

The Israel Attachments of American Jews: Assessing the Debate

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Received: 13 November 2009 / Accepted: 4 June 2010 / Published online: 2 September 2010
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Abstract This article assesses the debate between Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe on the one side and Cohen–Kelman on the other. We find that Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe’s work has significant weaknesses in data, empirical analysis, presentation and theory, and as such we have no reason yet to accept their claims. In contrast, Cohen–Kelman’s work is theoretically and contextually rich, but their case is not yet sealed because limitations of data and empirical analysis remain. We conclude with a brief discussion of how we might move forward to better understand American Jewish attachments to Israel.

Keywords Israel attachments · Data quality · Empirical analysis · Presentation · Theory

In the opening article of this issue, Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe argue that American Jews are not growing more distant from Israel, a view contrary to the conventional wisdom. In turn, Cohen and Kelman critique the sample Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe employ and their “strict constructionist” approach that leaves little room for theory, context and sociological imagination.

As social scientists who have worked for most of the past decade in applied research positions in the Jewish community, we have had a rich set of experiences

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with Cohen, Kadushin and Saxe. We have collaborated in research and publishing,¹ informally consulted with each other, and supported each other's work—and, not surprisingly, we have sometimes disagreed with one another. Many of our interactions have been around the National Jewish Population Survey 2000–2001 (United Jewish Communities 2003), on which Kotler-Berkowitz served as research director and Ament as senior project director.

In our response presented here, we devote most of our attention to the article by Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe, because we think it has significant weaknesses that undermine its claims. We then turn to the Cohen–Kelman article, and we conclude by using this debate to discuss how we might move forward to better understand American Jewish attachments to Israel.

Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe

Data Limitations

We are surprised to be pointing out the weaknesses of the data Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe employ. After all, Saxe and Kadushin were leading critics of the quality of NJPS 2000–2001 data in scholarly and media publications (Saxe and Kadushin 2003; Kadushin et al. 2005; Saxe et al. 2007a, b). One of their main criticisms was that NJPS, despite using a random digit dialing (RDD) methodology and varied criteria for defining Jews, over-represents the most Jewishly engaged part of the population, because Jews who are less engaged and less interested in Jewish life were harder to reach for an interview, and, if reached, were more likely to refuse to take part in the survey.

According to Saxe and Kadushin, findings from NJPS that depict a contracting, aging and more engaged Jewish population “are conclusions that probably should be qualified. Major policy decisions regarding the allocation of millions of dollars will be based on our interpretation” (Saxe and Kadushin 2003). Positing a different picture that includes less engaged Jews NJPS supposedly missed, they and their colleagues argue:

American Jewry is more diverse than previously believed. Some communal discussions regarding Jewish education, intermarriage or the role of Israel in the lives of American Jews have concluded that we need to focus on the core versus the periphery. However, the diversity of the community suggests that this discussion is based on a flawed understanding of the community's makeup (Saxe et al. 2007b).

Let us turn, then, to the American Jewish Committee (AJC) data Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe use for their current analysis. As Cohen and Kelman note, the samples are restricted to those who identify as Jews-by-religion (JBRs). They exclude those who identify as Jews for reasons other than religion and those whom

¹ Kotler-Berkowitz et al. (2003), Cohen and Kotler-Berkowitz (2004), Kadushin and Kotler-Berkowitz (2006), and Ament (2005).

Table 1 Jewish status, age and emotional attachment to Israel

Jewish status	Respondent age			
	18–34	35–49	50–64	65+
Panel A. Jewish status: proportion of JBRs and JNBRs by age				
JBRs (%)	66	77	80	83
JNBRs (%)	34	23	20	17
Total (%)	100	100	100	100
Panel B. Mean score of emotional attachment to Israel ^a , by Jewish status and age				
JBRs	2.17	2.15	2.06	1.85
JNBRs	3.15*	2.85*	2.63*	2.69*

Source: authors' analysis from National Jewish Population Survey 2000–2001

^a 1 very attached, 2 somewhat attached, 3 not very attached, 4 not at all attached

* Mean difference in Israel attachment scores, between Jewish-by-religion and Jewish-not-by-religion within age cohort, significantly different at $p = 0.000$

most sociologists would classify as Jews by reasons of ethnicity or lineage—if they do not claim a competing religion and regardless of whether they identify themselves as Jews. With Cohen and Kelman, we call these people Jews-not-by-religion (JNBRs), and we note that NJPS sampled them. Indeed, analysis of NJPS data shows JNBRs make up an increasing proportion of younger age cohorts, culminating in over a third of 18–34 year-olds (Table 1, Panel A).² Furthermore, within each age cohort, JNBRs have significantly weaker attachments to Israel than JBRs (Table 1, Panel B).

