

Working and Family Life: The Experiences of Jewish Women in America

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Jewish Achievement in the 20th Century

American Jews have been an extraordinarily successful minority. Over the past century American Jewish men have emerged from turn-of-the-century production workers in light manufacturing (with a heavy concentration in the garment industry) with very little schooling to their mid-century position as self-employed managers, salesmen and craftsmen, to highly educated professionals by the close of the 20th century (Chiswick 1992, Howe 1976, Manners 1972). In the early decades of this century about 3 percent of American Jewish men were professionals compared to 5 percent of native-born white men, while by 1990 nearly half of American Jewish men were professionals compared to 16 percent for white men in general.¹ Also by 1990, 71 percent of adult Jewish men were college graduates (16 or more years of schooling) in contrast to only 25 percent for adult white men.

Jewish women shared in this phenomenal advancement in skills. Among adult women in the early post-war period, 13 percent of the Jewish women and 7 percent of non-Jewish white women were college graduates (Table 1). By 1990, among adult Jewish women 57 percent were college graduates compared to only 19 percent for non-Jewish white women. The high levels of education of Jewish women may have had an important role to play in the socioeconomic advancement of their sons and daughters and, hence, of the Jewish family from generation to generation.

The Family and Intergenerational Mobility

In all groups in the United States, including Jews, women have difficult choices to make regarding how much time they devote to working in the labor market for wages, salaries or for profits (or as unpaid workers in a family enterprise), and how much time they devote to home production, that is, working without pay in the home sector.

1. These data are drawn from Chiswick (1994a), which reports on the occupational status of Jewish men from 1890 to 1990 using census and survey data.

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF SCHOOLING OF ADULT WOMEN, JEWS AND NON-JEWS

Years of Schooling	Early Post World War II		1957		1970		Around 1980		1990	
	GSS mothers ^a		CPS ^b		Census ^c		GSS Respondents ^d		NJPS ^e	CPS ^f
	Jews	Non- Jews	Jews	Non- Jews	Jews	Non- Jews	Jews	Non- Jews	Jews	Non- Jews
0-7	9.1	17.0	6.5	13.0	1.4	6.7	0.0	3.8	0.9	5.3
8	9.5	18.8	9.2	13.6	4.5	12.8	0.0	4.7	0.2	5.2
9-11	10.9	14.5	11.3	18.4	11.4	21.1	2.4	16.1	2.7	11.2
12	5.8	34.4	40.1	36.9	51.3	41.6	28.3	41.7	19.3	42.3
13-15	11.6	8.8	16.4	9.3	15.5	10.5	29.5	18.0	20.2	17.4
16	8.4	5.0	}16.4	}8.5	8.7	4.4	24.1	9.5	27.4	}18.5
Over 16	4.7	1.6			7.2	2.9	15.7	6.2	29.4	
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Median	12.0	11.0	12.6	12.1	12.0	12.0	14.0	12.0	16.0	12.7
Mean	11.4	10.2	NA	NA	12.5	11.1	14.4	12.3	15.4	NA

Notes: NA — Not available in source. Details may not add to total due to rounding.

- Educational attainment of the mothers of adult (age 25 to 64) white male and female respondents at age 16. Sample size 275 Jews and 10,067 non-Jews. (GSS — General Social Surveys)
- Employed females age 18 and over for Jews and total (Jews and non-Jews). Sample size about 35,000 households.
- Adult white women not enrolled in school and born in the U.S. with at least one foreign-born parent. Jews defined as those raised in a home in which Yiddish, Hebrew or Ladino was spoken instead of or in addition to English. Based on a 1/100 sample of the 1970 Census of Population (15 percent questionnaire).
- Adult (age 25 to 64) white female respondents. Sample size 166 Jews and 6,358 non-Jews.
- For Jews, adult (age 25 to 64) female respondents born Jewish. Weighted analysis. Sample size 936.
- Data for 1989 from the Current Population Survey (CPS) for white females age 25 and over.

