

A Geographical Approach to an Analysis of the Distancing Hypothesis

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Abstract This paper reacts to the Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe and Cohen–Kelman papers on distancing of American Jews from Israel. I argue that the problem with both of these papers is that they utilize data from a consumer panel. These data are clearly not a random sample of American Jews. I further argue that data from local Jewish community studies have much to say about the issue, revealing that distancing is occurring to different degrees in different American Jewish communities.

Keywords Attachment to Israel · Distancing hypothesis · Local Jewish community studies

Despite all the resources that the American Jewish community has expended on survey research, via the Council of Jewish Federations, United Jewish Communities (now the Jewish Federations of North America), local Jewish Federations, the American Jewish Committee, and other organizations, the research community cannot definitively answer the question posed in this special issue. This situation exists for a number of valid (and some not so valid) reasons related to the changing nature of society (which negated the use of home interview surveys and lowered survey cooperation rates), the changing technology of survey research, and the inherently flawed procedures that we call “survey research.” Thus, since optimal data sets are just not available, both Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe and Cohen–Kelman utilize data produced by Synovate (formerly Market Facts) for the American Jewish

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Committee. However, despite employing subsets of the same basic data, the research teams arrive at different conclusions!

Brief Summary of the Arguments

Briefly, Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe argue that while numerous commentators assume a distancing of American Jews from Israel their data show that from 1989 to 2005 emotional attachment to Israel has varied within a narrow range, showing no monotonic increase or decrease. Yet, they also conclude that “for those looking for detachment, plenty of evidence can be found in these surveys: younger American Jews and those who define themselves as Reform or unaffiliated express comparatively lower levels of attachment to Israel.” In a sense, they (rightfully) recognize that there are elements in the data that could be interpreted in a manner that is inconsistent with their major conclusions that: (1) “American Jews have tended to become more attached to Israel as they grew older”; and (2) “the present analysis of available survey evidence finds no consistent support for the distancing hypothesis.”

While Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe analyze Jews-by-religion, Cohen–Kelman analyze only non-Orthodox Jews-by-religion. This difference no doubt significantly contributes to their different findings. Cohen–Kelman argue that their analysis points to diminished attachment to Israel among younger Jews. The statement “We discerned a deep-seated, and broad-based gap in Israel attachment between young and old” is indicative of the major conclusion reached by Cohen–Kelman. Unlike Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe, Cohen–Kelman argue that intermarriage is a principal explanation of this gap in attachment. The fact that they conclude by implying that readers should look into their own experiences indicates that they would agree that the answer from the available data is not totally clear cut.

My Background

I approach this discourse from a somewhat different angle. I worked on the committees that designed the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) in both 1990 and 2000–2001. I helped design the Israel attitude questions in NJPS 2000–2001. I am the author of more than 40 local Jewish community studies, all of which have included Israel-related questions and an analysis of the responses (See www.jewishdatabank.org). In almost all of my local Jewish community studies, I have hired and supervised my own telephone interviewers and have personally interviewed a few hundred Jewish households over the 27 years that I have been conducting these studies.

My 30 years of teaching statistics and survey research at the University of Miami and my book *Survey Research for Geographers* (Sheskin 1985) have also shaped my thinking. I have a secondary geographic specialty on the Middle East and in this capacity have long followed opinion polls on Israel of both Jews and the general population, and I have recently published a book chapter on the implications of American Jewish demography on U.S.-Israel relations (Sheskin 2009a).

Which Argument is More Convincing?

I remain uncertain of where the truth lies. Both papers are well presented and well argued. Although my “gut” and the data I present below convince me that Cohen–Kelman’s findings are closer to the truth, both papers suffer from the same basic drawback: they rely on data from Synovate’s consumer panel. My professional background and experience suggest that the following problems are inherent in such a sample:

- (1) Such a “panel sample” is clearly not a random (representative) sample of all American Jewish adults. Little is said in either paper about how the panel was selected (because Synovate does not provide that information). That the demographics of the panel seem to mostly mirror NJPS results for Jews-by-religion is comforting, but that does not make the panel a random sample. Many observers believe that the type of person who would agree to be on such a panel may be different from those who would not agree. In the current context, those who agree to be part of a panel may be more likely to follow news reports than those who do not agree and thus may be more familiar with the topic. Noting that the sample only includes Jews-by-religion is important, so that we understand that this bias exists, but this does *not* imply that we have a random sample of Jews-by-religion.
- (2) The strength of the Synovate panel surveys is that they repeat the same questions (for the most part) year after year. But the time period (1989–2005) is simply not long enough to really test the hypothesis, particularly since some of the analysis looks at even shorter time frames (such as 2000–2005) within the data set. Thus, the studies do not really examine generational differences.
- (3) Any analysis of questions about Israel needs to be tempered by the fact that events in Israel over the month (and, in some cases, the past 24 hours) before questioning respondents can significantly impact responses. While some recognition of this is forthcoming when Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe recognize that the Second Intifada may have impacted results in the early 2000s, a fuller analysis would need to examine the news about Israel for 30 days and 24 hours prior to each survey.
- (4) Cohen–Kelman’s examination of the non-Orthodox Jewish population is a good idea. However, they fall into the same trap for which they take Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe to task: Cohen–Kelman’s omission of the Orthodox (a likely increasing proportion of Jews-by-religion) is similar to Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe omitting Jews-not-by-religion (a likely increasing proportion of the entire Jewish population), particularly since this latter group may very well continue to maintain some interest in Israel well after they have lost interest in Jewish religious practice.

