

The Fertility of the Jewish People: A Contemporary Overview

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Jewish fertility is of interest because of its obvious practical significance as well as its intellectual importance. Over the past decade or longer, questions have been raised in the popular press and in the scientific literature as to whether or not the Jewish people is perpetuating itself biologically. Disinterested scholars have also begun to study the historic and contemporary reproductive behavior of the Jewish people because of the special role of the Jews in the demographic transition in Europe and because of some special characteristics of Jewish population dynamics in our own time. This burgeoning interest in historic fertility generally and the historic and contemporary fertility of the Jewish people in our own time has produced a substantial and interesting scholarly literature.

While there remain serious problems of data quality and comparability in those jurisdictions where official sources do not recognize Jews as such, the situation has improved to the point where one can state conclusions with reasonable certitude. After reading through the published literature and the special reports written for this conference, one is forced to conclude that the diaspora communities have reached fertility levels that are below replacement and that the Jewish fertility levels in Israel are significantly above replacement. This conclusion is not based upon ideology but on the reports in the scientific literature.

Empirical Data: Country Reports

For the period 1970–1975, we have Crude Birth Rates for Jews and for total populations for a wide variety of countries whose Jewish populations account for well over three-fourths of the population of world Jewry (DellaPergola, 1983). Consistently, in each of these

countries, Jewish birth rates are below those of the total for the country. The extent to which Jewish birth rates fall below those of the host populations varies significantly so that in Switzerland and in the Moldavian Republic of the USSR Jewish birth rates were approximately 85 to 90% of those of the total population while in Canada and the United States Jewish birth rates were approximately 60% of those of the total populations. The crude birth rate of the Israeli Jewish population was significantly above the various diaspora Jewish populations and was greater than the crude birth rate of the total populations in all but one of the countries studied. In sum, Jewish birth rates for the recent period are a fraction of the total birth rates of the countries in which Jews dwell and in Israel, Jewish birth rates exceed those of the Jewish and non-Jewish populations of the industrialized world (DellaPergola, 1983).

The United States

Does a lower Jewish birth rate in the lands of the diaspora portend problems? In 19th century Russia, Jewish birth rates were below those of the host population yet the Jewish population of the tsarist empire grew rapidly and enormously during that period (Gitelman, 1981). That set of circumstances differs from our own in two fundamental ways. While Jews' birth rates were significantly below those of Russian gentiles, Jewish mortality was also much lower. The natural increase of Jews and gentiles, though composed of different proportions of natality and mortality, was reasonably close. Second, and more significantly, current Jewish birth rates in the diaspora, are now showing themselves to be fractions of general birth rates which themselves are below replacement. For example, birth rates in the United States have been declining for something on the order of 150 years. For most of that period however, American birth rates reached replacement. America grew through migration and through the excess of births over deaths. In recent years however, the United States has experienced rapid decline in fertility rates. The fertility rate for the United States in 1980 was 40% lower than it was in 1950 and by 1973, the United States fertility rate slipped below replacement (Fuchs, 1983:41).

In examining American Jewish tendencies to marry and age at marriage, we find further evidence of the prospects of continued low fertility among Jews. There is a significant increase in age at marriage, large enough to impinge upon fecundity, and also what may be a significant increase in life-long non-marriage (Goldstein, 1987). A study of college freshmen of the class of 1974 found that by 1980, 42% of the Jewish women were married as compared with 57% of the

non-Jewish women. About 1 in 20 Jews were parents as compared with 1 in 4 of the non-Jews (Rosenfield, 1984).

There are other less proximate factors to be considered such as a decline in religious traditionalism and an increase in inter-marriage, both of which have an effect on effective Jewish fertility. Based upon the limited evidence we have here, it is clear that American Jews, the largest single diaspora community by far, will not manifest fertility equal to, not to speak of greater than, replacement.

