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Jewish identification in intermarriage: does a spouse's religion matter? - Catholic vs. Protestant

[Sociology of Religion, Spring, 1999 by Uzi Rebhun](#)

Intermarriage, be it interethnic, interreligious, or interracial, is one of the classical processes proposed in sociological theories relating to situations in which social groups have opportunities for interaction within a relatively open environment. The frequency of intermarriage is a central test for the degree of cultural-spiritual integration within a given society. Intermarriage is furthermore a suitable context for evaluating the nature of changes in social structure and norms: It provides insight into changes in the significance of religious beliefs in shaping people's lives, of the influences of secular attitudes, and of the degree of acceptance of religious uniqueness in the society, and of the readiness of individuals from the minority group to respond to the stimuli presented to them by contemporary modernity (Alba and Golden 1986; Alba 1990; Gordon 1964; Heer 1980; Lieberman and Waters 1988).

Family patterns have an extraordinarily high correlation with the continuity or change of the group culture. The power of the gathering inward, or the scope of the contacts and relations with other groups, are central factors in determining the perpetuation or alteration of the cultural and ideological heritage, including religious and national habits or traditions (DellaPergola 1976). A high frequency of non-religiously-homogeneous family contacts is liable to blur structural and cultural particularism and even bring about involvement - both symbolic and religious - in ceremonies of other religious faiths. Taking into consideration the function of the family as a central factor in the socialization of children, it may be asserted that a homogeneous nuclear family will transmit a clear and well-defined feeling of group belonging. By contrast, a mixed family environment may expose the children to multireligious group values and orientation, cut off from a coherent ideological framework and bearing internal contradictions (Goldstein 1992; Gordon 1964; Lieberman and Waters 1988).

Updated data for the beginning of the 1990s reveal that more than one-fifth of all adult Americans living in a household comprising more than one adult, do so in a religiously heterogeneous household, and in the majority of cases such heterogeneity is the result of interreligious marriage (Kosmin and Lachman 1993). A religious group in America which has experienced particularly rapid growth in intermarriage is that of the Jews. While in the early 1970s, approximately 7 percent of all married Jews had a non-Jewish spouse who had not undergone any form of conversion, in 1990 this figure was as high as 28 percent. Among the most recent marriage cohort of 1985-1990, as many as 52 percent had a non-Jewish spouse (Kosmin et al. 1991). This suggests that marriage to people of other faiths has become the norm rather than the exception, and represents a departure from a long history of intragroup Jewish marriage. (1) From a more general American point of view, it reflects a significant change from the "triple melting-pot" type of assimilation (Kennedy 1944), namely that various national groups in the US are merging indiscriminately rather than within the three religious compartments of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism.

Among the most significant factors affecting Jewish marriage patterns are socioeconomic upward mobility, including high levels of educational attainment and professionalization; the ongoing transition from self-employed to employee; changes in geographic distribution among regions and among metropolitan areas, resulting in a highly dispersed Jewish population; and generational changes from a community of mainly foreign-borns to mostly third- and fourth-generation Americans. These processes not only enhanced Jewish-non-Jewish interactions; at universities, places of work, and residential areas Jews become intensively exposed to the mainstream sociopolitical mind, partly characterized by an ethos of secularism and individualism. Another factor which is connected with increased marital heterogamy is gender imbalance in the marriage market ("marriage squeeze"), due to fluctuations in natality levels because of a decline in birth rate in the early 1940s followed by the relatively high birth rate of the "baby boom" thereafter. Furthermore, prejudiced stereotypes about Jews and discrimination have diminished, and anti-Semitism in American public life has waned (Cohen 1983; Liebman 1989; Smith 1991). These trends have led to increased tolerance between Jews and non-Jews and a resultant possibility for intermarriage. (2) High levels of Jewish intermarriage should be seen as reflecting a successful integration into, and acceptance by, the larger society. Nevertheless, insofar as interfaith marriage evokes tensions of cultural differences within marital union, it may have a negative effect on the group identity of the partners involved.

The study of the qualitative implications of Jewish intermarriage in the US has long been a concern of sociologists. It reveals a wide consensus according to which intermarriage is, in fact, marital assimilation, weakening the association with Jewish involvement and values (Cohen 1983, 1988; Ellman 1987; Lazerwitz 1971; Medding et al. 1992; Rebhun and DellaPergola 1998). The conclusions reached in these studies refer to a wide variety of identificational spheres, and hold both at the national level and for individual communities (Medding et al. 1992; Rebhun and DellaPergola 1998). Even those who view intermarriage as less meaningful, seem to accept the notion that there is some relationship with Jewish discontinuity (Goldscheider 1986a).

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