Regular Jews, New Jews and Non-Jews: Some Methodological Reflections and New Data on Diversity Within the Jewish Population in the United States

Egon Mayer

The study of Jewish populations, particularly in societies such as the United States that are characterized by complete voluntarism in matters of religious identification, affiliation and practice, presents a unique methodological problem. Unlike population studies that are undertaken within clearly defined legal, organizational, and/or geographic boundaries, studies of Jewish populations must face time and again the dilemma of inclusion and exclusion. In trying to determine whom to count, such studies must confront the fractious question of "who is a Jew?"

Since most demographers who research American Jewry have neither the training nor the interest in the religio-legal system of Judaism to resolve that question, nor the desire to enter into the controversy that surrounds it, they have taken a simple and eminently sensible approach to the dilemma of inclusion. At least since the National Jewish Population Study (1970–71) virtually all studies of the American Jewish population have taken the so-called subjective approach. This approach relies on the self-identification of prospective respondents who are selected randomly from some suitably large sampling frame (e.g. all possible telephone numbers in a city).

For example, in a recent study of the Jewish population of Philadelphia (Yancey and Goldstein, 1984) – truly a model of methodological elegance – that approach is described:

> Following an explanation as to the nature of the study and questions concerning the location and size of the household, respondents were asked, "Is there anyone in this household who is Jewish?" If this question was answered "Yes", the household was included in the sample. If "No", the interview was terminated.

In the spirit of American voluntarism, it has become the practice to permit the respondent to determine whether he or she ought to be included in the survey. As long as the respondent reported that there was someone in the household who is Jewish that household would be considered 'Jewish' and included in the counting of the local Jewish population. In Philadelphia, as elsewhere, once that criterion was met, interviewers proceeded to ask all sorts of other questions about the household as a whole, as well as about Jewish affiliation, identification, attitudes, religious practices, and the like.

However, in determining for whom the information is actually to be collected, a rather different and more restrictive principle is applied. In Philadelphia, as elsewhere, while non-Jews were counted for a total estimate of the 'population in Jewish households', they were not surveyed regarding their attitudes, behavior, or social characteristics. Only Jewish respondents were actually interviewed, and only their responses were tallied to assess the various expressions of Jewish behavior and attitudes in the community.

This exclusion of non-Jews from the survey of Jewish households, that is, exclusion from the survey process itself, tips the methodological hat of social scientists to halachic standards. Those standards categorically deny any role or status to non-Jews within the Jewish family or the Jewish community, and their exclusion from the survey process parallels that categorical denial of status.

As a result of this mixture of a subjective approach, and a more objective or normative approach, at least since the NJPS, virtually all studies of local Jewish populations have noted that the total population living in so-called Jewish households is greater than the total number of Jews. Due primarily to intermarriage, there are large and increasing numbers of non-Jews living in these households as well (i.e. the spouse and one or more children of the intermarried Jew).

To continue with the example of Philadelphia (which is the fourth or fifth largest Jewish community in the United States), their recent population survey reported a total of about 256,000 people 'living in Jewish households'. The same study also reported that out of the total married adults in that population (157,800 currently married, Yancey and Goldstein, 1984, p. 154), 85% were inmarried, 3% were in couples in which one of the spouses had converted to Judaism, and 12% were in couples in which one of the spouses was not Jewish. This last group was also reported to have an average of 1.8 children. If one applies the 12% to 157,800 persons (19,000) and adds to that 1.8 children per each couple (17,100), one arrives at a figure of 36,100 people. Out of a population of 256,000, that constitutes approximately 14% (or nearly one of every seven) members of mixed households, either Jewish or not Jewish.

The purpose of this bit of arithmetic is not to ferret out non-Jews living in Jewish households, but rather to make a methodological point.

While such exclusion of the non-Jews from surveys of the Jewish population may be good Jewish practice, it is probably poor social science for several reasons. First, it takes as a given fact something that ought to be empirically tested. Halachic and Jewish tradition affirm a fundamental, ontological difference between Jews and non-Jews which could be bridged, if at all, only by the proper procedures of conversion. In the absence of such procedures it is presumed that non-Jews cannot feel like, think like, or act like Jews – they cannot 'be' Jews. As a metaphysical proposition, such a distinction is good. From a social scientific perspective it ought to be tested against some data.