Western Europe

For Western Europe, we have reports on the Federal Republic of Germany, Switzerland, Italy and France (Bensimon, 1987). In the Bundesrepublik, deaths among Jews exceed births by a ratio of approximately 5 : 1. The fertility rate of Federal Republic Jewry is 1.3, the lowest of the several countries to be discussed. The age structure of West German Jewry is such that a significant change is unlikely. In Switzerland, as we noted above, the Jewish Crude Birth Rate is a relatively large fraction of that of the population as a whole. Over the three decades from 1951 through 1980, the ratio of births to deaths has improved significantly from 0.64 : 1 to 0.84 : 1, however, the effective Jewish birth rate, i.e. Jewish children born to endogamous Jewish mothers, is declining. During the period 1965 through 1985 the Jewish community of Rome grew by 32%. However, based upon current mortality and natality, the community can be expected to age significantly, and with other things being equal, a concomitant decline in fertility can be expected.

The last West European community to be considered is France. French Jewry is now the largest Jewish community in Western Europe, thanks to the substantial migration from North Africa. Also, thanks to the North African subcommunity, French Jewry is young and fertile. Without taking into account for the moment whether children born to Jewish mothers are being raised as Jews, we find that as of 1979, Paris Jewry showed a total fertility rate of 2.4, well beyond the required 2.1 children. Disaggregated by national origin of the women we find wide variations. The total fertility for women born in North Africa was 3.1, for women born in Europe outside of France, 2.8 and for women born in France, 1.7. French Jewry's biological replacement is highly dependent on its non-indigenous population. The data strongly suggest however that the foreign born population is rapidly assimilating to native Franco-Jewish norms. Comparing period of marriage cohorts for Jewish women resident in Paris, we find that for those married in the first decade after the Second World War, North Africa origin women's

fertility was 1.74 times that of the native Franco Jewish women; for the next decade (1956–65) it was 1.26 and for the 1966 – 1975 decade the two groups reported the exact same fertility (Bensimon, 1987).

Israel

Unlike the diaspora Jewish communities, Israeli Jewry's fertility is significantly above replacement. While there is a decline from the reported total fertility of 4.0 in 1950, current total fertility ranges between 2.8 and 2.9 children per women (Sicron, 1987:4). The fertility experienced during the early days of the state was disproportionately that of women of Afro-Asian origin. In 1952–53 the total fertility of Afro-Asian women was 6.19 or more than twice that of European origin women (=2.98) and almost twice as much as women born in Israel (=3.29). In the early 1960s, European origin women reached their low point with a total fertility rate of 2.31. By 1983, there was convergence between Afro-Asian, European and Israeli born women with but 0.4 of a child difference between the Europeans and the Afro-Asians. The Afro-Asian fertility declined sharply while the European origin fertility grew somewhat (Schmelz, 1986: 92). As an aside we ought to note that European origin Jewish women in Israel have experienced greater fertility than fellow Jews who have remained in their countries of origin and even of the non-Jewish population of their home countries. While for the recent period this might reflect self-selective migration, for the period of mass migration this is unlikely to be the case. Something happens to migrants that raises their actual fertility and even more, seems to augment their notions of ideal fertility (Schmelz, 1986: 131–133). We will return to this issue further on in our discussion.

Fertility and Effective Fertility: the Impact of Exogamy

The discussion up to now has dealt with the fertility of Jewish women whether or not they were raising their children as Jews. In this section we will deal with the question of Jewish parents and their Jewish children as a problematic rather than as a given. Specifically, we will examine the impact of exogamy on effective Jewish fertility. I borrow the term effective Jewish fertility from the work of Schmelz and DellaPergola who have coined the phrase to take into account the probability that an intermarried Jewish parent will raise his/her child as a Jew.

From a purely mechanical demographic perspective, the Jewish population ideal would call for all Jews to marry non-Jews and to raise the issue of those unions as Jews. The Jewish fertility replacement

figure would then be 1.05 children per couple since each couple would “use up” but one Jew. This fantasy would work out if and only if the Jewish and non-Jewish spouse both wished to and were able to raise their child or children as Jews. As we shall see in a moment, the fantasy is just that, a fantasy. The reality is that a minority of children of mixed marriages (i.e. non-conversionary) are raised as Jews, the number and proportion of such marriages is increasing and that even with respect to conversionary marriages some of the published optimism is not warranted by the hard facts.