Sources:

National Opinion Research Center (1987). *General Social Surveys, 1972-1987, Cumulative Data File*, NORC, Chicago.

North American Jewish Data Bank. (1991). *1990 National Jewish Population Survey*. New York, 1991.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. (No date). "Tabulations of Data on the Social and Economic Characteristics of Major Religious Groups, 1957." Table. 12, mimeo.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. *1970 Census of Population, Public Use Sample*. 15 percent questionnaire, 1/100 sample.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1991). *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1991*. Washington, Table 224.

The result of this decision can have far-reaching effects on various facets of the social characteristics and economic well-being of the family. If women work more, by working more hours per day, more days per year or more years in their adult life, family money income is enhanced. On the other hand, more work implies less time for "home production," including less parental time input into raising children. Decisions regarding the allocation of time to the labor market and to home production have an impact on the type of consumption in which the family engages, the number of children it may have, and the "home produced" skills embodied in these children (Becker, 1981; Blake, 1987). The skills embodied in children are, of course, essential elements for the successful economic mobility of the group from one generation to the next.

In families, and perhaps in the most successful families, husbands and wives act as a team. The more stable the marriage is expected to be, the more likely each partner is to accept solutions that enhance the family as a whole, even if the solution is not in the narrow self-interest of individual family members. Strong marriage bonds and the sharing of economic well-being enable family members to take actions that might seem risky or sub-optimal from the individual perspective, but which enhance family well being through joint maximization.

Jewish families have traditionally been viewed as providing strong marital bonds and a sharing of the family's resources. Although desertion, separation and divorce were not unknown, they were less prevalent among Jewish immigrants than other immigrants at the turn of the century. Alcoholism, the scourge of many immigrant families, was rare among the Jewish immigrants and is still less common among Jews (see, for example, Condran and Kramarow, 1991). The Jewish family "partnership" was most obvious in the ubiquitous "mom and pop" businesses, but existed as well among wage workers.² The movie *Hester Street* presents a portrait of the marital tensions generated by the immigrant experience, while at the same time affirming marriage and the family as a central dimension of Jewish immigrant life.

Female Labor Supply and Child Mortality

Another important element in the lives of the turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrants was the relation between marriage and the social role of women (Glenn, 1990, Ritterband, 1990). Women were expected to marry and after marriage were expected to conform to a different social role than single women. The unmarried woman could attend (secular) school and could work, including work in an environment in which she would come into contact with men, both married and single. Typically she lived with her parents or, if they had not immigrated or were deceased, with a married sibling, and would help support this family. A married woman, on the other hand, was expected by tradition to avoid contact with men other than her husband or other close relative, particularly if this put her in a

2. For a somewhat idealized view of Jewish immigrant life at the turn of the century see Hapgood (1902). See also, Manners (1972) and Howe (1976).

subservient relationship, such as an employee-employer relationship. More so than among other immigrant groups, single Jewish women were enrolled in school or worked, and upon marriage the Jewish women withdrew from the labor force (see, for example, Glenn, 1990, pp. 50-89).

The lower labor force participation rate of married Jewish women compared to other married women at the turn of the century was noted at the time. Nathan Glazer (1957, pp. 80-81) quotes a 1900 observation by the economist John R. Commons that "Jewish women are employed (in factories) to a much less extent than the women of other nationalities; and their children are kept in school until 15 or 16 years of age." Glazer writes that "with the Jewish mother at home, the Jewish child received a better education and better care, as shown in lower delinquency and death rates."

Kessner (1977, pp. 75-77) also reports a very low labor supply of married Jewish women at the turn of the century. He quotes a Bureau of Labor Statistics study "Hebrew women almost invariably stop work when they marry." Kessner reports that Jewish women in the earlier period (1880-1890) did garment work at home, but "when the work switched from home to factory, Jewish women refused to take jobs in the factories. Some joined their husbands in their neighborhood stores, but otherwise they allowed their economic function to recede." Home work declined rapidly in the garment industry after 1900. Kessner quotes a 1909 Bureau of Labor Statistics report that "No matter how great the poverty, the Hebrew men seldom allow the women of their family to do the (clothing) work at home, even though they may have been shop workers before marriage."

