

Jews in the United States, 1957-2008: Milton Gordon's Assimilation Theory Revisited

1. Introduction

In 1964, sociologist Milton Gordon published "Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins". This study soon turned into a theoretical foundation for the research on the integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities into the host society, especially that of the United States. In his study, Gordon suggests seven different interrelated stages of assimilation. These include cultural assimilation (acculturation) into the language, ethical values, dress, music and manners of the core society; structural assimilation into social, economic and other general institutions; marital assimilation (amalgamation); identification assimilation of the development of the sense of peoplehood with the host society as the base; and three aspects which can be termed together as "conciseness assimilation" (attitude reception; behavioral reception; and civic assimilation) namely, lack of feeling of prejudice and discrimination, including an absence of value and power conflict.

Gordon further lists the seven dimensions of assimilation according to their mutual relationships and linear evolvement. Gordon's major argument is that cultural assimilation is the first type of the reaction of a minority group with the majority population, and this can take place without the occurrence of other types of assimilation and may continue independently over a long span of time. Yet, once structural assimilation has occurred, either simultaneously or subsequent to acculturation, all other types of the assimilation will follow suit. In other words, structural assimilation is a key component in the multi-layer array of assimilation.

The present study traces changes in major structural characteristics of one religious group which, while small, is nevertheless the third largest religious group in the United States, namely the Jews. The study covers a period of over fifty years (1957-2008); compare their changes with those of the core group which Gordon, as well as other sociologists of that time, defined it as White Anglo-Saxon Protestants; and examines whether and to what extent structural assimilation has an independent effect on three other aspects of assimilation: marital, identificational, and conciseness assimilation.

2. Data

I make use of several data sources. First, I analyze data from the 1957 Current Population Survey (CPS) (Goldstein, 1969; Mullan and Lane, 1972) which introduced a question on religious identity, and data from the 2008 US Religious Landscape Survey conducted by the Pew Center (Pew Forum, 2008). Each of these surveys included some 35,000 respondents with slightly more than one thousand in the former and slightly above six hundred in the latter who reported their religion as Jewish. Other data are culled from the 1990 and 2000 National Jewish Population Surveys (Kosmin et al., 1991; Kotler-Berkowitz et al., 2003). I also utilize data from the 2007 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion. Further I support and thicken my analyses with secondary materials.

It has been noted that over time there has been a significant change in the proportion of Jews among American religious groups. While according to the 1957 CPS, 3.2% of all Americans defined themselves as Jewish by religion, by 2008 this rate diminished by almost half to 1.7%. In part, this decline reflects increasing tendency among Jews to

prefer ethnic or cultural definitions of group belonging over religious identity; another, more central, explanation is the stability over the last five decades in the number of Jews against an increase in the number of members in many other religious groups. Nevertheless, during this period also the proportion of Protestants has also declined. In fact, the United States is on the verge of becoming a country where the Protestants, while remaining the largest single religious group in the country, will constitute less than half of the total population. Certainly white Protestants, who in the mid-twentieth century, accounted for 57% of all Americans, are estimated today at less than 45%.

3. Findings

3.1 Structural Assimilation

I examine three major socio-economic characteristics in an attempt to evaluate the structural integration of Jews: spatial distribution, educational attainment, and income. Traditionally, Jews have been concentrated in the northeast region of the country. In 1957, approximately two-thirds of them resided there as compared to less than one-fifth of the white Protestants. By contrast, less than ten percent of the Jews at that time resided in the South which was the preferred area for one-third of white Protestants. By 2008, the proportion of Jews in the Northeast, out of the total Jewish population, had declined to 40% while the decline in the share of this region among white Protestants was slim. Concurrently, the South attracted many Jews and became home to some one-quarter of them. Moreover, by 2008 proportionally more Jews than white Protestants were living in the West. Overall, the index of dissimilarity, measured according to the four regions of the country, declined from .49 in 1957 to .31 in 2008.

As far as education is concerned, already in the mid-twentieth century Jews exhibited salient achievements. Twice as many Jews had a baccalaureate or higher degree than did their white Protestant counterparts – 17% and 9%, respectively. Although both sub-groups have experienced upward mobility - to 59% among Jews and approximately one-fourth of all white Protestants - the advancement of the former was more significant and the differences increased from an index of dissimilarity of .14 in 1957 to .33 in 2008.

Education is strongly associated with economic attainments, and chiefly among these is income. Thus, it comes as no surprise that a large proportion of Jews are concentrated in the upper stratum of the income ladder. Taking into account changes in the consumer price index, the Jewish-non-Jewish differentials have widened over time. Classifying income into four categories, the gap between Jews and white Protestants in the two lowest categories increased to the detriment of the latter group. Among the third category, the changes have also been in favor of the Jews. By contrast, the difference between Jews and white Protestants in the highest category narrowed slightly. Overall, the index of dissimilarity suggests an increase in the gap between the two sub-groups from .22 in 1957 to .30 in 2008.

Thus overall, along different complementary socio-economic dimensions, the trends over the period of fifty years clearly indicate the successful achievement of American Jews that coincide with the definition of structural assimilation.

