

CHILDSPACING AMONG THE JEWS OF MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT

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While an impressive quantity of literature exists on population characteristics and vital statistics of Jews in the United States and elsewhere, one demographic variable on which Jews have not been significantly analyzed is childspacing. Childspacing, also called birth-interval, has referred to both the time elapsed between marriage and the birth of the first child, marriage and the birth of the second child, etc. and to time elapsed between marriage and first child, first child and second child, etc. Social scientists' interest in this phenomenon is relatively recent. Whelpton, Campbell, and Patterson (1966) have commented that very little is known about the phenomenon in comparison to knowledge about other demographic variables. They attributed this to the particularly problematic nature of gathering raw data on childspacing: it is difficult to bring together information about the successive births of a given woman. Since the 1960s, researchers have begun to concern themselves with childspacing. Thus, birth-interval from marriage to the first child was found to have increased from the early 1900s to the 1940s, then decreased from the 40s to the 50s (Whelpton, 1964); that education (Davidson, 1970) and family income (Freedman and Combs, 1966) were positively related to the duration of the first child birth-interval; and that family size tended to be inversely related to the duration of the various birth order intervals (Wray, 1971).

Jewish childspacing behavior, however, has yet to be satisfactorily established. Indeed, a review of the literature located only a few studies that dealt with childspacing among Jews. One, for instance (Whelpton, 1964), went only so far as to point out that Jews tended to have longer childspacing than Catholics and Protestants. A second (Goldstein and Goldscheider, 1968) collected information on the average number of months from marriage to first child, from marriage to second child, and from first child to second child for three generations of Jews in Providence, Rhode Island. Upon arranging these data according to 10 marriage cohorts ranging from "Before 1910" to "1955-1963," it was found that the longitudinal birth-interval trend of

Providence Jews was similar to the birth-interval trend of the general population: from the "Before 1910" marriage cohort to the "1935-1939" cohort, birth-interval increased in duration; from the "1940-1944" cohort to the "1955-1963" cohort, its duration decreased. Put differently, birth-interval increased from the first generation of Providence Jews to the second, but decreased from the second to the third generation. The data also suggested that social class had an effect on birth-interval, but for each generation that effect was considerably different. In the first generation, higher-status groups tended to have the longest birth-intervals, but for the third generation, lower-status groups tended to exhibit the longer birth-intervals. Religious preference of the wife had a similar mercurial relationship to birth-interval. While Orthodox wives had shorter birth-intervals than Conservative or Reform wives in the first generation, no systematic pattern of birth-interval was indicated by religious identification in the third generation. Another variable, urban or suburban residence, had no influence on childspacing behavior. And, while no data on the relationship between family size and birth-interval was presented, it is clear from the authors' discussion that a positive relationship between the two was assumed.

DATA

To shed further light on childspacing among Jews, data on the Jews of Middletown, Connecticut, collected for other purposes (Lindenthal, 1973), was analyzed. These data largely consisted of information extracted from birth certificates of 538 Jewish infants born in Middletown between the years 1852 and 1934. Seven variables were obtained for each birth: infant's name, date of birth, father's age, mother's age, father's occupation, mother's place of birth, and father's place of birth. One other variable, total number of children ever born to each couple, was also available for analysis. But since the data were "available" or "secondary," there were restrictions on the kind of analysis that could be performed. Also, birth certificates did not contain information concerning the mother's age at marriage, therefore marriage-to-first-child birth-interval could not be calculated. Further, since data on birth order of the newborn were lacking, childspacing between a first and second or a second and third child for a given mother and father was also incalculable. Thus, the only employable indicator of childspacing patterns, from available data, was a general average of birth-interval, ignoring birth order. The working assumption was that successive birth certificates for a given family signified total successive births, with no intervening births. Put differently, without direct information on birth order, birth order measured by successive birth certificates assumed that no intervening births occurred between any two births for which certificates for a given couple were on file. While data never completely reflect reality, e.g., birth certificates are

misplaced or lost, the fit between the two was felt to be close in the present situation.

In addition, the data forced two other closely related decisions. First, because the first order childspacing, i.e., the interval between marriage and the first child, was unknown, at least two birth certificates for a given set of parents were needed to determine a childspacing interval for those parents. Thus, each set of parents had to have at least two children in the sample in order to derive a childspacing figure for them. If only one child appeared for a given couple, that child was taken out of the sample. This decreased the number of birth certificates to be analyzed from the original 538 to 271, leaving 177 birth-intervals.

Finally, because the number of birth-interval cases being dealt with was so small, and because these cases covered almost a century, arrangement of cases in small cohort formation, e.g., birth cohorts of mothers, was precluded. To not do so would have left a small number of cases, if any, in most cells. Consequently, the data were arranged into two large time periods, birth-intervals falling between the years 1852 to 1899 and 1900 to 1934, henceforth referred to as T1 and T2, respectively.

Limitations of the analysis have been elaborated because they distinguish the present study from some other childspacing studies. Goldstein and Goldscheider's data, for example, allowed controls for both birth order and maternal marriage cohorts. Since there is less than total comparability between this study and others, any conclusion resulting from such comparisons should be seen as tentative, merely suggestive.

FINDINGS

Without controls, the average childspacing period for the 177 birth-intervals supplied by the data was three years. Massaging of Whelpton's data on Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish childspacing practices derived an average birth-interval period, regardless of birth order, for the groups of, respectively, 31, 30, and 40 months. The childspacing period of the present sample was shorter than that of Whelpton's Jewish subsample, but longer than that for his Protestant and Catholic subsamples, lending support to Whelpton's conclusion that Jews space their children further apart than do non-Jews.

