

ARE JEWISH FAMILIES DIFFERENT?

Jewish families have frequently been portrayed as strong, cohesive and closely knit. Of course, the family lives of other American minority groups have sometimes been described in similar terms. Commentators have written about the strengths of Catholic families, and a book published in 1972 bore the title *The Strengths of Black Families*. Yet, many of these favorable expositions of family life were undertaken in reaction to critical accounts of, say the supposed lack of economic and social achievement among Catholics or the female-centered nature of Black family life. In contrast, the Jewish family has largely been spared negative commentary in the social science literature. It is typically evoked in glowing terms, as an institution that has enhanced the considerable social mobility of its sons and daughters without weakening the close bonds of its family members.

But the premise that Jewish family life is different, or distinctive, does not rest on a solid empirical foundation. Most studies that reach this conclusion—including the better known ones—are impressionistic, and although these accounts may be valuable, they have limitations. Some draw heavily on descriptions of the *shtetl* culture of Eastern Europe; others are based on observations of the families of first-generation immigrants whose life styles were demonstrably different from those of contemporary Jewish families. Moreover, many of the studies of Jewish families do not present comparisons with non-Jewish families; thus it is difficult to decide how distinctive the reported Jewish patterns are.

Even the few empirical studies that have appeared are usually based on samples that are very small or whose representativeness is questionable. Most of Gerhard Lenski's widely cited conclusions about Jews in his *The Religious Factor* (1963) were based on but 27 cases; Judson Landis's findings (reported in 1960)* derived from a questionnaire given to 2,654 college students, including 247 Jews, enrolled in family sociology courses. And most investigations have not attempted to control for social-class position, in part because the samples were so small.

Since the proportion of Jews in the general population is so low, most of the national population surveys undertaken in recent years have too few Jewish respondents to be useful for comparative analyses. There is one exception, however: the General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center. The GSS is a personal interview sampling of the United States adult population, conducted annually from 1972 to 1978, and again in 1980. Its sampling universe was the total noninstitutionalized English-speaking population of the United States, 18 years of ages or older; different samples were selected every year. Sample sizes averaged 1,515 with a total of 12,120 cases from 1972 to 1980.

*All the studies mentioned in this paper are listed in full in the section entitled *References*.



In pooling all of the eight waves of the GSS and treating them as one large national survey, we obtained a body of data in which 7,771 respondents said that their current religious preference was Protestant, 3,049 said Catholic and 286 said Jewish* (824 indicated no preference, 162 mentioned other religions and 28 did not answer the question). The major problem in doing so is that the relationships we are investigating may have changed between 1972 and 1980; but preliminary analyses suggested that this was not a significant drawback. We compared the responses given by Jews, white Protestants and white Catholics to several family-related questions. Since we focused primarily on religious differences, we excluded nonwhites from our analyses. Likewise, we excluded persons whose religious preference was other than Jewish, Protestant or Catholic, or who expressed no religious preference.

A sub-sample of 286 individuals is relatively small by research standards, but it is large enough to support some statistical analyses, even if they are not as detailed as we would like them to be. Given the almost complete lack of adequate, nationally representative data comparing Jews and non-Jews, we believe that the GSS findings are worth analyzing. We will touch further on the limitations of our findings and indicate some implications for future research.

Satisfaction With Family Life and Social Interaction

Perhaps the most common indicators of the quality of family life in survey research relate to satisfaction with one's situation and to interaction with other members of the family. The GSS included several such pertinent questions, though not all of them were asked every year. In his study of college students, Landis found that 80 percent of the Jewish students responded that their parents' marriages were happy or very happy, as against 70 percent of the Protestant students and 70 percent of the Catholics. We were able to assemble a similar table on marital happiness from responses to a question that was asked of married persons in the GSS from 1973 through 1980: "Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage? Would you say that your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" Out of 5,881 respondents, 70 percent of the Protestants, 68 percent of the Catholics and 72 percent of the Jews answered "Very happy," 28, 29 and 27 percent respectively replied "Pretty happy," and 2, 2 and 1 percent respectively, said "Not too happy."

