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Research note

ARE JEWS MORE POLARISED IN THEIR SOCIAL ATTITUDES THAN NON-JEWS? EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM THE 1995 JPR STUDY

Stephen H Miller

Numerous studies have reported differences between the attitudes of Jews and non-Jews toward a range of social phenomena.¹ This note addresses a more fundamental issue, namely whether Jews - in accordance with Jewish folklore, religious narratives and the tropes of Jewish humour - are more divergent in their attitudes and more likely to hold strong views across a wide variety of issues.

To address this question empirically it is necessary to compare the distributions of opinion of Jewish and non-Jewish groups on attitudes that allow the respondent to choose between moderate or more extreme positions. It is then possible to test the hypothesis that Jews – in this case British Jews - are prone to adopt stronger and/or more divergent positions than non-Jews.

The 1995 Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) study of 2167 British Jews provides a unique opportunity to make such a comparison because the survey incorporated questionnaire items taken from the national British Social Attitudes Study (BSA).² Thus it is possible to compare the pattern of responses of a large sample of Jews and non-Jews to exactly the same social attitude items, and to examine the extent to which Jews, in comparison with non-Jews, adopt more extreme positions on those attitudes.

Subsequent JPR surveys have not included questionnaire items matched to those included in the BSA study (and nor has any other British Jewish community survey) so this issue can only be investigated for British Jews using relatively old data. However, unlike mean scores on an attitude scale, which will obviously change through time, a finding that one group shows more diversity in its views than another group is less likely to be time dependent; this is because such comparisons reflect group differences in cognitive style rather than specific views on a

ARE JEWS MORE POLARISED IN THEIR SOCIAL ATTITUDES
THAN NON-JEWS?

substantive issue. Cognitive style is known to be an enduring and consistent feature of human performance.³

Findings

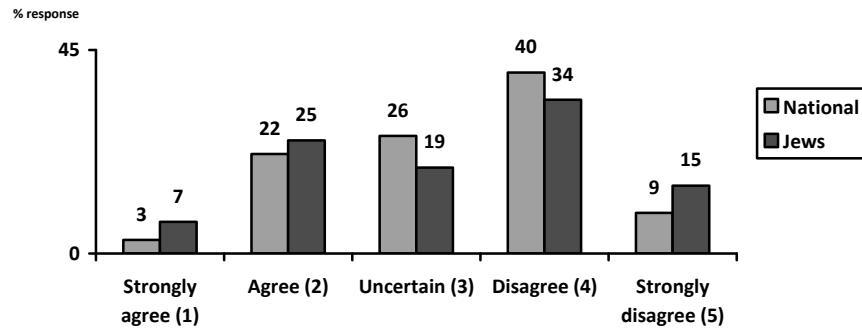
Most of the questionnaire items in the BSA survey invite respondents to express their opinions by selecting a position on a five-point Likert scale. For example, in response to the statement “Many people who get social security don’t deserve any help” each respondent may select any one of the following options:-

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Typically, the ‘strongly agree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ options attract the smallest numbers of responses. However, a population with strong or highly divergent attitudes would be expected to gravitate towards the extremes of the scale.

Chart 1 shows the distribution of responses of the national BSA sample (1995) and those of the JPR sample to a statement on social welfare payments. Although the median scores on the 5-point attitude scale are almost identical (at 3.46 and 3.45 respectively), there are about 10% fewer Jewish respondents in the central categories, and a corresponding increase in the proportion of Jews in the ‘strongly agree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ categories. Indeed Jews are roughly twice as likely as non-Jews to strongly disagree with the statement on social security (15% vs 9%), and to strongly agree with it (7% vs 3%).

CHART 1: Many people who get social security don't deserve any help



This single example is not sufficient to validate the central hypothesis. However, Table 1 below extends the analysis to fourteen relatively controversial items that allow a direct comparison between the BSA and JPR data. In all but one of these cases, the Jewish respondents exhibit a wider spread of attitudes (i.e. a higher variance) than their non-Jewish counterparts.

These distributions are based on large sample sizes (2900+ in the BSA study and 2000+ in the JPR study) and the differences in spread (the F ratio⁴) are statistically significant in 11 of the 14 cases – and in only one case is the expected outcome in the reverse direction from that predicted. The finding of greater variance in the JPR responses over the 14 items taken as a whole is highly significant statistically (Mean F ratio = 1.23, SE of Mean = 0.045, $p < 0.0001$).