Before turning to the data for this part of our discussion, let us lay out the basic conceptual scheme. Let us assume a population of 1,000 Jewish men and 1,000 Jewish women. If they were to marry one another, i.e. total endogamy and they were to have a total fertility rate of 2.1 children, then this 2,000 Jews would produce 2,100 Jewish children or enough for their own biological replacement. For the moment, let us assume a 20% individual inter-marriage rate. That is, 400 of these Jews would be marrying non-Jews giving a couple inter-marriage rate of 33%. The endogamous Jewish couples would be producing 800×2.1 or 1,680 children. The other 400 Jewish women and men who were exogamous would produce 840 children. If all of the children of the exogamous were to be raised as Jews then the total number of Jewish children would be 2,520 or a fertility rate of 2.5, comfortably above replacement. If half of the exogamous children were to be raised as Jews then the total would be 2,100 or at replacement. Where one-fourth are raised as Jews, then there would be 1,890 Jewish children and at one-eighth, 1,785 Jewish children.

Computing effective Jewish fertility then is in principle simple. One simply plugs in the numbers into a very simple arithmetic procedure. We do not have all of the numbers for all of the countries we have discussed, but some order of magnitude can be arrived at for several countries.

Again, beginning with Europe we find that in Switzerland the number of children born to Jewish mothers is increasing but the fertility increase is counterbalanced by a sharp increase in mixed marriage, particularly among Jewish women who have now effectively caught up with the Jewish men of Switzerland with an inter-marriage rate of 45.2% by the early 1980s. Almost half of all marriages entered in to by Swiss Jews in the early part of this decade were mixed marriages. Among Jewish women in mixed marriages, 27% of the children were not reported as Jews. I have no data on the outcome of father Jewish / mother non-Jewish marriages. In the Federal Republic of Germany, between 1971 and 1975, 78% of the marriages entered into by Jews

were mixed. The number of conversions into the community is somewhat less than the number leaving the *Gemeinde* (*Austritte*). With respect to Rome, the source data was the community list, and as such one has to question its intermarriage data.

The most comprehensive data for Europe are to be found for France where at least for the Paris area, we have good data on intermarriage, religious behavior and the identification of Jewish children. In the first decade after the Second World War, 16.1% of all marriages contracted in France in which there was a Jewish bride or groom were mixed. By 1956–65 that proportion had grown to 25.4% and by 1966–1975, 49.0%. As has been found elsewhere, more men than women initially intermarried, but by the most recent decade for which we have data the sex difference has disappeared. Most of the boys born to mixed marriages are not circumcised. In all, 92.1% of the boys born to endogamous couples are circumcised as compared with the situation in mixed marriages in which the husband is Jewish, where 49.1% are circumcised and mixed marriages where the wife is Jewish, 17.5%.

If circumcision is to be taken as the indicator of the child's being raised as a Jew, then where the intermarriage includes a Jewish wife, the Jews "lose" by approximately 4:1, while where the husband is Jewish, there is neither gain nor loss. If approximately one-third of the Jewish women in the most recent cohort marry non-Jews and approximately one-fifth produce effectively Jewish children then the total fertility rate of this Jewish population has to be discounted appropriately. Without taking into account the lower fertility of the mixed married and other complicating factors we arrive at the following:

2,000 Jews, 1,000 men and 1,000 women
a mixed marriage rate of 49% gives the following distribution:

1,510 Jews married to Jews

= 755 homogamous couples

the most recent fertility rate = 1.8

yield - $1.8 \times 755 = 1,359$ Jewish children

490 Jews married to non-Jews

assume same fertility as endogamous

245 women produce $1.8 \times 245 = 441$ children

of whom $441 \times .175 = 77$ are Jewish

245 men produce $1.8 \times 245 = 441$ children

of whom $441 \times .491 = 217$ are Jewish.

