

Determinants of Religious Inter-marriage: Are Jews Really Different?

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Much is being written about the near-epidemic rate of religious outmarriage among American Jews. According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), fully 26 percent of all ever-married Jews-by-birth selected non-Jewish partners for their first marriage. The secular trend is clear: whereas only 9 percent of those who first married prior to 1950 had non-Jewish partners, more than half of those first married since 1980 have outmarried (Table 1). Moreover, despite minor differences in some decades, Jewish men and women appear equally likely to marry non-Jewish partners.

TABLE 1. OUTMARRIAGE RATE AMONG AMERICAN JEWS, 1990^a

Year of First Marriage	Percent Outmarried		
	All	Men	Women
Total	26	27	25
Before 1950	9	10	8
1950-1959	12	14	11
1960-1969	20	21	19
1970-1979	40	38	43
1980-1985	49	45	52
1986-1990	55	55	54
Sample size	2197	1074	1123

a. Percent of all ever-married Jews-by-birth whose first spouse was not Jewish (by religion) at the time of marriage.

Source: 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (household weights).

This paper is devoted to improving our understanding of the environment within which American Jews make their marital choice decisions, focussing on the

relationship between Jewish outmarriage and marital stability. The first part develops those aspects of the economic theory of marriage that effect religious intermarriage. The second part places the Jewish experience in the context of American religious pluralism, summarizing the evidence for other American religions and considering ecumenism as a factor in Jewish outmarriage. The third part concludes with a summary of findings and their implications for the American Jewish community.

Priorities and Tradeoffs in Marital Search¹

In late twentieth-century United States, marriage is best viewed as a partnership contracted only if both parties expect to benefit, and readily dissolved if either party revises that expectation (Becker, 1991). Each individual is characterized by a bundle of attributes, and the overall quality of a marriage depends on the match between the two partners with respect to the entire package of characteristics. Marital instability is more likely when traits are mismatched (presumably the outcome of an inefficient search), in part because the efficiency gains from marriage are low and in part because there are more potential partners who might present a better alternative. To the extent that the optimal pairing involves tradeoffs, however, a poor match on any one trait may be compensated by a very good match on other traits and need not imply a poor match overall. The greater the number of important marital traits, the greater the likelihood that a successful pairing will involve a mismatch on any single trait viewed in isolation.

An ideal pairing matches partners with similar values of traits whenever similarity between spouses enhances efficiency in achieving marital goals. Since marital goals associated with religion in general, and Judaism in particular, are achieved more efficiently by spouses whose religious beliefs and practices are similar to each other, Jews should prefer (other things the same) to marry other Jews. If so, individual Jews would view religious outmarriage as a compromise rather than a goal of the marital search. Although historically outmarriage may have provided an escape from antisemitism, an explicit rejection of Judaism, or even an expression of Jewish self-hatred, the fact that some 80 percent of the intermarried Jews-by-birth identified in the NJPS sample (and 90 percent of those married since 1980) continue to self-identify as Jews after marriage suggest that these are not primary motives for outmarriage in this population.

Outmarriage is also more likely to occur among individuals who place a low priority on religion as a marital trait, an effect likely to be greater the more complex the sort. Secularization, in the sense of reduced religiosity and weakened commitment of individuals to their own religious community, is sometimes attributed to the extensive religious pluralism that prevails in American society. Yet an important recent study suggests that pluralism leads to increased private religious

1. For a fuller development of the economic model of intermarriage outlined in this section see Chiswick and Lehrer (1991).

practice; Americans seem to place relatively more importance on religion per se, and on religious observance, than do their counterparts in countries which are more religiously homogeneous (Iannaccone, 1991). The absence of a state monopoly and competition among religions in America tends to increase the responsiveness of religious groups to individual preferences, enhancing the variety as well as the degree of religious expression (Warner, 1993). This suggests that assimilation in America is best viewed as a consequence rather than the goal which motivates religious outmarriage.

