure to normative attitudes about the importance of Israel prevalent in synagogues and other Jewish institutions might have influenced the AJC respondents as their exposure to these norms had increased over the life course. For their part, Cohen and Kelman do not elaborate as to why having a non-Jewish spouse should be a “principal explanation” for Israel attachment. Do Jews who intermarry have weaker Jewish backgrounds to begin with or does the presence of a non-Jewish spouse somehow weaken attachment to Israel? Perhaps intermarriage is simply a proxy for having a non-Jewish parent, because Jews of mixed parentage marry non-Jews at more than twice the rate than do Jews of single ancestry (Phillips 1997). Jews of mixed ancestry have much less exposure to experiences such as formal Jewish education, Jewish camping, and Jewish youth groups, which influence attachment to Israel (Phillips 2010).

¹ This was calculated directly from the NJPS data.

Cohen and Kelman explain distancing as a cohort effect without using the explicit terminology. Is the cohort effect they observe indicative of assimilation, or is it part of changing social attitudes found among all younger Americans (Levine et al. 2008)? Left out of the cohort versus age (life course) debate is their methodological cousin, the period effect. A period effect is the impact of specific events experienced by an individual that remains over the life-course. Cohen and Kelman come close to specifying period effects when they contend, “levels of attachment are linked to when people were born and came to adulthood rather than a particular stage in life.” They do not, however, specify which periods they have in mind. The Seattle Jewish Population Survey (Phillips and Herman 2001) provides some evidence for a period effect on Israel attachment. The Seattle Jews most attached to Israel were those who were teens or young adults during the Six Day War (1967) or the Yom Kippur War (1973), when the destruction of Israel was perceived as a genuine possibility. The link between perceived anti-Semitism and Israel attachment is not discussed in either paper and merits further investigation. It has a strong theoretical basis in what Herman (1998) has termed the “interdependence of fate.” It functions as a period effect in times of perceived danger. Following the Six Day War, Marshal Sklare re-interviewed respondents from the original “Lakeville” study (Sklare and Greenblum 1967). He found that “Support for Israel seems to have increased as the Crisis deepened, undoubtedly because it evoked unconscious feelings” (Sklare 1968). Even some of the anti-Zionist leaders of the Classical Reform “Einhorn” synagogue had contributed to the Israel Emergency Fund. Some indirect evidence that this dynamic continues comes from the San Francisco Jewish Population Study. “Unfair criticism of Israel in the media” was found to be by far the most mentioned “personal” experience of anti-Semitism reported by the survey respondents (Phillips 2004).

Two shared points of agreement deserve special emphasis. Neither team found any correlation between general political orientation and Israel attachment. This single finding has probably derailed a potentially polarizing dynamic between Jewish liberals and conservatives. Implicit in each paper is an association between Israel attachment and socializing experiences, either as children or as adults. Cohen and Kelman note that travel to Israel has an impact on Israel attachment as does Orthodox identification and the intense socialization implied therein. Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe also found travel to Israel to be a significant predictor of Israel attachment. The importance of Israel to Jewish identification was also a strong predictor, presumably the result of socialization. To the extent that American Jewish attachment to Israel is important to either or to both communities, it is important to know that it can be influenced by experience and exposure.

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Author Biography

Bruce A. Phillips is Professor of Sociology and Jewish Communal Studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles. He has published on a number of topics including Jewish residential mobility and intermarriage.