The adult respondents in the questionnaires of 1973 through 1980 were also asked to rate how much satisfaction they derived from various areas of life, including their family life, on a seven-point scale in which 1 meant "a very great deal" and 7 meant "none." The mean scores for Protestants, Catholics and Jews were an identical 2.0. Thus, even before we attempt to delve into social class or urban residence, we find little or no difference among the three religious groups in marital happiness or in satisfaction with family life.

*Our definition of a Jew includes some people who were not born of Jewish mothers and who therefore would not be considered as Jews under the Halakhic definition but who later converted, or who now regard themselves as Jews. From 1973 on, the GSS also inquired about the religion in which the respondents were raised. From this information we can determine that in the surveys administered from 1973 to 1980, 92 percent of the persons we classify as Jews by our definition were raised as Jews, five percent were brought up as Catholics, two percent were raised as Protestants, and one percent grew up in a nonreligious family. Whether or not it is deemed appropriate to include Jews by conversion or preference in our analyses, we doubt that their inclusion in such small numbers significantly alters our conclusions. Moreover, had we adopted the alternative definition—including only persons whose upbringing was Jewish—we would have been forced to exclude all 54 Jews sampled in 1972, the year in which information on religious upbringing was not collected.

Previous studies also reported that Jews see more of their relatives than do non-Jews. Lenski, for instance, reported that 75 percent of his Jewish respondents said they visited relatives every week, as against 56 percent of white Catholics and 49 percent of white Protestants. The GSS included a similar question: In 1974, 1975, 1977 and 1978 the respondents were asked how often they spent a social evening with relatives. Jews were somewhat less likely to have reported that they spent a social evening with relatives once a week or more often; 29 percent said so, as compared with 37 percent of Protestants and 39 percent of Catholics.

The differences—or lack of differences—discussed thus far could result from characteristics unrelated to religion, such as social class or geographic mobility. Alternatively, urban-rural or educational differences could be suppressing religious differences, or causing them to appear less significant than they might be otherwise. We know that Jews are much more likely to reside in urban areas than non-Jews, and that Jews tend to have more education than others. In the pooled GSS sample, 78 percent of all Jews lived either in a city with a population of at least 50,000 or in a suburb of such a city, as compared with 63 percent of Catholics and 47 percent of Protestants. Moreover, 36 percent of all Jews had completed four or more years of college, as compared with 13 percent of Catholics and 13 percent of Protestants.

In order to sort out these various factors, we analyzed the responses of the three religious groups to the questions discussed above in relation to urban residence and educational attainment. Our statistical method was multiple regression, which required scoring the three dependent variable as follows: in marital happiness, "very happy" = 1, "pretty happy" = 2, and "not too happy" = 3. Satisfaction with family life remained a seven-point scale with 1 indicating a very great deal of satisfaction and 7 indicating none. Spending an evening with relatives was also rated on a seven point scale, with 1 indicating almost every day and 7 indicating never.*

The results showed that even after accounting for educational attainment and urban residence, Jews were quite similar to non-Jews. To demonstrate the similarity, we predicted scores—based on our statistical analyses—for hypothetical Protestants, Catholics and Jews who do not differ with regard to urban-rural residence or educational attainment. These scores confirmed that the effects of religion were small. For example, let us consider three respondents, a Protestant, a Catholic and a Jew, all of whom live in a metropolitan area and have completed from one to four years of college. According to our estimates, the predicted scores on the scale of satisfaction with family life would be 2.0 for the Protestant, 1.9 for the Catholic and 1.9 for the Jew. On the scale measuring how often they spent an evening with relatives, the predicted scores would be 3.7 for the Protestant, 3.6 for the Catholic and 3.8 for the Jew. The predicted score for marital happiness would be 1.3 for each of the three groups. For this set of indicators, then, the religion of the respondent appears to make very little difference

Parental Childrearing Values

Still, there might be substantial differences among Protestants, Catholics and Jews in more specific domains of family life. The aspect of Jewish family life that is perhaps most frequently cited as distinctive is childrearing. Jews are said to motivate their children to achieve, to stress the need for education and to take particular satisfaction in their

*For details of this and subsequent statistical procedures, see our technical report, "Are Jewish Families Different: Some Evidence from the General Social Survey" (forthcoming).

children's achievements. According to some observers, these characteristics have been instrumental in bringing about the high level of upward social mobility of second- and third-generation American Jews.