TABLE 2. STABILITY OF FIRST MARRIAGES AMONG AMERICAN JEWS, 1990^a

Year of first Marriage	Tenth-Year Divorce Rates ^b (percent)						
	All	Inmarried Jews			Outmarried Jews		
		All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
All Cohorts:	6	5	5	5	10	11	10
Before 1950	2	2	3	2	4	(1)	7
1950-1959	3	2	2	3	8	(15)	(0)
1960-1969	9	8	6	10	11	12	9
1970-1979	12	11	9	12	14	13	14
Sample size	1599	1322	619	703	254	132	122

a. All ever-married Jews-by-birth

b. Percent of first marriages which had ended in divorce before the end of their tenth year. Outmarriages defined as unions with spouse not Jewish at time of marriage.

() Percentage based on 11-20 cases.

Source: 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (household weights).

Although rising divorce rates among non-Jewish Americans have led to a social environment increasingly tolerant of (if not actually friendly toward) marital dissolution, divorce is still sufficiently costly to be a disincentive for high-risk marriage. To assess the instability associated with Jewish outmarriage, Table 2 reports the percent of all ever-married Jews-by-birth whose first marriage ended in divorce before the end of the tenth year.² The patterns for men and women appear to

2. These data are only for first-marriage experiences, whether or not the individual has since remarried. Kosmin, et al (1989) find interfaith marriages among Jews to be less stable than endogamous unions, and also that exogamy rates are even greater for second and higher-order marriages. Thus high rates of first-marriage exogamy raise divorce rates, and high divorce rates in turn raise overall rates of intermarriage.

be quite similar, although for most cohorts the divorce rates were somewhat higher for women than for men. Among the inmarried, these first-marriage tenth-year divorce rates rose from 2 percent for those married prior to 1950 to 12 percent for those married in the 1970s. Among the outmarried, tenth-year divorce rates rose from 4 percent for the earlier cohort (prior to 1950) to about 14 percent for the cohort married in the 1970s.³

Although these figures indicate that Jewish outmarriage is generally less stable than inmarriage, the incentive for young Jews to choose same-faith partners has been eroded over time by persistent increases in marital instability among Jewish inmarrieds. Persons first married prior to 1950 were twice as likely to divorce within ten years if their spouses were not Jewish (4 percent as compared to 2 percent), whereas among those married in the 1970s the likelihood of divorce by the tenth year was only 37 percent higher for outmarrieds (14 percent as compared to 11 percent). The comparison is particularly dramatic among women, for whom inmarriage divorce rates have increased six-fold while outmarriage divorce rates have merely doubled.

The story of increasing Jewish outmarriage must therefore be told within the context of declining Jewish marital stability. Although divorce rates are higher among the outmarried than among the inmarried, the decreasing difference makes it unlikely that the high divorce rates of outmarrieds can be explained by a disproportionate number of generally poor matches. Indeed, among the younger generation of American Jews outmarrieds appear to include many of "the best and the brightest" who are very good marriage partners in other dimensions.

This suggests that the trends observed in Table 2 may be the result of increased complexity in the marital search. Cohort by cohort, as young American Jewish men and women have become wealthier, better educated, more cosmopolitan and more mobile, they have also become more varied in their opportunities and ambitions. Increasingly, religious compatibility has had to vie for consideration with such factors as type of education or career perspective, locational preference, and political leanings as well as personality, looks and age. Marital search has become correspondingly more complex, involving more traits (and more within-trait variation) to match with a potential partner. Such an increase in marital search complexity is consistent with both the observed decline in Jewish marital stability and the rising incidence of Jewish outmarriage.

Ecumenism and the Jews

Three aspects of religion seem to be especially important for marital efficiency. The extent to which religious beliefs and practices are doctrinally similar affects religious compatibility between partners with different affiliations. The extent to

3. To the extent that religious intermarriage occurs disproportionately among couples who are mismatched on multiple marital traits, the observed instability of outmarriages need not be related to religion per se.

which a religion emphasizes family-based practices and experiences (in contrast with a religion that is either intensely personal in its expression or, at the other extreme, more closely associated with public ceremony) will also affect the relative efficiency of outmarriage. The extent to which a religion clearly defines its membership and doctrinally distinguishes members from non-members is also an important factor in determining marital compatibility.