Because they exclude JNBRs, the cross-sectional AJC samples present a narrower picture of the Jewish population than NJPS, at odds with a more diverse population that Saxe, Kadushin and their colleagues have insisted exists. As importantly, the AJC samples cannot be used *longitudinally* to test whether the Israel attachments of JNBRs are diminishing. Yet this is the segment of the population where social scientists and other observers of American Jewry suspect the severest declines are occurring.³

Problems with the data continue. The AJC respondents are sampled from an opt-in panel whose members have agreed to answer surveys sent to them, thus declaring themselves easy to reach and interested in the chosen topics. By any reasonable assessment, AJC panel respondents are much easier to reach than NJPS's RDD respondents, creating greater bias in the AJC data due to "reachability" than in NJPS.

² Using cross-sectional data from NJPS 1990 and the American Jewish Identity Surveys (AJIS) of 2001 and 2008, Kosmin (2009) has recently shown that categories of Jews equivalent to JNBRs are a growing share of American Jewry over time. The NJPS and AJIS surveys belie Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe's contention that "No data, however, exists to estimate whether and to what extent this population is in fact increasing."

³ Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe acknowledge that Jews by religion have stronger Israel attachments than other Jews, but claim these other Jews would not affect their findings because they are analyzing trends over time, not absolute levels of attachment to the Jewish state. We find this reasoning faulty. If other Jews (i.e., JNBRs) are an increasing part of the Jewish population and have weaker attachments to Israel, logic suggests overall attachments to Israel would trend downward over time.

Strong quantitative methodologists, as we know Kadushin and Saxe are, might be able to compensate for these data deficiencies if they had documentation about the surveys' methodologies. Indeed, Kadushin, Saxe and others they work with have done this with NJPS, using the extensive methodological documentation released to researchers with the NJPS data⁴ to address the methodological concerns they had. However, they do not—in fact, they cannot—do this with the AJC data. Why? Because as Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe acknowledge, “Synovate (AJC’s field house) does not publish detailed information about how panels are assembled and sampled” (p. 7), nor does it report survey response rates (note 4, p. 36), a standard measure of data quality. We note that disclosure of both items is required under the professional guidelines of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (2010a) for all publicly released research.⁵

In sum, the AJC samples are less, not more, representative of American Jews than NJPS; they likely have more bias due to their panel methodology; and they lack basic documentation to directly assess data quality. Given Saxe and Kadushin’s past pronouncements about NJPS, we have to ask: why are they using the AJC data to conduct scholarly analysis and influence communal policy (Sasson et al. 2008a⁶, b)?

Empirical Limitations: Weighting and Cohort Analysis

In one of their analyses, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe weight up intermarried JBRs because they are under-represented in the sample and have weaker attachments to Israel. However, they claim, weighting makes no difference, as the trend for attachments to Israel stays flat. But this weighting adjustment cannot address intermarried JNBRs, who are systematically excluded from the sample. Later in their paper, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe acknowledge this limitation but they insist, “Weighting the AJC samples to reflect a growing *intermarried* population had negligible impact on overall levels of Israel attachment. It is expected that the same would be true for Jews by ancestry were we able to estimate their numbers and weight the samples accordingly” (p. 20).

As committed empiricists, we reject this passive-voice expectation, which is offered up to support their argument but has no basis—indeed can have no *possible* basis—in any empirical testing or analysis with their sample. In contrast, there is enough evidence in NJPS to hypothesize that intermarried JNBRs might negatively

⁴ See the NJPS–NSRE 2000–2001 Study Documentation and Data File User Guide, both available at the North American Jewish Data Bank (www.jewishdatabank.org).

⁵ The recently released AAPOR Report on Online Panels (American Association for Public Opinion Research 2010b) emphasizes this point specifically for online surveying: “Much of the controversy surrounding use of online panels is rooted in claims that may or may not be justified given the methods used. Full disclosure of the research methods used is a bedrock scientific principle and a requirement for survey research long-championed by AAPOR. Disclosure is the only means by which the quality of research can be judged and results replicated. Full and complete disclosure of how results were obtained is a requirement for all survey research regardless of methodology.”

⁶ The original version of Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe was published by the Brandeis University Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI), whose “work is characterized by the application of cutting-edge research methods to provide policy-relevant data” (quote accessed at <http://www.brandeis.edu/ssri/index.html>).