Lenski explored the relationship between parental childrearing values and religion by asking his respondents to rank in order of importance a set of qualities that most parents desire for their children. He reported that Jews and white Protestants were more likely than white Catholics to score intellectual autonomy (the child should "think for himself") higher than obedience. In general, middle-class respondents were more likely to rank autonomy over obedience than working-class respondents. Melvin Kohn used a similar procedure in a series of studies in which he found that middle-class parents placed a higher value on "self-direction" for their children and a lower value on "conformity to external authority" than working-class or lower-class parents. In studying social class, Kohn also presented evidence that Jews valued self-direction more than Protestants or Catholics. Both Lenski and Kohn suggested that parents who emphasize autonomy or self-direction enhance their children's chances of entering higher-status occupations because these occupations tend to require more self-direction; in contrast, lower-status occupations tend to demand conformity to authority.

The GSS of 1973, 1975, 1976, 1978 and 1980 included a set of questions similar to the ones used by Kohn. Respondents were handed a list of 13 characteristics and asked: "The qualities listed on this card may all be important, but which three would you say are the most desirable for a child to have? Which one of these three is the most desirable of all?" Then they were asked: "All of the qualities listed on this card may be desirable, but could you tell me which three you consider least important? And which of these three is the least important of all?" The responses to five of the characteristics on the list best distinguished parents who valued self-direction from those who valued conformity. The five items were: "that he has good sense and sound judgement"; "that he is interested in how and why things happen"; "that he has good manners"; "that he is neat and clean"; and "that he obeys his parents well." Respondents who tended to rank the first two items (which emphasize self-direction) as most desirable also tended to rank the last three (emphasizing conformity) as least important, and vice versa. All white Protestants, white Catholics and Jews who had children aged 17 or less in their households were given a score on a scale based on their relative rankings of these five items. The possible range of the scale was 1 to 5, with a score of 1 indicating the maximum possible value placed on self-direction.

The mean scores for the three religious groups were 3.0 for Protestants, 2.9 for Catholics and 2.6 for Jews. The differences between Jews and Protestants and between Jews and Catholics were statistically significant. Thus, Jewish parents appeared to place a higher value on self-direction for their children and a lower value on conformity than non-Jewish parents.* For example, 42 percent of the Jewish parents selected "good sense and sound judgment" as the single most desirable quality in the entire set of 13 items, in comparison with 19 percent of the Catholics and 17 percent of the Protestants. At the other extreme, five percent of the Protestants and three percent of the Catholics picked "good manners" as the single most important quality but none of the Jews did.

We know that the emphasis on self-direction is generally stronger among middle-class parents and that a greater proportion of Jews are middle class than Protestants or

*A small number of the respondents were not the parents of the children in the household but other adults such as unmarried older siblings. However, their inclusion does not appear to affect the findings.

Catholics. When we attempted to control statistically for social class and urban residence, we found that our measures of religion, social class and urban residence all were significant predictors of a respondent's scale score. As we expected, the more education or income a respondent had, the more likely he or she was to value self-direction. In addition, parents who lived in metropolitan areas were more likely to value self-direction.

Over and above the effects of social class (as measured by education and income) and urban residence, Jews were most likely to value self-direction, Catholics less likely, and Protestants the least likely of all. Moreover, the impact of religion was similar in magnitude to the effect of social class. For instance, let us consider a Protestant and a Jew who both were aged 35, lived in a metropolitan area, had completed 13 to 16 years of schooling, and had a family income of \$20,000. The predicted scale score for the Jew, based on our statistical estimates, would be 2.5 as against 2.7 for the Protestant. This difference is roughly of the same magnitude as the difference in predicted scores between two respondents of the same religion who were dissimilar only in that one had not finished high school and the other had gone on to college. The differences in these predicted scores are not dramatic when compared with the possible range of scores, but they do suggest a noticeable if modest difference in the childrearing values of Jews and non-Jews.