Competing explanations

These findings support the hypothesis that Jews are more divergent in their social attitudes than their non-Jewish counterparts. There are, however, at least two alternative classes of explanation for the results that need to be considered:

1) *Socio-demographic*: The JPR and BSA samples differ significantly with respect to (i) age and (ii) academic achievement. With regard to age, the JPR sample is somewhat more aged than the general population. However, since older respondents are *less* prone to extreme attitudes than younger ones,⁵ this confounding factor cannot explain the greater spread of opinions in the JPR sample.

ARE JEWS MORE POLARISED IN THEIR SOCIAL ATTITUDES
THAN NON-JEWS?

Table 1

Attitude statement	Spread (variance) JPR	Spread (variance) BSA	F ratio (JPR/BSA)	P value
Many people who get social security don't deserve any help	1.38	1.06	1.29	0.1%
In this area most people could find a job if they really wanted to	1.26	1.19	1.06	-
Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another	1.28	1.13	1.13	1%
If welfare benefits weren't so generous people would learn to stand on their own two feet	1.58	1.19	1.32	0.1%
Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards	1.47	1.17	1.26	0.1%
Formal exams are the best way of judging the ability of pupils in schools	1.38	1.1	1.24	0.1%
Schools should teach children to obey authority	0.95	0.69	1.37	0.1%
Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values	0.99	0.90	1.10	5%
People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences	1.06	0.69	1.55	0.1%
The law should be obeyed even if a particular law is wrong	1.16	1.05	1.11	5%
For some crimes the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence	2.38	1.71	1.40	0.1%
A man's job is to earn the money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family	1.33	1.31	1.02	-
A job is all right but what most women really want is a home and children	1.22	1.27	0.96	R
Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nations wealth	1.07	0.80	1.40	0.1%

With regard to academic achievement, in keeping with Census data for the period,⁶ the JPR sample contains a much higher proportion of graduates than the BSA sample (32% vs 10%). Since the variance of graduates' attitudes is about 8% higher than that of non-graduates (in the JPR sample), the larger proportion of graduates in the JPR sample could explain the differences in variance between the two samples. However, making the crude, but plausible assumption that the BSA sample has a 'graduate effect' of similar magnitude to that found in the JPR sample, the higher proportion of Jewish graduates could only account for about a 2% difference in the variance of Jewish and non-Jewish attitudes (ie $[0.32 - 0.1] \times 8\%$) assuming additivity of variances in the relevant

subpopulations. The data in Table 1 show a mean increase in variance of 23% making it very unlikely that the differences in exposure to higher education could account for more than a small fraction of the increased divergence of Jewish attitudes.

2) *Language norms*: A second and more subtle explanation is that the greater use of the extremes of the attitude scale by Jewish respondents may reflect a superficial difference in the way Jews label their opinions; i.e. that they have a greater propensity for using the more extreme labels (e.g. strongly agree/disagree) to describe the same level of conviction as would be represented by the terms agree/disagree by non-Jews. On this model, Jews could be characterised as having a lower threshold for using polarised language, rather than being more diverse in the intensity of their attitudes and beliefs.

This 'language norms' hypothesis was tested empirically by comparing the variance of JPR and BSA attitudes on questionnaire items that were judged by a panel of five observers to involve 'less controversial moral, political or social issues than the items in Table 1' (e.g. judgements of how much more or less government spending should be devoted to particular areas of the economy). If the more divergent opinions of Jews were due simply to their tendency to use unequivocal language, then they would be expected to show more divergence than non-Jews both on controversial and on neutral items. However, if the increased divergence reflects real differences in conviction, then the greater variability should diminish or disappear when Jews are compared with non-Jews on more neutral items. For the eight items allocated to the 'neutral set', there was in fact no significant difference between the variances of the JPR and BSA responses. (Mean F ratio = 1.02, SE of Mean = 0.055, $p > 0.1$).

This leads to the conclusion, having excluded the most obvious confounding factors, that at least in the JPR and BSA samples Jews are significantly more polarised in their views than non-Jews.