Exclusion of non-Jews also leads to overlooking the extent to which they may, in fact, be involved in the various aspects of Jewish communal life. Finally, such exclusion prevents the development of any sociological insights into the formation of Jewish identity among those who may lack the halachic pre-requisites for such an identity. In a society where religious and ethnic identification is largely a matter of individual

choice and family life style, such an oversight may result in a serious long-term miscalculation of how many and what kinds of people actually participate in the life of the Jewish community.

Partly in response to these deficiencies of existing local Jewish population studies, and for a few other reasons as well, a new survey of the American Jewish population was conducted by this researcher between June 1984 and June 1985 (Mayer and Avgar, 1987). This survey, conducted on behalf of the American Jewish Committee, was administered simultaneously to born-Jews, and to converts and non-Jews who were marrried to born-Jews. For the sake of simplifying discussion, these three groupings of respondents have been labeled 'regular Jews', that is Jews by birth who were not intermarried, 'new Jews', that is former non-Jews who converted to Judaism either before or since marrying a born-Jew, and 'non-Jews' who were married to a born-Jew.

Method

The samples for this survey were obtained from twelve communities across the United States (New York City, Long Island, Westchester, Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Nashville, Portland, Los Angeles, St. Louis and Washington, D.C.), by means of a randomized snow-ball technique. In each community approximately one hundred and fifty 'distinctive Jewish surnames' were selected from the local telephone directory, including addresses as well as phone numbers. The prospective respondents were sent a letter explaining that we were conducting a study of Jewish identity, and alerting them to expect a telephone call from one of our interviewers in the following weeks.

When our interviewers called they requested the selected respondent to give us the names, addresses, and phone numbers of any relatives or friends who were either converts or non-Jews married to born-Jews. By this process of 'snow-balling' a randomly selected sample of Jews with 'distinctive' Jewish surnames we were able to generate 746 names from 691 born-Jewish 'informants'. These 'informants' themselves came to constitute the 'regular Jews' of our study. All three groups received virtually identical questionnaires by mail, with a cover letter and a postage pre-paid return envelope.

We obtained useable completed questionnaires from 192 of the 'regular Jews' (a response rate of 28%), and from 309 of the persons whom they had referred us to (a response rate of 41%). Of this latter group, 116 (or 38%) were converts and 193 (or 62%) were non-Jews married to born-Jews.

Findings

What follows in the remainder of this paper is a brief and preliminary overview of the responses of our 'regular Jews', 'new Jews', and 'non-Jews' to the same questions concerning various aspects of Jewish identification. The purpose is to illustrate the potentials for gaining new insight into the nature of Jewishness in America by including non-Jews and former non-Jews in the study of the Jewish population.

Denominational Identity

As is characteristic of most of America's Jews, the 'regular Jews' in our study were segmented into the popular Jewish denominational divisions, as follows:

Denomination	N	%
Total	192	100.0
Orthodox	8	4.2
Conservative	58	30.2
Reform	61	31.8
Just Jewish	53	27.6
No answer/other	12	6.2

The 'new Jews' had also entered the portals of Judaism through one of the three major branches, as shown below:

Denomination	N	%
Total	116	100
Orthodox	14	12
Conservative	28	24
Reform	74	64

But from a previous study of a nearly identical distribution of converts (Mayer and Sheingold, 1979) we have learned that, in fact, only 2% of the 'new Jews' identify as Orthodox; only 17% identify as Conservative; and 61% identify as Reform Jews; 20% do not identify with any of the denominations through which they entered Judaism.

A comparison between the 'regular Jews' and the 'new Jews' suggests that, proportionally, there are more Orthodox conversions than there are Orthodox Jews, and also a lot more Reform conversions than there are Reform Jews. It would seem that the Conservative branch of Judaism loses out to either of the other two branches when it comes to conversions. Our knowledge about the post-conversion identification patterns of 'new Jews' further suggests that this group is far more attracted to the Reform branch than to any other. A sizeable proportion of those converts who became Jewish through the Orthodox or the Conservative branch of Judaism end up identifying as Reform Jews.

As one might expect, among the 'non-Jews' 95% do not identify with any of the branches of Judaism, since they do not regard themselves as Jews. Nevertheless, about 5% do regard themselves as Jews by self-definition, and they think of themselves as Reform Jews.

What these figures suggest, taken altogether, is that the Reform denomination of Judaism is the predominant choice of 'new Jews' and a possible emerging minority of 'non-Jews'. Given the sometimes acrimonious debate between the main branches

of Judaism over various religious matters, it should be useful to know in what proportions these branches appeal to the various segments of the American Jewish population.