Demographic Characteristics

Finally, we examined two demographic indicators of family life that had been shown by previous researchers to differentiate between Jews and non-Jews: the number of children ever born to women, and the proportion of married adults who ever divorce or separate. It is well known that the fertility of American Jews is lower than that of Protestants or Catholics, and it appears that this difference holds even when indicators of social class and urban residence are controlled. Yet few studies have been able to take into account statistically more than one confounding factor at a time. Therefore we analyzed the determinants of completed family size for Jewish and non-Jewish women, accounting for such factors as social class, urban residence and age at marriage.

Our analysis was restricted to white women aged 45 and over who had completed their childbearing years. There were 89 such Jewish women in the GSS data, 655 who were Catholic, and 1,901 who were Protestant. (The limited number of Jews in the samples precluded an adequate examination of the fertility patterns of younger women, whose incomplete childbearing experience would best be analyzed by more sophisticated demographic methods.) The mean number of children ever born was 2.65 for the Protestants, 2.68 for the Catholics and 2.07 for the Jews. Thus as expected, we found a substantial gross difference between Jews and non-Jews; specifically, an average of about 0.6 children per woman.

When we attempted to adjust for other relevant variables, we found that Catholics had a significantly higher completed family size than Protestants, and that Jews had a lower completed family size than Protestants. According to our estimates, about half of the gross difference between Jewish and Protestant completed fertility remained after differences in educational attainment, urban residence and age at marriage were accounted for. If we considered a Protestant woman, a Catholic woman and a Jewish woman, each of whom had attended college, lived in a metropolitan area and had married at age 21, we would find that the predicted number of children would be 2.7 for the Protestant, 3.0 for the Catholic and 2.4 for the Jew. Thus, our analysis of completed fertility conforms to the view that the low fertility of American Jews is not merely a function of their socioeconomic characteristics, their tendency to live in urban areas or their tendency to marry at later ages. These characteristics are important, but other characteristics associated with

American Jews also contribute to their low fertility.

Our findings on childbearing and childrearing are consistent with hypotheses previously suggested by a number of scholars who have attempted to explain the lower fertility of the Jews. In 1969, Calvin Goldscheider and Peter Uhlenberg advanced the theory that when minority groups (including the Jews) are insecure about their status and compete with majority groups for society's rewards, they marshal their resources to support fewer children. In this way their children have a better chance to compete with the more advantaged children of the majority group. Other scholars expressed skepticism about the role of insecurity, but most have endorsed the idea, consistent with Goldscheider and Uhlenberg's hypothesis, that the Jews' desire for social advancement lay behind smaller family size. Our findings imply that this strategy is still followed by many American Jewish parents.

It is also well established that a smaller proportion of Jewish couples divorce than Catholic or Protestant couples. But here again, small sample sizes have often precluded attempts to account simultaneously for a series of potentially confounding factors. Among the ever-married adults in the pooled 1972-to-1980 GSS data, 24 percent of the white Protestants, 17 percent of the white Catholics and 12 percent of the Jews had divorced or separated at some time since they were married.

Even after accounting for social class, urban residence, duration of marriage and region of residence, we found that Jews and Catholics still had significantly lower probabilities of having ever divorced or separated than Protestants. Our estimates implied a net difference of nine percentage points between Jews and Protestants ever divorcing or separating. Since the gross difference before other variables were controlled was 12 percentage points, our analysis suggested that a substantial portion of the difference between Jews and Protestants regarding divorce and separation remained after accounting for education, urban residence, region of residence and years of marriage.

Limitations of Our Research

Because the GSS samples were limited, we were unable to study changing trends in family attitudes and behavior patterns (such as a greater incidence of divorce, for example). Many of the adults in the GSS began their married lives decades ago; surely they have formed lasting habits that differ from the family patterns of younger adults. Moreover, many of the older Jews in the GSS were immigrants from Eastern Europe, while many of the younger Jews were third or fourth-generation Americans. We might expect that the family patterns of the first generation would differ substantially from those of the younger adults. Ideally, we would have presented separate analyses by birth cohort (e.g., 1900-1919, 1920-1939, and so on) or by generational status, (first-generation immigrant, second-generation, etc.). Through this procedure we could have investigated the question of how rapidly differences between Jews and non-Jews have lessened during this century. In our analysis of fertility we examined only completed family size. But it is possible, perhaps even probable, that the fertility of young Jewish and non-Jewish women has become more similar in recent years; we do know that fertility differences between Catholics and non-Catholics have diminished. Because of sample size limitations, however, these kinds of questions could not be answered with our data.