Table 2 Jewish status, in/intermarried status and emotional attachment to Israel (married respondents only)

Panel A. Mean Israel attachments for groups defined by Jewish and in/intermarried statuses	
Jewish and in/intermarried statuses	Mean emotional attachment to Israel ^a
JBRs and in-married	1.86
JBRs and intermarried	2.46
JNBRs and in-married	2.72
JNBRs and intermarried	2.90
Panel B. Mean differences in emotional attachment to Israel between intermarried JNBRs and other groups	
	Mean difference
JNBR intermarried—JBR in-married	1.04*
JNBR intermarried—JBR intermarried	0.43*
JNBR intermarried—JNBR in-married	0.17

Source: authors' analysis from National Jewish Population Survey 2000–2001

^a 1 very attached, 2 somewhat attached, 3 not very attached, 4 not at all attached

* $p = 0.000$

Table 3 Jewish status, in/intermarried status and age (married respondents only)

	Respondent age			
	18–34	35–49	50–64	65+
Jewish and in/intermarried statuses				
JBRs and in-married (%)	51	59	64	79
JBRs and intermarried (%)	19	22	18	7
JNBRs and in-married (%)	8	2	5	6
JNBRs and intermarried (%)	22	18	13	9
Total (%)	100	101 ^a	100	101

Source: authors' analysis from National Jewish Population Survey 2000–2001

^a Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding

affect overall levels of Israel attachments if they were included in the AJC sample. NJPS data show intermarried JNBRs have significantly weaker attachments to Israel than both in-married and intermarried JBRs (Table 2) and are a monotonically increasing proportion of married Jews from older to younger cohorts (Table 3).

A second methodological weakness appears in their longitudinal age-cohort analysis of data from 1994 to 2005, in which they claim successive birth-cohorts strengthen their attachments to Israel as they become older. Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe acknowledge that “The 11 years for which longitudinal data are available may be insufficient to capture the trend” (p. 20), but as our next two paragraphs illustrate, this statement does not adequately warn readers about the limits of the analysis.

Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe define three cohorts—under 40, 40–59 and 60 and older—but the time period under study is too short to prevent these cohorts from overlapping. For example, close to half the cohort age 40–59 in 1994 is still in the 40–59 cohort in 2005, joined by some but not all of those who started in the under

40 cohort in 1994 but moved into the 40–59 year-old cohort over time. As this is also happening to the other cohorts, they are not mutually exclusive of each other as they move across time.

As a result, it is possible that longitudinal patterns reveal a life-cycle effect related to aging as Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe argue, but it is also possible that the mixing of cohorts over time is hiding distinctive patterns that would be apparent if the cohorts were kept mutually exclusive. As conducted and presented, the analysis is indeterminate.

Presentation

In December 2008, we convened a session at the Association for Jewish Studies annual conference devoted to the initial report on this topic (Sasson et al. 2008a). At that time, we expressed concern to the authors about their report’s presentation of several issues. We reiterate our concerns here about the current Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe article:

- In the methodology section, the article acknowledges that “[T]he surveys track the opinions of self-identified ‘Jews-by-religion’ only,” but rarely does the rest of the text again refer to JBRs. Most remaining references are more general—i.e., American Jews, younger American Jews, American Jewish attachments—and therefore may mislead the reader. Beyond the article, the same messaging is featured on their sponsoring institute’s website, which highlights media articles that promote this generalization.⁷
- Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe do not adequately represent Perlmann’s (2007) assessment of AJC data. They report that Perlmann “concludes that in most respects the AJC samples are comparable to the other two [NJPS 2000–2001 and the AJIS 2000].” But the NJPS and AJIS surveys include both JBRs and JNBRs, and Perlmann’s comparison is only with the JBR portions of NJPS and AJIS, a distinction Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe do not note. More importantly, Perlmann raises concerns about biases in the AJC data and about generalizing from the AJC samples to all American Jews.
- In seeking to contest the distancing hypothesis, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe contend, “Published reports on trends in Israel attachment are, however, far from uniform in their conclusions.” But they cite just one study to support this contention, a 2002 report co-written by one of the current authors (Phillips et al. 2002). And what data did Phillips et al. use? None other than the same restricted AJC samples Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe now employ. Is there any surprise that the same findings result from using the same (limited) data?