In a study of the determinants of the lower Jewish child mortality in the early years of the 20th century, Condran and Kramarow (1991, pp. 233) refer to the contemporary literature: "Jews are described as especially caring and responsible parents, as manifested in lower rates of family desertion by Jewish men and lower rates of labor force participation on the part of Jewish women. The latter was an almost universally noted phenomenon and was important because it allowed Jewish infants to be breastfed for at least the first year of life. Later evidence...confirms that Jews breast-fed their children longer than many other ethnic groups...." In their own statistical analysis, using the recently created microdata from the 1910 Census of Population, Condran and Kramarow (1991) confirm that among immigrant married women those who were Jewish (identified as those reporting a Yiddish mother tongue) had a lower child mortality rate than any other group, even when other variables are the same. The younger the child the greater the differential effect on mortality. They also find higher mortality rates if the mother is illiterate, does not speak English, works, and has a large number of children.

A special survey was conducted in 1890 of the changes from 1885 through 1889 in the demographic characteristics of Jewish families that had lived in the United States for at least 5 years (Billings, 1890). The sample of 60,630 individuals from 10,618 families is primarily of German Jewish origin. The reported birthplace of the mother was 55 percent Germany, 21 percent the U.S., 11 percent Russia and Poland, and 13 percent elsewhere. Compared with the general population the data

show a later age of marriage, a lower birth rate, and a lower death rate at all ages, particularly at younger ages. Jewish women had a very low rate of participation in the labor market; 8 percent of the Jewish women age 15 to 44 reported an occupation in contrast to 27 percent of the foreign-born white women in the same age group (Billings, 1890, Tables 3 and 4 and Census Office, 1897, p. cxxii).

The combination of a later age at marriage, lower fertility and a lower death rate, especially a lower rate of infant mortality, among Jews was not unique to their experience in the United States. Studies of 19th century and turn-of-the-century Jews in Europe also showed more favorable demographic characteristics than their non-Jewish neighbors (see, for example, Billings 1890, p. 19; Silber, 1980; and Condran and Kramarow, 1991 and the references therein).

Implications for Child Quality

Thus, turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrant women allocated their time differently than other immigrant women. Because they were more likely to be at home than at work, family income was less. However, as distinct from other immigrant groups, this meant that fewer daughters were providing child care for younger siblings. This facilitated lengthening the number of years in school among Jewish daughters, as well as enabling them to have a more continuous attachment to the labor market from the time they left school until their own marriage. Moreover, the mothers at home provided a higher quality of child care than could have been provided by older siblings, grandparents (if they had immigrated) or other arrangements. The lower fertility of American Jews and their lower rate of child mortality meant greater maternal time input per child that survived.

These parental time inputs, both prior to the onset of school and concurrent with it, enabled Jewish children to be better equipped for schooling. Glazer writes (1957, pp. 80–81):

The Jewish child strongly urged on by his working-class parents was a prodigy in school. Another authoritative observer in 1900 wrote, in the report of the Industrial Commission of that year, 'In the lower schools, the Jewish children are the delight of their teachers for cleverness at their books, obedience and general good conduct.' Never were teachers in slum schools happier than when they had Jewish pupils; never were settlement-house workers more delighted with the results of their work than when the Jews filled the slums of the large cities.

Leaving aside Glazer's hyperbole, the Jewish mothers undoubtedly contributed to the educational attentiveness and performance of their children, both their sons and their daughters.