Religious groups may be ranked along an "exclusivist-ecumenical" continuum according to their emphasis on the boundaries of group membership (Kelley, 1972). Initially developed to analyze the growth of various Protestant denominations, this continuum has also proved useful for understanding the stability of interfaith marriages (Lehrer and Chiswick, 1993). At one extreme, "exclusivist" religious groups have clear membership criteria, strictly enforced, frequently with specific penalties against outmarriage and sometimes even shunning of non-members. At the other extreme, "ecumenical" groups tend to have few membership criteria, vaguely stated and weakly enforced, and place relatively little importance on religious group boundaries. For couples with a given level of religious commitment, marriage between members of two different ecumenical-tending denominations would be less stressful than marriage between members of two exclusivist groups simply because religious boundaries matter less to the former.

Jews are not the only American religious group concerned with high rates of outmarriage: among non-Hispanic whites first married since 1960, some 28 percent chose a spouse of another faith.⁴ Outmarriage rates were as high as 48 percent for the mainstream Protestant denominations, 36 percent for the remaining (mostly exclusivist) Protestant denominations, 30 percent for Catholics, and 21 percent for Mormons, suggesting a positive association between outmarriage and ecumenism. Moreover many American religious groups have tended to become more ecumenical in their outlook over time. As the importance of group boundaries has diminished, the social environment has become increasingly friendly both to Jews and to interfaith couples and the perceived cost of outmarriage has correspondingly declined.

Although outmarriages are generally less stable than inmarriages for all American religious groups, the difference varies inversely with ecumenism. For example, intermarriages involving two Protestant denominations near the ecumenical range of the spectrum are only marginally less stable than inmarrieds in those denominations, consistent with the relative unimportance of denominational

4. Characteristics of non-Jewish religions reported in this and the following paragraphs are from Lehrer and Chiswick (1993), using data for 3,060 first marriages from the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). Among Protestants, religion was narrowly defined so that inter-denominational marriages were viewed as exogamous. Although the sample of (self-identified) Jews was small, amounting to only 3 percent of the total, the Jewish first-marriage exogamy rate of 27 percent was comparable to the overall rate of 28 percent.

boundaries for these groups.⁵ Similarly, persons reporting no religion (the ultimate, perhaps, in ecumenism) showed the same marital instability rate whether or not their spouse reported an affiliation. For all other religious groups, probabilities of marital dissolution before the fifth anniversary were at least 10 points higher for outmarrieds than inmarrieds.⁶

Since ecumenism enhances the ability of people from different groups to respect each other's religious views and practices, it is not surprising to find it associated with higher incidence and greater stability of religious outmarriage. Yet ecumenism seems to have a destabilizing effect for persons marrying within the religious group. Among couples with the same religious affiliation, the lowest fifth-year dissolution probability was .13 for Mormons, who place great importance on group boundaries, and the highest was .36 for persons reporting no religion. Between these two extremes were inmarriages for Catholics and for some thirty Protestant denominations toward the exclusivist end of the spectrum, with fifth-year dissolution probabilities of .20.⁷

The experience of the Protestant denominations towards the ecumenical end of the spectrum is especially instructive. Some 38 percent of the inmarriages for these groups are conversionary, suggesting that at least one of the partners as an individual places importance on group identity. Such conversionary marriages are extremely stable, with fifth-year dissolution probabilities of only .13 in contrast to .24 for "naturally homogamous" marriages.⁸ The experience of "mainstream" Protestant inmarriages is thus fully consistent with an inverse relationship between ecumenism and marital stability.⁹

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5. Between-group differences in marital stability are estimated by fifth-year dissolution probabilities obtained from Cox-regressions which control for various characteristics of each partner and their families of origin. Adjustment for a possible sample selection bias in the NSFH would reduce the reported values of these dissolution probabilities by 3 points but would leave invariant all between-group differences.
 6. Nearly all such differences were statistically significant at the 5 percent level. Although the sample of Jews was small and a difference could be discerned only at the 15 percent significance level, the magnitude of that difference was about the same as for Protestants and Catholics.
 7. Within this large and heterogenous category, between-group differences were negligible and not statistically significant. Among groups with small samples, dissolution probabilities for Jewish inmarriages were higher (.27) and those for "all other" religions lower (.13), but these differences were not statistically significant.
 8. This distinction proved not to be important for more exclusivist religions. Fifth-year dissolution probabilities for naturally homogamous couples were estimated as .19 for exclusivist Protestants and .20 for Roman Catholics. For conversionary inmarriages the corresponding probabilities were .16 and .19, respectively.
 9. Causes for the inverse association between inmarriage stability and ecumenism have yet to be established. There is a tendency for supporters of exclusivist groups to attribute higher marital stability to their religious ideology. Yet the phenomenon appears to be generalizable across religions which differ considerably in their "family values". The