A totally endogamous population of 1,000 Jewish men married to 1,000 Jewish women would have produced 1,800 children while with the characteristics we have noted, i.e. intermarriage rates and rates of retention of children, the same 2,000 Jews would have produced 1,653 or 8% less. I take this to be a conservative estimate in that we have not taken into account the lower fertility, the greater probability of divorce, and the weaker Jewish environment of exogamous households.

For the United States, the most recent national data we have are to be found in *The National Jewish Population Study*. Overall, the NJPS found a mixed marriage rate of Jewish persons of 7%, with a cohort analysis revealing an individual rate of intermarriage of 4–5% of those marrying between 1950 and 1959 going up to 22% for those marrying between 1965 and 1969. By mixed marriage in these data is meant those marriages in which the non-Jewish origin spouse did not convert to Judaism. Community studies conducted since NJPS report that during the 1970s and 1980s the rate of intermarriage has gone up and the rate of conversion to Judaism has gone down. Even where there is a conversion to Judaism, the ethnic Jewishness of the household (e.g. as measured by living in and wanting to live in a Jewish neighborhood) declines (Ritterband, 1988). The primary socialization function of the Jewish household is less effective. I strongly suspect that the approximately 8% loss we calculated for France (above) is a conservative estimate for the United States.

The Counter Thesis

I began the discussion by noting my conclusion, that diaspora Jewry was in demographic decline. In this section I shall examine the counter thesis and counter evidence. The counter thesis, based upon an argument from survey data on expected fertility of young American Jews and upon a different reading of the age specific fertility of American Jewry, has proposed that the fertility of American Jewry has been underestimated.

Surveys of expected and desired fertility have shown themselves to be quite accurate in the aggregate. Those persons who project small families tend to have them and those who project large families have them. Both the 1975 and 1985 Boston population studies reported fertility expectations of 2.2 for currently married Jewish women, a figure well within the range of replacement. In a 1979 national study of high school graduates of the class of 1971 Jews report that they expect to have about two children (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1985).

Closer examination of the 1975 Boston data shows that the most recent marriage cohort expected completed fertility of 1.9 children as compared with 2.3 for the 1960–65 cohort and 2.8 for the 1949–1959 cohort (Goldscheider, 1986:97). While it is quite possible that the young cohort will revise its expectation upward, my own work suggests that they will revise their expectation downwards, i.e. below 1.9 (Cohen and Ritterband, 1981). The same holds true for the Class of 1971 study. In addition, particularly with respect to the Class of 1971 study, we should be taking into account delayed marriage, the apparent increase in post-fecundity marriage, the difference between the fertility of Jewish women and the effectively Jewish fertility of Jewish women, i.e. intermarriage. Each of these factors has the potential of reducing the probability of the inter-generational biological replacement of the American Jewish community. For example, the Philadelphia Jewish community study of 1984 found that 11% of the women and 16% of the men between the ages of 31 and 40 had never married (Yancey and Goldstein, 1984). Will these aging young Jews marry and create Jewish families? Will a significant and growing fraction of them either never marry or marry too late to procreate?

The second consideration is the construction of total fertility rates from current fertility. It has been suggested that Jewish women have increasingly, and more than other women, delayed their child bearing such that total fertility rates have to be recomputed to take into account their changing age specific distribution. The evidence that I have seen suggests that while there has been an increase in late 30s fertility, it is more than compensated for by a decrease in earlier fertility. While it is premature to be sure, the data available, crude as they are, suggest that the burden of proof falls on those who claim biological replacement of American Jewry.