Thus, the reason I remain unconvinced by the findings of either study is not because either side in this debate is patently wrong, but because the data set upon which they rely is clearly not a random sample of American Jewish adults, the time frame of the data is too short, and the results are not adjusted for events happening in Israel at the time of each survey.

Geography Matters¹

Most planning in the American Jewish community is not undertaken at the national level, but at the level of the local Jewish community (Sheskin 2009b). The data in this section derive from local Jewish community studies completed since 1993.² All these studies used random digit dialing (RDD) for at least part of their sampling. RDD was the procedure used in both National Jewish Population Surveys and is used in all of the national polls conducted by Harris, Gallup, Time-CNN, etc. While RDD also has some methodological drawbacks, particularly in the past few years, as response rates have decreased and the percentage of cell phone-only households has increased, RDD data are recognized by almost all researchers as significantly more representative of a population than data obtained from a panel of participants as is the data used by Sasson–Kadushin–Saxe and by Cohen–Kelman.

The data in Tables 1, 2, and 3 are from the local Jewish community studies that I have completed since 1994. All these studies used RDD for at least part of their sampling. Distinctive Jewish Name (DJN) sampling was also used in many communities with weighting factors applied to remove much of the bias introduced by DJN sampling.

Table 1 shows that the percentage of Jewish respondents who are extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel varies from 32% in York (PA) to 62% in Miami, a range of 30 percentage points. Some communities are simply much more Israel-oriented than others. The extent to which a local Jewish newspaper will find readers interested in Israel and the extent to which a local Jewish Federation is able to draw upon feelings about Israel in soliciting donations is simply much greater in Miami, Middlesex County (NJ), and Detroit than in Rochester, Las Vegas, and Charlotte.

Table 1 can also be analyzed to examine the distancing hypothesis. The table shows the percentage of respondents who are extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel by age, for respondents under age 35, age 35–49, age 50–64, and age 65 and over.

Ten communities show strong evidence of distancing: South Palm Beach, West Palm Beach, Rhode Island, Atlantic County, Sarasota, Milwaukee, Monmouth, Hartford, Portland (ME), and York. In these communities, the percentage extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel increases monotonically and significantly with age. For example, in South Palm Beach, the percentage extremely or very emotionally attached increases from 35% of respondents under age 35 to 45% of respondents age 35–49, 54% of respondents age 50–64, and 65% of respondents age 65 and over.

Another seven communities show some evidence of distancing in the sense that a difference exists between the two age groups below age 50, on the one hand, and the two age groups age 50 and over, on the other: the Lehigh Valley, St. Paul, Harrisburg, Richmond, Tidewater, Rochester, and Las Vegas. For example, in the Lehigh Valley, 38% of respondents under age 35 and 39% of respondents age 35–49

¹ Parts of this section are taken from a longer forthcoming paper.

² The 1990 and 2000–2001 National Jewish Population Surveys also provide time series data on emotional attachment to Israel. I ignore this evidence here because it is addressed elsewhere in this volume in an article by Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz and Jonathan Ament.

Table 1 Extremely + very emotionally attached to Israel by age, community comparisons