To what extent are these findings of relevance to the Jewish experience? Can the growth of ecumenism within American Judaism explain some of the observed decrease in Jewish marital stability as well as the Jewish community's increased tolerance of outmarriage? Before this possibility can be considered, the exclusivist-ecumenical continuum must be defined in a way that is meaningful in a Jewish context.

Among American Jews, exclusivism would be associated with those congregations, organizations and movements that emphasize the distinctiveness of the Jewish People among the nations. For this purpose, exclusivist criteria need not be limited to religious observance but might include, for example, secular Jewish nationalism (Zionism) or an acute awareness of potential persecution. In contrast, ecumenism would be associated with an emphasis on Judaism as a system of ethics, on social action, and on those beliefs (religious, social and political) which are held in common with similarly ecumenical non-Jewish neighbors.

To the extent that Orthodox Jewry defines and enforces strict membership criteria, it belongs at the exclusivist end of the continuum. To the extent that Reform Jewry is vague about the definition of its boundaries and indifferent as to their enforcement, it belongs near the ecumenical end. However this characterization does not do justice to the within-denomination variety of American Jewish belief and practice. Although Orthodox Jews may articulate membership boundaries quite clearly (e.g., observance of Kashrut, Shabbat observance, wearing a kipa or other distinctive dress), individual practice may vary considerably and persons who relax their observance in some respects may still continue to identify as Orthodox. Some Reform and Reconstructionist groups can demand various forms of active participation by their congregants despite the loose membership criteria of their affiliation.

Keeping this in mind, the figures in Table 3 suggest that Jewish denomination-based ecumenism, like that of non-Jewish religions, is positively associated with the incidence of outmarriage: outmarriage rates are 42 percent for those raised as secular Jews, 35 percent for those raised Reform, 22 percent for those raised Conservative, and 10 percent for those raised Orthodox. Denomination-based ecumenism is also positively related to the stability of outmarriages (with the notable exception of persons raised as Orthodox Jews) and negatively to the stability of inmarriages, although these associations are relatively weak. The overall pattern thus appears to be consistent with that found for other religious groups, especially with regard to the incidence of outmarriage.

The weakness of the stability associations observed in Table 3 is consistent with the observation that denomination is an incomplete proxy for Jewish exclusivism. American Judaism contains a strong ecumenical component, but its appeal is widespread throughout all subgroups, including the Orthodox and Conservative as well as the Reform movements. Moreover Jewish universalist values are not

positive relationship between ecumenism and successful outmarriage further suggests that such an explanation may be too simplistic.

inconsistent with a strong emotional identification with the Jewish people, religious or otherwise. To the extent that exclusivism is associated with relative instability of outmarriage, the data suggest that particularist identification is widely spread across the major Jewish denominations.

TABLE 3. OUTMARRIAGES AND MARITAL STABILITY BY DENOMINATION RAISED

Denomination Raised ^a	Percent Out-married	Percent Divorced by Tenth Year						
		All	Inmarried Jews			Outmarried Jews		
			All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Total Jews-by-birth	25	6	5	5	5	10	11	9
Orthodox and Traditional	10	3	3	5	2	2	5	(0)
Mixed Jewish ^b	21	7	3	(8)	0	*	*	*
Conservative, Reconstructionist and "Just Jewish"	22	6	5	4	6	13	15	12
Reform	35	8	6	6	6	11	11	11
Secular, Misc., and No Religion	42	8	9	(4)	(13)	(7)	(8)	*
Non-Jewish ^c	66	6	4	(6)	*	8	11	(4)
Sample size	2282	1581	1314	616	698	247	127	120

a. Includes all Jews-by-birth ever married by 1980.

b. Persons raised as both Orthodox and Conservative, both Orthodox and Reform, or both Conservative and Reform.

c. Jews-by-birth raised as non-Jews, whether or not they were also raised as Jews.