Of course, for traditionalists in the Orthodox as well as the Conservative camps the above figures will likely be read as further proof that the Reform movement ought not to be regarded as a legitimate expression of Judaism, and that the majority of converts ought not to be regarded as *bona fide* Jews. However, further comparisons of our three samples give little comfort to such contentions.

Affiliation and Participation

The single most public and common way that American Jews express identification with their heritage is through affiliation with and participation in the synagogue and other Jewish organizations; and also by giving money to fund drives sponsored by these organizations. The figures in Table 1 compare our three samples on these expressions of Jewishness.

The figures on synagogue membership and attendance, organization membership, Jewish charitable giving, and the reading of Jewish publications underscore several key points. Communal involvement in all five dimensions ranges from the highest among the Orthodox to the lowest among those who do not identify with any of the denominational branches. The proportional involvement of this latter group in the life of the Jewish community approaches the proportional involvement of non-Jews. On the other hand, the methodological exclusion of non-Jews from the survey process leads to a substantial undercounting of the numbers of people participating in the life of the community, or, at least a misperception of the composition of the population that participates in the communal life of American Jewry.

It should be emphasized here that the 'just Jewish' category comprised about 28% of our entire sample of 'regular Jews', nearly approximating the proportions of Conservative and Reform Jews. That in such a large segment of this population the extent of formal involvement with the Jewish community is not much different from that of non-Jews who are married to Jews should pose a serious question for Jewish demographers about the validity of including the 'just Jewish' Jews in any analysis of the total Jewish population, while excluding the non-Jews who are married to Jews. This question is further stressed by comparisons between the three groups on other dimensions of typical expression of Jewishness, such as observance of Jewish holidays and affirmation of certain characteristically Jewish or other social attitudes (Table 2).

Among other things, the figures in Table 2 indicate that about one quarter of the non-Jews who are married to Jews attended synagogue services in the past year. Moreover, at least on Rosh Hashanah, they were proportionally better represented at synagogue than 'regular Jews' who consider themselves as 'just Jewish'.

In the case of converts or 'new Jews' we find that, as a group, they are as strongly or more strongly represented on all of the above measures of Jewish expression than the 'regular Jews' in the Conservative or Reform branches of Judaism. Two things that are particularly important to note about this finding are:

(a) that the overwhelming majority of conversions take place under the auspices of the Reform movement and are therefore discounted by many traditional Jews as somehow not valid; and

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS REPORTING JEWISH ACTIVITIES, 1984–85

	Born Jewish					Born Non-Jewish	
	Total[a]	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform	Just Jewish	Convert	Non-Jew
N	192	8	59	61	53	116	193
Synagogue membership							
Yes	54	100	67	70	15	88	16
No	46	-	33	30	85	12	84
Membership in other Jewish organization							
Yes	56	100	66	65	31	67	12
No	44	-	34	35	69	33	88
Regular synagogue attendance							
Yes	39	100	46	47	12	68	22
No	61	-	54	53	88	32	78
Contributions to a Jewish Fund drive past year							
Yes	82	100	86	95	62	80	39
No	18	-	14	5	38	20	61
Reading Jewish periodicals or newspapers							
Yes	62	100	79	59	42	80	31
No	38	-	21	41	58	20	69

a. Includes 11 'Others'.

(b) from a previous study of intermarriage and conversion we found that about 30% of the 'new Jews' became Jews sometime after marriage.

In the present study, 25% of the 'new Jews' converted sometime after marriage. In the light of this last observation, the methodological exclusion of non-Jews from surveys of Jewish households necessarily leads to an underestimation of the future or potential Jewish population within any given time interval in which such studies are usually made.

Conclusion

The data presented in this paper would suggest that future demographic surveys

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE REPORTING OBSERVANCE OF SELECTED JEWISH HOLIDAYS, 1984–85

	Born Jewish					Born Non-Jewish	
	Total[a]	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform	Just Jewish	Convert	Non-Jew
Attended a Seder							
Yes	86	100	98	84	75	95	67
No	14	-	2	16	25	5	33
Lit Hanukah candles							
Yes	81	100	88	88	62	94	65
No	19	-	12	12	38	6	35
Attended synagogue on Rosh Hashanah							
Yes	62	100	81	74	20	90	26
No	38	-	19	26	80	10	74
Attended synagogue on Yom Kippur							
Yes	67	100	88	74	33	88	25
No	33	-	12	26	67	12	75

a. See note a. to Table 1.

of Jewish populations in which there is a substantial amount of intermarriage take much greater care than they have done heretofore both in counting and describing the social attributes of the non-Jews living in so-called Jewish households.

References

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