A result of greater parental investments in their children was a sharper rise over time in the educational attainment of American Jews than of other adult whites (Chiswick, 1992). By the 1940s American Jewish men had a mean of 11.6 years of schooling compared to 9.7 years for non-Jewish white men, and 24 percent of Jewish men were college graduates compared to only 10.5 percent for other white men. The educational advancement of Jewish women was equally impressive, with

a mean of 11.4 years (13.1 percent college graduates) compared to a mean of 10.2 years for other white women (6.6 percent college graduates) by the 1940s (Table 1).

TABLE 2. LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES BY AGE AMONG WOMEN, JEWS AND NON-JEWS (PERCENT)

Age	1957 CPS ^a		1970 Census ^b		Around 1980		1990	
	Jews	Non-Jews	Jews	Non-Jews	GSS Respondents ^c		NJPS ^d	CPS ^e
					Jews	Non-Jews		
14-17	NA	17.7	30.6	26.1	NA	NA	NA	NA
18-24	57.2	45.5	58.5	57.5	54.5	58.3	39.9	69.6
25-34	25.5	34.8	39.7	42.2	66.1	60.6	75.9	73.5
35-44	33.5	42.6	48.8	47.4	68.6	63.6	74.8	76.0
45-64	38.2	41.1	53.3	49.2	60.0	49.8	65.6	57.8
65 and over	8.5	11.5	19.7	10.7	26.2	9.8	12.0	8.4
All women	30.7	35.1	46.8	30.0	53.3	48.0	53.4	57.4

Notes: NA — Not available in source, not applicable or not computed.

- a. Women age 14 and over for Jews and all (Jews and non-Jews). Sample size about 35,000 households.
- b. White women born in the U.S. with at least one foreign-born parent. Jews defined as those raised in a home in which Yiddish, Hebrew or Ladino was spoken instead of or in addition to English. Based on a 1/100 sample of the 1970 Census of Population (15 percent questionnaire).
- c. White women respondents. Sample size, 242 Jews and 9,228 non-Jews.
- d. For Jews, female respondents age 18 and over born Jewish. Weighted analysis. Sample size 1,381.
- e. Data for 1989 from Current Population Survey (CPS) for females of all races. Overall rate for white females is 57.2 percent.

Sources:

National Opinion Research Center. (1987). *General Social Surveys, 1972-1987, Cumulative Data File*. NORC, Chicago.

North American Jewish Data Bank. (1991). *1990 National Jewish Population Survey*. New York.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1991). *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1991*. Washington. Table 632.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. (No date). "Tabulations of Data on the Social and Economic Characteristics of Major Religious Groups, 1957." Table 11, mimeo.

U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1970 Census of Population, Public Use Sample*, 15 percent questionnaire, 1/100 sample.

Recent Trends in Labor Supply

Throughout the course of the twentieth century the labor force participation rates of married women have been increasing. This can be attributed to an increase in the value of time of married women in the labor market (i.e., increased real wages) relative to the value of their time in home-sector activities. The change in the relative value of time is due to many factors. These include a decline in fertility and

a decline in the cost of consumer durables and non-durables that substitute for time in home production (e.g., dishwashers, clothes washers, dryers as well as frozen, prepared and fast foods), that reduced the value of time in home production. They also include the increasing educational attainment of women and technological change that increased wages in the labor market.

The labor force participation rate of women had risen to 35 percent by 1957 and to 57 percent by 1990 (Table 2). Among Jewish women the participation rates were 31 percent and 53 percent respectively. Thus, Jewish women, on the whole, still have a lower participation rate than non-Jewish women. More important, however, there remains a difference in participation rates by family structure.

Among married women in 1990, the participation rates for Jewish women were somewhat lower than for non-Jewish women, 54 percent compared to 57 percent (Table 3). Among those with at least one child under age 6, but with no older children the participation rate is substantially lower for Jewish women, 49 percent compared to 58 percent. Among those with children 6 to 17 but none under 6, Jewish women used to have a lower labor force participation rate (29 percent compared to 37 percent in 1957), but by 1990 the differential had disappeared. However, in a comparison among women with school-age children, married Jewish women who work are more likely to be working part-time (fewer hours per week) and part year (fewer weeks per year) (Chiswick, 1988a).