3.2 Structural Assimilation and Marital Assimilation

Data from national Jewish surveys show that internal migration does not effect marriage with non-Jews. Indeed, the rate of Jewish interfaith marriages is higher in new areas of

Jewish settlement in the South and West, but it is not internal migration per se that determined the nature of these marriages; rather, as Bruce Phillips argues, the movement of those Jews who were involved in mixed-marriage was subsequent to the marriage. Even if there is an independent effect of the local society and culture in the South and West on interfaith marriage, these relationship has recently become less important.

Most recent studies found lower rates of intermarriage among Jews with higher levels of education as compared with their Jewish counterparts with lower levels of education. For example, according to the 1990 NJPS, while 31% of those with advanced academic degrees had non-Jewish spouse, this was true for more than half of those with high school education or less. Similarly, Waite and Friedman (1997) showed that as each level of education above high school diminished the likelihood for interfaith marriage and increased the chance of endogamous marriage especially among those with high academic diplomas. Communal surveys also found positive relationships between education and Jewish endogamous marriages (Medding et al., 1992).

In eight Jewish communities, about one-quarter of those who earned between \$10,000 and \$30,000 annually were intermarried; the parallel figure among Jews with an annual income of \$150,000 and above was only 12%. Likewise, the 1990 NJPS found that, all else being equal, income deters Jewish intermarriage.

Hence, structural assimilation does not enhance marital assimilation but rather, to a large extent, it deters and moderate intermarriage. In a community in which a high level of socio-economic achievement is the norm, people whose characteristics differ unfavorably from those of the majority group are less attractive partners and might face difficulties in finding a spouse within the Jewish group. These Jews, of relatively low socio-economic attainment, will still be regarded as well qualified by many among the general population. Under such conditions, they will take their chances outside the Jewish community rather than compete in the Jewish marriage market with religious peers with higher social and economic attainment.

3.3. Structural Assimilation and Identificational Assimilation

Nor does structural assimilation enhance identificational assimilation. Jews who have experience upward social and economic mobility do not necessarily have weaker group commitment than their counterparts in the upper strata of the social ladder; they might even exhibit higher levels of Jewishness. One evidence is internal migration: while the NJPS-1970 revealed that intensive migration disrupts Jewish identification, the 2000-NJPS found that this effect had disappeared for ritual observance and informal social cohesion and diminished for affiliation with Jewish institutions. Yet, it should be noted that place of residence is an important determinant of Jewish identification, and living in the West has an independent negative effect on Jewishness; this effect does not derive from migration per se but rather from area context characteristics. Still, these negative effects of area of residence on Jewish identification have diminished over time.

Unlike NJPS-1970, the 1990 and 2000 NJPS showed that after controlling for key individual characteristics, higher education (as compared to low education) has a positive, not a negative, effect on different patterns of Jewish identification. Similar findings were found in communal studies including that of Boston, Philadelphia and Los Angeles. Quite consistently, the more recent NJPS revealed that higher income is positively associated with various expressions of Jewish identification in both the private and public spheres.

Thus, most of the empirical evidences, especially the later from the late 20th century-early 21st century, does not support Gordon's approach according to which structural assimilation inevitably evolves into identificational assimilation. On the contrary, structural assimilation, as reflected in social and economic success, is a source of constraint and moderation in assimilation. In fact, it can even provide sources for Jewish social and cultural strength.

3.4 Structural Assimilation and Consciousness Assimilation

Structural assimilation does enhance consciousness assimilation. The more they are integrated into the American society, as reflected in their socio-economic attainment of education and income, Jews' perception of the seriousness of anti-Semitism in the US declines. While 38% of Jews with high school education or lower claim that anti-Semitism is a serious problem, this was true for only one-fifth among those with advanced academic education. Very similar differences were found between the groups at the two ends of the income continuum. These relationships between high socio-economic stratification and consciousness assimilation are supported by multivariate analyses. It is argued that Jews' socio-economic integration enhances contacts with Americans from the majority society, especially those with similar characteristics, thus lowering prejudice and strengthening mutual positive attitudes.

Marital assimilation and identificational assimilation, each enhances consciousness assimilation.

4. Conclusions

We should judge and assess Gordon's approach within the social context of America of the mid-twentieth century. At that time, the dominant social and cultural ethos was that of Anglo-conformity or at the most that of the melting pot between different immigrant groups and local customs. These two models are, to a large extent, versions of identical framework of aims according to which cultural variations and attachment to origin groups will gradually blur. The idea of the melting pot was conceptualized by many as the symbol of the liberal vision of the American society. Under such circumstances, it is only logical that structural assimilation will, indeed, result in other types of assimilation.

Yet, later on, from the late 1960s, the melting pot ideology gave place to cultural pluralism and diversity. This view argues for the maintenance of core cultural patterns by the various ethnic groups. This preservation is often selective; it filters and chooses mainly intermittent and informal behaviors which, according to Gans' definition, reflect symbolic ethnicity and religiosity. As compared to religious commitments among past generations, the current patterns might be weaker. But from the subjective individual point of view, this group identification is meaningful, it serves the individual's needs of self-fulfillment, and reaffirms the inherent connection of personal and group identity.

5. References

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