It is not clear why this should be so. Indeed, it has not been the fashion in Jewish social research to examine attitudinal or psychological differences between Jews and non-Jews, still less to consider possible explanations for such differences.⁷

There is a class of explanations that connects Jewish firmness in matters of judgement and opinion to the process of cultural transmission; in essence, Jewish patterns of child rearing, socialisation and education are assumed to encourage the development of analytical thinking and the formation of unequivocal views. This is something that could be usefully examined both in relation to the current issue and as a means of

ARE JEWS MORE POLARISED IN THEIR SOCIAL ATTITUDES THAN NON-JEWS?

understanding the processes by which Jewish identity is transmitted across generations.

In addition to environmental explanations, there is a great deal of evidence to show that individual differences in cognition, personality and behaviour can be explained by genetic factors; behavioural geneticists are agreed that variations in characteristics like intelligence and assertiveness reflect the interaction of genetic and environmental causative factors.⁸ If genetics is a factor in the higher levels of conviction of Jews than non-Jews then the intriguing question is how the Jewish gene pool came to select for these particular aspects of cognitive style? There are at least two possible classes of explanation (not mutually exclusive): the first is that over successive periods of persecution, pogrom and hostile attack, there was survival value in having the capacity to construe situations in stark terms and to take firm and decisive action. Thus by the normal processes of behavioural evolution, the surviving Jewish population would have the genetic correlates of decisiveness and firmness selectively reinforced.

The second possibility is that in periods of relative peace and harmony, Jews with more compliant and flexible personalities would be able to assimilate more easily into the host society. Given this tendency, the gene pool of the sub-population which remained Jewish would, by default, shift in the direction of firm-mindedness (Hypothesis A). However, it is possible to argue precisely the opposite case: Formidable social and emotional pressures may be brought to bear on those choosing non-Jewish partners or disassociating from the Jewish community in other ways - so those who cease to identify as Jews may be expected to possess the highest levels of intellectual conviction and determination (Hypothesis B).

Hypotheses A and B have interesting and contradictory implications. They lead respectively to the prediction that the divergence of Jewish opinions will intensify further through time (A) or gradually atrophy (B). Using the JPR data it is possible to test whether Jews who have married out, or whose lifestyle can be characterised as tending towards assimilation, are more (or less) extreme than other Jews in their social attitudes. Using the set of attitude items listed in Table 1 extended with a set of four similar items, outmarried Jews do exhibit more divergent attitudes than those who marry Jews or remain single, in accordance with Hypothesis B. (Mean F ratio = 1.12, SE of Mean = 0.022, $p < 0.01\%$).

If replicated in other studies, the conclusion to be drawn is that, in parallel with the process of assimilation, there is likely to be a net loss of individuals from the organised community who possess relatively diverse social attitudes. Over a number of generations, if these trends are reliable

and continue, the residual Jewish population which is currently characterised as having strong and divergent opinions, may come to lose that feature.

Notes

¹ For example: 'Jews, Non-Jews, And Attitudes Toward Reproductive Technologies', Judith N. Lasker and Dawn Murray, *Contemporary Jewry* Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 80-97; *Social and political attitudes of British Jews: Some Key findings of the JPR Survey* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 1996). S. H. Miller, M. Schmool and A. Lerman

² I am grateful to the late Professor Sir Roger Jowell for permission to use items from the SCPR study of British Social Attitudes (1993 and 1994) in the JPR study.

³ Ausubel, D.P., Novak, J.D. & Hanesian, H. (Eds.) (1968) *Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View* (New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston).

⁴ The F ratio is defined as the variance in one sample (in this case JPR) divided by the variance in another sample (in this case BSA). On average the F ratio will be 1 if the two samples show similar variations in attitude, but it will rise above 1 to the extent that the JPR respondents show a wider spread of opinions.

⁵ Older respondents (>60 years) have, on average, about 10% less variance than younger respondents on the 14 items in Table 1.

⁶ *Jews in Britain: A snapshot from the 2001 Census*; David Graham, Marlena Schmool, Stanley Waterman, 2007

⁷ A notable exception is: *The Chosen People: A Study of Jewish Intelligence and Achievement*. Washington, Richard Lynn, Summit Publishers, 2011.

⁸ See, for example, Robert Plomin et al, *Behavioral Genetics in the Postgenomic Era* (Washington, DC: APA Books, 2003).