An analysis of the labor supply of Jewish and non-Jewish women in 1970 found that, more so than among other women, higher levels of education encourage Jewish women's labor supply, and that the more children and the younger the children the lower is the labor supply of Jewish women (Chiswick 1988a). For example, in 1970 among women with 12 years of schooling and two children, Jewish women had a labor force participation rate 21 percentage points lower than other white women if both children are under 6, 11 percentage points lower if one child was under 6 and the other was 6 to 18 years, no difference if both were 6 to 18 years, and 4 percentage points higher if there were no children under 18 in the household (Table 4). By way of contrast, among those with 16 years of schooling, having two children under age 6 was associated with a 17 percentage point lower labor force participation rate for Jewish mothers, and one child under 6 and one 6 to 18 years with a 6 percentage point lower rate, but if both children were 6 to 18 years the Jewish women had a 4 percentage point higher rate and an 8 percentage point higher rate if there were no children under age 18 in the family.

Thus, Jewish women still maintain a different pattern of labor supply than other women and this difference is linked to the family context. Whereas earlier in the century the key family variable was marriage, now the key family variable for Jewish women is children at home. Because of their high level of education and greater responsiveness to the positive effect of schooling on labor supply, Jewish women with no young children at home are more likely than other women to be in the labor market, but if they have children at home, particularly if they are pre-school children, Jewish women are less likely to work, and if they do work it is for fewer hours in the year.

TABLE 3. LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES FOR MARRIED WOMEN BY PRESENCE AND AGE OF CHILDREN, JEWISH AND NON-JEWISH WOMEN

Children Living at Home	1957		1970		1990	
	CPS ^a		Census ^b		NJPS	CPS
	Jews	Non-Jews	Jews	Non-Jews	Jews ^c	Non-Jews ^d
Total	27.8	29.6	51.7	46.8	54.1	57.0
No Children under 18	30.0	35.6	55.4	50.2	50.9	50.0
With Children 6–17, none under 6	28.6	36.7	49.2	44.7	75.6	72.7 ^e
With Children under 6, none 6–17	11.8	17.0	25.1	31.1	49.4	57.5

a. Women age 18 and over for Jews and all (Jews and non-Jews).

b. White women age 25–64, second-generation Americans.

c. Women who were born Jewish. Weighted analysis. Based on year of birth of oldest and youngest child.

d. Data for 1989 from Current Population Survey. White women age 16 and over.

e. For youngest child 6 to 13 years 71.8 percent, and for youngest child 14 to 17 years 74.5 percent.

Sources:

North American Jewish Data Bank. (1991). *1990 National Jewish Population Survey*. New York.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. (No date). "Tabulation of Data on the Social and Economic Characteristics of Major Religious Groups, March 1957". Table 13.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. *1970 Census of Population, Public Use Sample*, 15 percent questionnaire, 1/100 sample.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1991). *Statistical Abstract of the United States:1991*. Washington, Table 644.

Now as in the past, the labor supply decisions of Jewish women seem optimal in terms of generating high investments in their children. Jewish mothers are more likely than other mothers to be investing their own time in their children when the children are young and they are more likely to be working when there are no children at home (either because they had not yet been born, or they are adults) or the children are investing in college schooling. Indeed, it has been shown that, in addition to having a larger number of children attending college, Jewish parents provide a higher level of financial support for their college-enrolled children, even compared to non-Jewish parents of the same level of income (Catsiapis and Robinson, 1981).