Our research was also limited in that we treated the three religious groups as if they were monolithic. For the Jews, once again the sample size was too small to study the variations among Jews from metropolitan areas, small cities and rural areas; or among Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jews; or between Jews who married outside the faith and those

who did not. In the case of Catholics, a detailed consideration of differences among the various Catholic ethnic groups would have been beyond the scope of this paper. Yet given that Catholic families appeared to differ from non-Catholic families about as often as Jewish families did from non-Jewish families, it would be worthwhile to examine the Catholic groups more closely. Kohn reported, for example, that Catholics from English or Irish backgrounds tended to value self-direction highly, even taking social class into account, but that Italian Catholics tended to value conformity.

Yet despite these limitations, we believe that the GSS data are the best available source of comparative information on religious differences in family life. The data are suggestive rather than definitive, leaving many interesting questions unanswered. But they did allow us to put many widespread beliefs about Jewish families to a better empirical test than had been previously possible.

Conclusions

All in all, the GSS data imply that the differences between contemporary American Jewish families and non-Jewish families are more modest than much scholarly and popular writing would lead us to believe. When we examined three standard survey questions designed to measure general family well-being and solidarity, we found almost no differences between Jews and non-Jews. Contrary to what we might have expected, Protestants appeared to be as satisfied with their family lives, virtually as happy with their marriages and as likely to have spent a social evening with relatives as Jews. Ever-married Jews, however, were less likely to have divorced or separated than Protestants. Catholics were the most likely of all three religious groups to have spent a social evening with relatives recently—even after controls were introduced for educational attainment and urban residence—although the magnitude of the difference was small. Moreover, the difference between Catholics and Jews in the probability of having divorced or separated was small once other factors were accounted for.

Of course, there are many other ways in which to measure family solidarity. It is possible, for example, that religious differences might become evident in responses to questions about contact with relatives by telephone or by mail. We hope that a richer body of data will be collected in the near future that will allow for a fuller examination of family cohesion among the major religious and ethnic groups. But until such a study is conducted, the GSS data will remain by far our best source of information on the comparative solidarity of Jewish and non-Jewish families. In general, the GSS data indicate that Jewish families seem to be little more cohesive than non-Jewish families.

But we did find differences between Jewish and non-Jewish families regarding childrearing. The Jewish family has often been described in literary and scholarly works as child-centered; parents are said to invest great amounts of time, effort and money to assist in their children's advancement, and to derive great pride from their achievements. This conventional view may exaggerate the distinctiveness of Jewish families, but our findings suggest that it contains some truth. When asked what qualities they consider most desirable for children to have, contemporary Jewish parents were more likely than non-Jewish parents to stress qualities that reflect autonomy and self-direction; conversely, they placed a lower value on qualities associated with obedience and conformity to external authority. Thus, Jewish parents seemed more likely to instill in their children those qualities that are congruent with the more highly-rewarded and prestigious occupations in our society. In doing so, they probably enhanced their children's chances of entering higher-status occupations.

Jewish parents had fewer children than non-Jews. We discovered even after taking into

account educational attainment, urban residence and age at marriage, that the completed family size of Jewish women appeared to be substantially lower than that of non-Jewish women. This result is consistent with earlier research. Smaller family size would make it easier for Jewish parents to invest heavily, both emotionally and materially, in their children's welfare. We suggest that it is in childbearing and childrearing patterns that contemporary American Jewish families are most distinctive.

We also found that the probability of ever-divorcing or separating was lower for Jews than for Protestants, even after statistical controls were worked out for confounding factors such as social class, urban residence and geographical region of residence. It appears from other research, however, that the difference in the divorce trends between Protestants and Catholics has narrowed somewhat since 1960. Likewise it may be possible that the difference between Jews and non-Jews has also diminished in recent years.

A fuller examination of the issues raised in this paper must await the collection of better comparative data about the family lives of American Jews, Protestants and Catholics.

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