| Community | Year | Overall (%) | Under 35 (%) | 35–49 (%) | 50–64 (%) | 65–74 (%) | 75+ (%) | 65+ (%) |
|-----------------|------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Miami | 2004 | 62 | 55 | 61 | 57 | 66 | 69 | 68 |
| S Palm Beach | 2005 | 61 | 35 | 45 | 54 | 64 | 66 | 65 |
| Middlesex | 2008 | 58 | 58 | 46 | 52 | 61 | 68 | 65 |
| Detroit | 2005 | 56 | 58 | 51 | 54 | 63 | 57 | 59 |
| Jacksonville | 2002 | 56 | 47 | 54 | 52 | 73 | 63 | 67 |
| Bergen | 2001 | 55 | 47 | 56 | 53 | 58 | 61 | 59 |
| San Antonio | 2007 | 55 | 38 | 55 | 52 | 62 | 60 | 61 |
| Lehigh Valley | 2007 | 54 | 38 | 39 | 56 | 60 | 63 | 62 |
| W Palm Beach | 2005 | 54 | 25 | 33 | 50 | 61 | 61 | 61 |
| Rhode Island | 2002 | 53 | 38 | 44 | 56 | 70 | 61 | 64 |
| Minneapolis | 2004 | 52 | 33 | 51 | 46 | 62 | 68 | 65 |
| Atlantic County | 2004 | 51 | | 37 ^a | 48 | 58 | 60 | 59 |
| St. Paul | 2004 | 50 | 44 | 41 | 57 | 64 | 54 | 57 |
| Sarasota | 2001 | 49 | | 27 ^a | 48 | 56 | 53 | 55 |
| Washington | 2003 | 49 | 48 | 46 | 52 | 47 | 53 | 51 |
| Tucson | 2002 | 47 | 47 | 42 | 43 | 50 | 59 | 54 |
| Milwaukee | 1996 | 44 | 32 | 39 | 48 | 55 | 51 | 53 |
| Broward | 1997 | 42 | 40 | 39 | 31 | 46 | 46 | 46 |
| Monmouth | 1997 | 42 | 32 | 36 | 43 | 52 | 52 | 52 |
| Harrisburg | 1994 | 42 | 35 | 37 | 48 | 54 | 53 | 54 |
| Westport | 2000 | 41 | 35 | 39 | 36 | 47 | 61 | 55 |
| Richmond | 1994 | 41 | 28 | 37 | 51 | 53 | 54 | 53 |
| Tidewater | 2001 | 40 | 31 | 34 | 43 | 47 | 56 | 52 |
| Hartford | 2000 | 40 | 23 | 35 | 40 | 52 | 44 | 48 |
| Wilmington | 1995 | 38 | 30 | 37 | 34 | 59 | 38 | 50 |
| Rochester | 1999 | 37 | 29 | 30 | 36 | 53 | 45 | 49 |
| St. Petersburg | 1994 | 37 | 37 | 30 | 39 | 47 | 35 | 41 |
| Las Vegas | 2005 | 36 | 32 | 31 | 37 | 38 | 44 | 41 |
| Charlotte | 1997 | 35 | 27 | 33 | 33 | NA | NA | 56 |
| Portland (ME) | 2007 | 33 | | 24 ^a | 35 | 48 | 48 | 48 |
| York | 1999 | 32 | 9 | 27 | 37 | 42 | 48 | 44 |

^a Under age 50

are extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel, compared to 56% of respondents age 50–64 and 62% of respondents age 65 and over.

Another four communities show some evidence of distancing in the sense that the under age 35 percentage is significantly lower than the age 35–49 and the age 50–64 percentages (which are close to one another), and the age 65 and over percentage is higher than the two middle age groups: Jacksonville, Bergen, San Antonio, and Minneapolis. For example, in Jacksonville, 47% of respondents under age 35 are extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel, compared to 54% of respondents

Table 2 Emotional attachment and visits to Israel by age decade 2000 data set

| Community | Overall (%) | Under 35 (%) | 35–49 (%) | 50–64 (%) | 65+ (%) |
|--|-------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| All respondents (extremely + very attached) | 52 | 44 | 45 | 50 | 60 |
| All respondents (not attached) | 12 | 19 | 17 | 12 | 8 |
| In-married (extremely + very attached) | 63 | 58 | 61 | 60 | 66 |
| Intermarried (extremely + very attached) | 31 | 19 | 29 | 35 | 42 |
| Visited Israel (extremely + very attached) | 69 | 64 | 68 | 68 | 72 |
| Did not visit Israel (extremely + very attached) | 34 | 24 | 26 | 34 | 41 |
| An adult visited Israel | 53 | 48 | 45 | 47 | 61 |

Table 3 Emotional attachment to Israel by age over time

| Community | Year | Overall (%) | Under 35 (%) | 35–49 (%) | 50–64 (%) | 65+ (%) |
|---------------------------|------|-------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Extremely + very attached | | | | | | |
| Miami | 2004 | 62 | 55 | 61 | 57 | 68 |
| Miami | 1994 | 42 | 39 | 37 | 40 | 48 |
| S Palm Beach | 2005 | 61 | 35 | 45 | 54 | 65 |
| S Palm Beach | 1995 | 50 | 38 | 27 | 52 | 52 |
| Not attached | | | | | | |
| Miami | 2004 | 10 | 12 | 13 | 10 | 7 |
| Miami | 1994 | 19 | 18 | 20 | 20 | 18 |
| S Palm Beach | 2005 | 7 | 31 | 14 | 11 | 4 |
| S Palm Beach | 1995 | 12 | 24 | 19 | 15 | 10 |

age 35–49 and 52% of respondents age 50–64. The percentage then increases significantly to 67% of respondents age 65 and over.