⁷ Sasson, Kadushin and Saxe (2008b), Rosner (2008a) and Weiss (2008) are featured at the SSRI website, <http://www.brandeis.edu/ssri/news.html>, and the website of the Brandeis University Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/news.html> (both accessed Nov. 12, 2009). Rosner (2008b) is also featured on the SSRI website, and a blurb from Rosner (2008a) is highlighted in the Notes and Quotes section of the Cohen Center webpage. In contrast, Saxe and Kadushin were highly critical of NJPS reports and presentations where, due to survey instrument design, data for the entire Jewish population were not available, arguing this would lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation (Kadushin et al. 2005).

Theory

While empirical analysis is critical to social science, so too is theory, by which we mean the systematic and logical linkage of concepts and testable hypotheses into explanations (Zuckerman 1991). Unfortunately, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe’s article is devoid of theory that links aging to stronger attachments to Israel. While typical life-cycle explanations connect behavioral and attitudinal changes to such factors as marriage, family formation, children leaving home and retirement, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe offer no reason why psychological attachments to Israel should be tied to aging and its corresponding life stages. What is it, we ask, that would lead people to feel more strongly about the Jewish State as they age and experience the life cycle?

Cohen–Kelman

Cohen–Kelman clearly excel in theory. To support their cohort effect argument, they directly link declining Israel attachments to rising intermarriage rates, but they also place connections to Israel within a larger context of dramatic changes in Jewish institutions and Jewish denominational affiliations, as well as the increasing prominence of individual meaning-making and fluid social networks rather than strong ethnic boundaries and group loyalties. “Surely,” they write—and surely we agree with them—“the relationship between American Jews and Israel is neither insulated nor isolated from these other trends, and only in that context can we truly understand what the data mean.”

Lest we be accused, though, of aiming our critique at only one party to this debate, let us be clear that we also have concerns with Cohen–Kelman’s work:

- Like Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe, Cohen–Kelman use data from the Synovate consumer panel, so their sample suffers from the same limitations and biases. Compared to Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe, however, sample biases in Cohen–Kelman are less troubling, because they exaggerate the former’s hypothesis while conservatively understating the latter’s.
- According to the original report (Cohen and Kelman, no date) that their current article is based on, Cohen–Kelman’s sample is weighted to targets from NJPS 2000–2001. However, detailed information is lacking, including which NJPS respondents were used as weighting targets and presented as comparisons. Moreover, we reiterate that weighting cannot compensate for respondents (JNBRs) who are systematically excluded from the sample frame.
- Cohen–Kelman’s analysis is based on a cross-sectional survey. Even as they are consistent with Cohen and Kelman’s theory, data from a single cross-sectional survey cannot definitively determine whether cohort replacement or life-cycle effects are driving current age differences.
- Cohen–Kelman’s empirical analysis is limited to bivariate and three-way crosstabulations. Though we find the crosstabulations clear and unambiguous, we believe scholarly work using quantitative methods must advance beyond crosstabulations to more sophisticated multivariate modeling.

Conclusion

We applaud Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe for challenging the conventional wisdom, but based on data, empirical analysis, presentation, theory and standards they previously set for the field, we have no reason yet to accept their claims. Cohen–Kelman’s theory and their understanding of the complex changes in America Jewry are far richer than Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe’s, but their case is not yet sealed because significant limitations of data and empirical analysis remain.

So, where does all this leave us? For each side of this debate there are clear directions in which they need to move. Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe and other advocates of a life-cycle explanation of Israel attachments need to develop a theory that explains why aging is connected to stronger feelings for Israel. Cohen–Kelman and their supporters need to develop multivariate models to provide more rigorous evidence for their hypotheses.

For all of us jointly, we obviously need to address the issue of data and samples. As the costs of survey research increase, financial incentives to sample Jews defined by religion from self-selected panels will intensify. If opt-in panels are sampled for reasons of cost and efficiency, especially for longitudinal tracking, then at the very least we as a field need to advocate and fund the inclusion of questions that will allow us to identify JNBRs. In addition, we need to have standard methodological documentation about the surveys. It is unacceptable for publicly released research, whether scholarly or designed to inform communal policy, to be based on undisclosed panel construction, sampling methods and response rates.⁸

Ideally, we all want better methods for surveying Jews than self-selected panels. The resources necessary for that are, of course, enormous. In all likelihood, none of us or our institutions acting alone can fund high quality surveys that are representative of the American Jewish population. As a result, we will need broad-based cooperation—intellectual, financial, and professional—from those in academia, research organizations and communal institutions, if we are to move forward and help each other understand American Jews and their attachments to Israel better than we currently do.

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⁸ For additional data and reporting recommendations when using opt-in panels, see Phillips (2009).

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