**TABLE 4. DIFFERENCE IN LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION BETWEEN JEWISH AND NON-JEWISH WOMEN BY EDUCATION AND NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN THE HOUSEHOLD, 1970^a—
(JEWISH MINUS NON-JEWISH, PERCENTAGE POINTS)**

Years of Education	Number of Children in Household					
	None	One Child		Two Children		
		Under 6	6–18	Two Under 6	One Under 6 One 6– 18 years	Two 6–18 Years
10	+1.7	-10.9	-3.4	-23.5	-13.0	-5.5
12	+3.9	-8.7	+1.9	-21.3	-10.8	-0.2
16	+8.4	-4.2	+6.3	-16.8	-6.3	+4.2

- a. Computed from a pooled Jewish-non-Jewish regression of labor force participation on age, education, marital status, family income, geographic area, and children variables, with interactions between the Jewish variable and the education and children variables. The observed difference is +3.5 and the difference *ceteris paribus* is +1.7.

Source: Chiswick, (1988).

Studies indicate that the pattern of lower labor supply of women is more intense the more Jewishly oriented is the household. Ritterband (1990) finds that among Jewish women, labor supply is lower for those raised in a traditional or religious home and for those currently engaged in more ritual practice or Jewish communal activity. A study of labor supply among women in Canada also found that married Jewish women work less than other married women, other things being the same (Spencer, 1992, unpublished appendix).³ Moreover, in the Canadian data the labor supply of Jewish women was lower among those with a Jewish rather than a non-Jewish spouse. Furthermore, among non-Jewish women in Canada, those with a Jewish husband had a lower labor supply than those with a non-Jewish husband, even after controlling for husband's educational attainment and income.

Conclusions and Implications

Thus, it appears that the unique labor supply behavior of American Jewish women in the context of the family may have contributed substantially to the evolution of the advantageous economic position of American Jews. A challenge facing the Jewish family is the maintenance of high levels of achievement while supporting the

3. Spencer's (1992) data for Canada also reveal a sharper decline in labor supply in response to the presence of children, particularly young children, among Jewish than among non-Jewish married women.

evolving role of Jewish women in the labor market. The high level of education of Jewish women can generate high labor market earnings which makes withdrawal from the labor force that much more costly to the family. Moreover, Jewish women respond more sharply in their labor supply to the positive effects of schooling (Chiswick, 1988a). As married Jewish women have increased their attachment to the labor market to a level comparable to non-Jews, there will inevitably be increased inroads on the time devoted to child care. There are alternatives to maternal time in child care, including paternal time and hired care providers. Although paternal time in child care has undoubtedly increased over time, in part as a response to more mothers working, the father's time in the labor market is at least as valuable as the mother's time.

Increasingly, Jewish as well as non-Jewish children will be receiving child care, prior to the onset of schooling and concurrent with schooling, from adults who are not their parents. High quality child care can be provided, but it is expensive. Fortunately for many Jewish parents the combination of high levels of education and occupational status of both parents can result in sufficiently high incomes to finance expensive child care arrangements. For many other Jewish families, however, the cost of high quality child care can be prohibitive.

The choice of child care mode can have far-reaching consequences on the Jewish education of Jewish children. Non-Jewish or secular child care programs cannot provide Jewish acculturation. Many Jewish families may have difficulty in providing this education because the Jewish parents themselves did not receive it, because they are "lapsed" Jews or because of intermarriage. This creates a new challenge and a new opportunity for the Jewish community — Jewish child care arrangements and Jewish day schools as a communal response to the evolving role of Jewish women in the labor market. This of course raises other issues. Residential concentration facilitates the development of Jewish educational systems by providing enough children to take advantage of economies of scale within schools and by providing enough schools within close proximity of the home to lower the daily transportation costs. Moreover, there is the complex political issue of "educational vouchers" as a means of helping to finance the cost of day school education.

The success of efforts to develop high quality child care and kindergarten through grade 12 education in secular and Judaic subjects for Jewish children nationwide may be crucial for the continued achievement of American Jews, as both Americans and as Jews — that is, their continued success in education, occupational attainment and earnings, and their continued meaningful participation in Jewish life and in the Jewish community.

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