Accounting for Jewish Fertility Patterns: A Review of Some Theories

Over the past two hundred years or more, Jewish fertility patterns have been significantly different from those of the host populations among whom Jews lived. In a recent state of the art paper, Livi-Bacci (1986) includes the Jews among the “Social-Group Forerunners of Fertility Control In Europe”. By the first quarter of the eighteenth century the Jews of Livorno experience a level of fertility which their Catholic neighbors would not reach until the middle of the nineteenth century. In various regions and cities of Germany, in Prague, even in doggedly traditional Poland and Tsarist Russia, Jewish fertility was

lower than that of gentiles and began its decline earlier than did that of gentiles. The fertility of Jews resembled that of the aristocracy in Italy and of the officer corps in Germany. In the United States, as Jews assimilate or acculturate they do not take on the fertility patterns of white gentile Americans. On the contrary, the more like Americans they seem to in be terms of language, dress, food, etc., the less like gentile Americans they seem to be in terms of fertility behavior. In this, as in other areas, American Jews do not assimilate to America, but rather to some futuristic America which is peculiarly theirs.

While modernist Jews have continued to reduce their fertility over the past two centuries or more, ultra-traditionalist Jews have self-consciously maintained or perhaps even increased the fertility they at one time experienced in Eastern Europe. Can we account for both ends of the Jewish fertility distribution? Why are the modernists so apparently "super-modern" and the traditionalists "super-traditional?" Why do the secular Israelis, an otherwise determinedly modernist group, experience fertility significantly higher than that of other industrialized peoples and much higher than that of Jews of similar background and origin who live in the diaspora?

The simplest theoretical formulation is that of what has been called the characteristics approach. It states that Jews have low fertility because they have the characteristics of a low fertility population. Jews are urban, have high levels of education and thus have low fertility. The characteristics approach, while useful, is not in fact a theory. Differences which can be located among characteristics require theoretical explanation. While characteristics are useful as indicators, they do not explain anything other than in the limited and special sense of explaining variance. Further, characteristics frequently lead to contradictory findings. Among these is the relationship between fertility and education which in some instances is positive and others negative. Last, with respect to Jews, if we explain in terms of the differential characteristics of Jews, we then must explain why the Jews have these characteristics.

With respect to Jews particularly, it has been suggested that Jewish lower fertility is a consequence of minority status and the insecurity and striving which flow from that status (Goldscheider, 1967). While the minority status thesis is attractive in its apparent ability to account for Israel-diaspora differences, it does not account for other minorities. For example, Catholic fertility is higher where they are in the minority than where they are in the majority (Day, 1968). Blacks have higher fertility than do whites but reduce their fertility as they rise in social status, while Mexican Americans do not. In sum, a theory which

accounts for one minority, the Jews, but does not account for others, cannot be used to explain the Jews.

I would like to propose that our theorizing move along two dimensions, i.e. rational and non-rational. By rational, I mean that "...perceived social and economic circumstances must make reduced fertility seem advantageous to individual couples". In addition, "...fertility must be within the calculus of conscious choice" (Coale, 1973). By non-rational, I mean essentially the reverse, where fertility does not respond to calculations of advantage, where fertility is an end in itself or at very least, is not responsive to the "calculus of conscious choice". The distinction I am drawing flows directly from classic sociological theory with its distinction of the rationality of means and the rationality of ends.

The rational economic theory accounts for reduced fertility in terms of changes in inter-generational transfers, the value of children's labor, return of investment in human capital. As Becker (1981:110) puts it, the low fertility of Jewish families is "...explained by the high marginal rates of return . . . to investments in the education, health and other human capital of their children". Jews trade off quantity for quality because of the high return that Jews receive from quality. The economic argument then is that Jewish fertility was and is lower than that of surrounding population because Jews were and are more likely to make conscious rational choices, calculating their advantage, and the opportunity structure particularly rewarded reduced fertility. That is, by investing in the "human capital" of their children, Jews were more likely than were non-Jews to receive a return on their investment. Educated Jews earned more than did educated non-Jews, therefore it paid for Jews to give their children an education. In order to give their children an education, it became necessary for Jews to restrict their number of children, thus controlled fertility.