* 10 or fewer cases; () denotes percentage based on 11–20 cases.

Source: 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (household weights).

Although the underlying reasons are as yet unclear, the distinctive way in which Judaism balances its universalist and particularist tendencies may affect the observed patterns of marital stability across Jewish denominations. Jewish distinctiveness may also provide insight into the limits of Protestant ecumenism. Table 4 presents tenth-year first-marriage divorce rates by cohort and spouse's religion at time of marriage. Marriages with Protestant spouses have been the least successful, with a tenth-year divorce rate of 17 percent, while those with Catholics

and spouses of "other" religions had tenth-year divorce rates of about 12 percent.¹⁰ Since it is expected that most of the Protestant spouses belong to the more ecumenical denominations, it is curious that their marriages to Jewish partners are less stable than those of Catholic spouses. Yet to the extent that "mainstream" Protestantism effectively dominates American secular culture, persons from these denominations may be less self-aware of the balance between ecumenical and exclusivist tendencies in their own beliefs and doctrines. If Catholics who marry Jews understand more fully the implications of religious outmarriage than do Protestants, their marriages would be less subject to subsequent dissolution.

TABLE 4. MARITAL STABILITY BY SPOUSE'S RELIGION^a

Year of First Marriage	Percent Divorced by Tenth Year				
	Jewish First Spouse	Non-Jewish First Spouse			
		Protestant	Catholic	Other	None
Total	4	17	12	11	3
Before 1950	2	(3)	(16)	*	(0)
1950-1959	3	*	(14)	*	*
1960-1969	8	(18)	(10)	*	(0)
1970-1979	11	21	14	12	8
Sample size	1322	57	81	46	70

a. Ever-married Jews-by-birth whose first spouse was not Jewish at time of marriage.

* Denotes percentages based on 10 or fewer cases.

() Denotes percentages based on 11-12 cases.

Source: 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (household weights).

Outmarriage and the Jewish Community

This paper has explored some hypotheses as to the rising rates of Jewish outmarriage in the United States. From an individual's perspective, increasingly complex marital search has led to higher outmarriage rates and lower marital stability among Jews. From the group's perspective, exclusivism is defined as the clarity with which Jews identify and enforce the boundaries (implicit and explicit) between themselves and others, and this was shown to affect marriage patterns. This

10. An unknown number of the spouses who were not Jewish at the time of marriage actually may have been Jews by birth. It is possible that this is responsible for the fact that tenth-year divorce rates for no-religion spouses are comparable to those for Jewish spouses.

sense of Jewish identity appears to be moderately associated with denominational membership and affects selection of the first marriage partner.

Another important dimension of the American Jewish story is the increased rates of divorce, attributable in part to rising ecumenism, in part to rising social acceptability (including improved opportunities for remarriage), and in part to the rising complexity of marital search. Divorce rates for inmarried Jewish couples have increased even more dramatically than those for outmarried Jews. As a result, the greater instability once associated with inter-faith marriage has been significantly eroded, and individual Jews no longer have this strong incentive to marry other Jews.

Rising rates of Jewish outmarriage must be understood in the context of American religious pluralism. Ecumenism in any religious group appears to be associated not only with more outmarriage but also (for reasons that are as yet unclear) with decreased marital stability among inmarrieds. As changes in emphasis within the American Jewish community tip the balance between universalist and particularist values toward the universalist, the frequency of outmarriage can be expected to increase along with the relative success rate for interfaith marriages.

The analysis in this paper suggests that a key factor in Jewish marital patterns is the American Jewish community's response to religious ecumenism. To the extent that Jewish groups respond by blurring boundaries, ignoring the distinctive responsibilities associated with belonging to the Jewish people, inmarriage divorce rates can be expected to continue rising along with outmarriage rates. However if American Jewry can strengthen its sense of identity, integrating Judaism's strong ecumenical tradition on social issues with its equally strong emphasis on membership in a distinctive and important group on religious and cultural issues, it may be possible to slow or even reverse the pace of outmarriage while at the same time increasing the stability of the Jewish marriage.

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