There was a marked increase of 1.2 years in childspacing between periods T1 and T2, as can be seen in Table 1. This increase dramatically documents the same longitudinal trend for the first third of the twentieth century, found by Whelpton among Protestants and Catholics, and by Goldstein and Goldscheider among Providence, Rhode Island Jews.

Parental Birthplace

While many children had two foreign-born parents, few had two native-born parents. But, since few children had one native-born and one foreign-

TABLE 1
Average Number of Childspacing Years by Time Period and Parental Birthplace

<u>Time Period</u>	<u>PARENTAL BIRTHPLACE</u>		<u>Total</u>
	<u>Foreign Born</u>	<u>Mixed/Native Born</u>	
T1: 1852-1899	2.1 (48)	2.6 (11)	2.2 (59)
T2: 1900-1934	3.4 (112)	3.5 (6)	3.4 (118)
TOTAL	3.0 (160)	2.9 (17)	(177)

born parent, these "mixed-nationality" couples were incorporated in the "native-born" category. Still, the *N* for this "Mixed/Native-Born Parents" category is rather small; findings should be viewed with caution. As Table 1 indicates, without controls for time, parents' place of birth had no appreciable effect on the childspacing period.

The lack of a relationship between parental place of birth and the childspacing period did not hold for both time periods. At T1, mixed/native-born parents had a half year longer birth-interval period than did foreign-born parents. In those years, parental birthplace made a difference. After 1900, foreign-born parents were spacing their children as far apart as were mixed/native-born parents. Thus, it was during T2 that parental birthplace was inconsequential with regard to childspacing.

While both foreign and mixed/native-born parents contributed to the general increase in childspacing period occurring from T1 to T2, foreign-born parents contributed somewhat more than did mixed/native-borns (1.3 and 0.9, respectively).

Parental Occupational Status

"Father's occupation" was divided into two categories: high-status occupations, i.e., having a rating between 1 and 3 on the Occupational Scale of Hollingshead's *Two Factor Index of Social Position* (Hollingshead, 1965), and low-status occupations, rating between 4 and 7. Childspacing period was not affected by occupational status of the father, even with controls for time. Data in Table 2 indicate that high- and low-status occupation fathers had almost the same average birth-interval at T1 as they did at T2. Also, the general increase exhibited in childspacing period from T1 to T2 was contributed to equally by high- and low-status occupation fathers.

Family Size

The final variable examined was family size. The total number of children ever born to the 91 couples in the sample was 473, the average number of

TABLE 2
Average Number of Childspacing Years by Time Period and Occupational Status of Father

<u>Time Period</u>	<u>FATHER'S OCCUPATIONAL STATUS</u>	
	<u>High Occupation</u>	<u>Low Occupation</u>
T1: 1852-1899	2.0 (22)	2.1 (19)
T2: 1900-1934	3.3 (50)	3.4 (45)
TOTAL	2.9 (72)	3.0 (64)

children per couple being five. From T1 to T2 there was a decrease of 1.5 children per couple (6.3 to 4.8). This would suggest an inverse relationship between childspacing and family size, the former increasing as the latter decreased. Families with one to five children were designated "small families" and those with six to 14 children were designated "large families." Data in Table 3 show that, time period controlled, the inverse relationship between family size and childspacing pattern persists, and is pronounced in T2.

DISCUSSION

The data indicate that certain childspacing patterns delineated for Jews in other communities held true for the Jews of Middletown, Connecticut. Specifically, Middletown's Jews tended to have relatively long childspacing periods. They also experienced the same increase in birth-interval during the early part of this century experienced by their coreligionists in Providence, Rhode Island. Corroboration of these two patterns lends support for their generalizability to Jews in the United States. The data also suggest that certain childspacing behavior which up to now has been observed in only non-Jewish groups also occurred among Jews, i.e., an inverse relationship between family size and childspacing.

There is, however, an important way in which the childspacing behavior of Middletown's Jews differed from the childspacing behavior of both Jews and non-Jews elsewhere. In contrast to Providence Jews, who exhibited a positive relationship between social status and birth-interval period during the early 1900s but a negative relationship during the 1950s, and in contrast

TABLE 3
Average Number of Childspacing Years by Time Period for Small and Large Families

<u>Time Period</u>	FAMILY SIZE	
	<u>Small Families</u>	<u>Large Families</u>
T1: 1852-1899	2.5 (18)	2.2 (45)
T2: 1900-1934	3.9 (51)	2.7 (70)
TOTAL	3.5 (69)	2.5 (115)

to Freedman and Combs' (1966) Detroit sample, which exhibited a positive relationship between family economic position and birth-interval, no significant relationship—either positive or negative—between social class, measured by father's occupational status, and birth-interval was found for Middletown Jews. This lack of a relationship persisted over two extensive time periods.

Finally, there was one way in which findings for Middletown's Jews differed from those sociological reasoning would have expected. Parents' places of birth were found to be a factor in fertility, or family size. Foreign-born parents tended to have larger families than native-born parents. The inverse relationship between family size and childspacing would have led to the expectation that parental birthplace would have made a persistent difference in childspacing behavior, foreign-born parents having a shorter childspacing period than native-born parents. This pattern, however, did not hold for both time periods studied, foreign and mixed/native-born parents exhibiting almost identical childspacing periods at T2.

The fact that parental birthplace during T2 and father's occupational status at both T1 and T2 had no effect on childspacing patterns among Middletown's Jews seems particularly noteworthy. Possibly, childspacing behavior was determined more by what they held in common than by what differentiated them. What they held in common, of course, was their Jewish status. Perhaps, during those years, being Jews and a minority not only affected fertility trends, as some have suggested (Goldstein and Goldscheider, 1968:135), but also determined childspacing patterns. On the basis of the present study, this certainly appears to be a hypothesis worthy of further investigation.

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