The non-rational theory allows less room for "the calculus of individual choice". It poses the question, "Why do individuals take upon themselves the freedom to make life choices?" Why are they not constrained by traditional norms? Earlier than others, a large fraction of Jewish society became committed to the rational choice norms of modernism. This was and is a core element in the secularization of the Jewish people and other peoples. Part of Jewish society however, did not accept the new social arrangements. With the rise of the modernist political, moral and economic order, with its emphasis on free choice and its rejection of the authority of the past, some Jews consciously rejected that social order and became even more committed to the past. As the Hatam Sofer put it, "*badash assur min ba-Torah*". The past must

rule because the past encapsulates the right and the true. The rational calculation of advantage, the rejection of the moral weight of the past, will lead Jews to sin and assimilation.

That which had been, became sacralized as the present became increasingly divorced from the past. Within the Jewish people there remained a small group which saw itself as a saving remnant, preserving the past including the fertility norms of the past. What I am arguing is that the fertility norms of the Haredim are not the result of passive indifference to contraception, but rather are motivated by a more general, activist ideology which idealizes a past which never was (Friedman, 1987). Specifically, the Haredim are not strangers to contraception. They do not simply accept children as God's will and gift. On the contrary, they employ effective contraception, but do so later in the course of the marriage after several births (Harlap, S., 1980).

As a more general proposition, the more past oriented a household is, the higher its fertility as a consequence of its having granted moral authority to the past and the norms of the past. Traditional religious behavior is a key indicator of positive valuation of the past, but it is not the only indicator. The State of Israel per se is an affirmation of the Jewish past as much as it is a rebellion against the Jewish past. The fertility of secular Israelis is less than that of the religious Israelis but greater than that of the diaspora secular Jews, with their much weaker sense of the Jewish past. With all of its emphasis on modernism, secular Israel is very much obsessed with the Jewish past and with the need to maintain contact with the past. Part of that past is the familial character of the Jewish people and pro-familial norms which serve as a partial counter-weight to the norms of rational calculus which have come to dominate modern, secular societies.

The effects of traditionalism and secularism with their different perspectives on the past have been shown to be true of the Christian, particularly Roman Catholic populations of Western Europe as well (Lesthaeghe and Wilson, 1986). Using socialist vote as their indicator of secularization, they find significant correlations between secularism and low fertility in Western Europe. Socialism is not only an economic, it is a moral stance attempting to displace traditional morality and values. For both Jews and Christians, socialism was emblematic of a social perspective that denied the authority of tradition.

More generally, modernism expands the scope of "rational calculus" and turns the individual's gaze toward the future and away from the past. There is a phrase associated with Newton, but which actually can be traced through Jewish and Christian sources at least as far back as

the thirteenth century. It well summarizes the moral stance of traditionalism asserting that if we see further than our forbears, it is because we are "dwarfs on the shoulders of giants." That phrase became a critical marker of the wars between modernists and traditionalists, implying emancipation from the weight of the past for the modernists and continued commitment to the past for the traditionalists (Levine, 1978; Merton, 1966; Zlotnick, 1973).

Declining Jewish fertility is clearly related to the changing objective social position of the Jewish people, but it is also related to the radical change in the moral stance of the Jews. Much, but not all of that change, is captured in indicators of religiousness. There are other indicators and sources of traditionalism, but clearly religiousness is a major carrier of a more general traditionalist orientation. With the erosion of Jewish religious sentiment, Jewish fertility has fallen sharply.

Summary

In the recent past, the low fertility communities of the modernist Jewish world were kept afloat by migration in from the high fertility communities. These communities no longer exist in large numbers. Western Jewries are now left to their own resources. Between low fertility and assimilation, the Jewries of the West face continual erosion. Extrapolating from the present, the question is not whether or not these Jewish communities will decline, but rather how quickly they will decline. The Jewish people on the whole accepted modernity with its concomitant devaluing of the past. One consequence of the choice of modernism has been the gradual erosion of the demographic basis of Jewish life.

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