Another six communities show even less evidence of distancing because only the elderly, for the most part, have a significantly higher percentage than the other age groups: Miami, Tucson, Broward, Westport, Wilmington, and Charlotte. For example, in Miami, the 68% of respondents age 65 and over who are extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel is significantly higher than the percentages for the other three age groups (55–61%).

Three communities show relationships that show distancing patterns that have been “reversed”: Middlesex (NJ), Detroit, and St. Petersburg. For example, in Middlesex, the percentage of respondents who are extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel increases from 46% of respondents age 35–49 to 52% of respondents age 50–64 and 65% of respondents age 65 and over. The reversal occurs in that the 58% of respondents under age 35 is significantly higher than the percentages for age 35–49 and age 50–64. (Note that Tucson also has a reversal of respondents under age 35).

The only community showing no relationship between age and being extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel is Washington, where the percentages are

48% of respondents under age 35, 46% of respondents age 35–49, 52% of respondents age 50–64, and 51% of respondents age 65 and over.

A special analysis was undertaken of the 21 post-2000 studies in Table 1. All 21 individual community data sets were merged into one (the Decade 2000 Data Set) and weights were applied so that the overall results represent a random sample of the 21 communities. While these 21 communities do not represent a random sample of all American Jewish adults, the 19,000 surveys completed in these 21 communities are a random sample of the 536,000 American Jewish households in the 21 communities. In this data set, the percentage of respondents extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel increases from 44% of respondents under age 35 to 45% of respondents age 35–49, 50% of respondents age 50–64, and 60% of respondents age 65 and over (Table 2). The percentage not emotionally attached decreases from 19% of respondents under age 35–17% of respondents age 35–49, 12% of respondents age 50–64, and 8% of respondents age 65 and over. The most serious break appears to be between respondents under age 65 and respondents age 65 and over. Perhaps more importantly, the results for the under age 35 and the age 35–49 groups do not differ significantly.

My major conclusions: (1) distancing, for the most part, is occurring in almost all communities. The extent of this distancing varies significantly from community to community; and (2) distancing seems to be greatest between elderly and non-elderly respondents, with less difference between the two youngest age groups.

Two communities were asked the emotional attachment to Israel question in two different surveys conducted 10 years apart (Table 3). In Miami, the percentage extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel increased from 42% in 1994 to 62% in 2004, while the percentage not emotionally attached to Israel decreased from 19% in 1994 to 10% in 2004. A similar relationship is seen in South Palm Beach: the percentage extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel increased from 50% in 1995 to 61% in 2005, while the percentage not emotionally attached to Israel decreased from 12% in 1995 to 7% in 2005. While a number of explanations for this are possible, it is hardly evidence of distancing. Finally, note that increased attachment occurs for almost all age groups.

Some Other Findings

Several additional findings from the Decade 2000 Data Set (which contains 21 local Jewish community studies completed between 2000 and 2008) can add to the discussion (Table 2). First, 63% of respondents in in-married households are extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel, compared to only 31% of respondents in intermarried households. The percentage increases by age for respondents in both in-married and intermarried households, but the increase is much greater for respondents in intermarried households, implying that the greatest “problem” of a lack of attachment to Israel is among young respondents in intermarried households, a finding consistent with that of Cohen–Kelman. Second, 69% of respondents in households in which an adult has visited Israel are extremely or very emotionally attached to Israel, compared to only 34% of respondents in

households in which no adult has visited Israel. Third, emotional attachment to Israel increases with age both in households in which an adult has visited Israel and in households in which no adult has visited, although the increase is much greater among non-visitors. Finally, 47% of non-elderly households contain an adult who has visited Israel compared to 61% of elderly households. Note that little difference in the percentage of households in which an adult has visited Israel exists among the three non-elderly age groups.

What does this Mean for the American Jewish Community?

To some extent, a symbiotic relationship exists between Israel and the American Jewish community. American Jews hope that trips to Israel and Israel's accomplishments will help to foster a sense of pride and a Jewish identity among American Jews. Israel understands that a strong American Jewish community is important to the political and economic future of the State. The policy implication of this research is that, if younger American Jews are less emotionally attached to Israel and they do not on their own become more attached as they age, then additional means should be found to establish and reinforce such an attachment. This would benefit Jews in both countries.

This brief expose suggests that while the distancing of American Jews from Israel is occurring, perhaps it is not occurring at the significant pace suggested by some. More importantly, the extent to which there is distancing varies significantly geographically. Some American Jewish communities may need to do more to promote attachment to Israel among their younger members than others do.

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