

**Brandeis University**

Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

# Reflections on the Science of the Social Scientific Study of Jewry

Leonard Saxe

MARSHALL SKLARE MEMORIAL LECTURE

Sponsored by the Association for the Social Scientific Study of  
Jewry (ASSJ)

December 2012

## Marshall Sklare Award

The Marshall Sklare Award is given by the Association for the Scientific Study of Jewry (ASSJ) in recognition of a “senior scholar who has made a significant scholarly contribution to the social scientific study of Jewry.” The award honors the memory of the Cohen Center’s founding director Marshall Sklare (1912-1992). Acknowledged as the “founding father of American Jewish sociology,” Sklare was Klutznick Family Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies and Sociology at Brandeis University.

The 2012 awardee, Leonard Saxe, is the current Klutznick Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies at Brandeis University and director of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, as well as the Steinhardt Social Research Institute. Professor Saxe is a social psychologist who conducts socio-demographic studies of American Jewry and a program of research on Jewish education and its relationship to Jewish engagement. He is the author or co-author of numerous books and publications including *How Goodly Are Thy Tents: Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences* (2004) and *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity* (2008).

The present publication was the text for Saxe’s Sklare Award lecture given on December 16, 2012 at the 44<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies in Chicago. Several pictures that were used as part of the PowerPoint presentation that accompanied the lecture are reproduced here. A version of this text will be published in *Contemporary Jewry*, along with commentaries by Matthew Boxer, Daniel Parmer, Benjamin Phillips, and Michelle Shain.

© 2012 Brandeis University  
Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

Additional copies of this publication are available from:  
Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies  
Brandeis University  
Mailstop 014  
Waltham, MA 02454-9110  
781.736.2060  
[www.brandeis.edu/cmjs](http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs)

The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, founded in 1980, is dedicated to providing independent, high quality research on issues related to contemporary Jewish life.

The Cohen Center is also the home of the Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI). Established in 2005, SSRI uses innovative research methods to collect and analyze socio-demographic data on the Jewish community.

## Author's Acknowledgements

My work would not be possible without the generous support of funders who believe in what we do and the unending assistance of the support staff at the Center. I want, first, to acknowledge the funders whose philanthropy makes my work possible. Maurice and Marilyn Cohen were the visionary philanthropists who enabled Marshall Sklare to establish the Cohen Center. I had the privilege of getting to know Marilyn Cohen and to work closely with members of the Cohen family, in particular, Martin and Betsy Solomon who have carried on the family's tradition of engaged and thoughtful philanthropy. Judy and Michael Steinhardt's gift established the Steinhardt Social Research Institute, enabling us to develop and apply new quantitative methods to studying American Jewry. Their support demonstrates their extraordinary commitment to high quality science and scholarship in the service of the Jewish community.

I am also grateful to the dedicated staff, students and colleagues at Brandeis who foster my scholarly work. They include Gloria Tessler and Masha Lokshin, who manage and administer the Cohen/Steinhardt research enterprise, and Joshua Davidson, who served as research assistant and editor on this lecture. I owe, as well, a debt to colleagues at Heller School for Social Policy and Management and the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program. I teach at both Heller and Hornstein and my colleagues provide the environment rich in intellectual content and concern with praxis that is the crucible for my own thinking and research.

Len Saxe  
December 2012



## Introduction

I am grateful and deeply honored to join the ranks of Sklare awardees. The award is particularly meaningful because it is in the name of the scholar who both shaped the field of the social scientific study of Jewry and founded the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. Fourteen years ago, Jehuda Reinharz, then president of the University, invited me to assume the directorship of the Cohen Center. He challenged me to re-create a center of scientific excellence that reflected the best of Marshall Sklare's thinking. As a scholar with a track record of studying a host of national policy problems, none of which dealt directly with the Jewish community, it was *chuzpadik* to accept the challenge.

If I have had a modicum of success since being drawn into the social scientific study of Jewry, it is because I have been able to steward Sklare's invention, the Cohen Center, and to collaborate with an extraordinary group of individuals. I want to acknowledge several of these scholars, beginning with Charles Kadushin, a fellow Sklare awardee. Charles and I first worked together at CUNY and served together on the research front of America's War on Drugs. He has been my lay rabbi about matters Hebraic and Jewish, as well as my social scientific guru. Amy Sales has been my partner in extending Marshall Sklare's legacy and I owe her a tremendous debt – both for encouraging my chutzpah and providing needed restraint. Ted Sasson, Liz Tighe, Fern Chertok, and Annette Koren, along with a phenomenal group of research associates, have been wonderful research co-

conspirators. Later, you are going to hear from several of the younger generation of scholars with whom I have been privileged to teach, learn, and work. They represent the future of our field.

My focus today is a variation on the theme of learning from others. Sir Isaac Newton made famous the saying, "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." My work has been made possible not only by those who stand with me, but by those whose ideas form the foundation for how I study the Jewish community. As captured in a parable by a 13th century Italian Talmudist:

*Who sees further? The dwarf or the giant? You must conclude that it is the giant, for his eyes are higher ... **But if you have the dwarf ride on the neck of the giant, who sees further?** ... So are we dwarves riding on the necks of giants, for we have seen their wisdom and we surpass it. And it is by virtue of their wisdom that we have the wisdom to say all that we say, not that we are greater than they (Isaih ben Mail di Trani).*

I can't think of myself as a dwarf who sees further than a giant, but I identify with the notion that we "stand on the shoulders" of those who come before us and enable us to see further. My perspective on Jewish scholarship has been shaped by social scientists whose meta-frameworks influence my thinking about human behavior and by those of you whose analytic focus lights our understanding of the Jewish community. I acknowledge my debt to others' ideas, even as I strive to fashion a new view.

## Science

In a Kuhnian sense (Kuhn, 1996), we social scientific scholars of Jewry are neither a discipline nor, perhaps, even a sub-discipline. Although we are mostly polite to one another, we lack a common paradigm. We share a focus on understanding the Jewish experience, but sometimes it appears that there is little else to unite us. My immodest goal today is to explore what it means to be a social scientist of Jewry by elucidating my

Science is a way to understand, but it is not a mechanical process – that’s what makes it challenging.

own perspective and attempting to draw out some common principles. The intent is not to lay claim to a single proper way to understand contemporary

expressions of Jewish life; rather, I want to illuminate what seems core and disentangle some of the confusion created by the often cacophonous sounds of clashing perspectives.

Our common identity is as social scientists, but what does that mean? The practice of science and its application to social phenomena seems always to have been in flux, yet, there is something distinctive about calling ourselves scientists. To draw from the richness of Jewish thought, Maimonides viewed science as central to the rational function and, perhaps, “rationalist” is not a bad way to describe our identity. But Maimonides also says that science is “... the knowledge of ultimate and proximal causes, which one must investigate if one is to know anything” (Shemonah Perakim, 2:3). If our field needs a motto, this Maimonidean formulation should be a candidate. If a more prosaic description of why we

employ scientific methods is needed, consider the words of Robert Pirsig (1974) from *Zen and Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*:

*The real purpose of the scientific method is to make sure that Nature hasn't misled you into thinking something you don't actually know* (Pirsig, 2005, p. 105).

Science is a way to understand, but it is not mechanical a process – that’s what makes it challenging. One’s disciplinary/sub-disciplinary perspective makes a difference. As I count the 21 Sklare awardees, we are from 10 disciplines, but I am the first psychologically-trained recipient. Not surprisingly, my approach is influenced by this perspective. Let me explain by talking about several of the psychological figures on whose shoulders my perspective has evolved.

*Daniel Kahneman.* One of these psychological giants is an Israeli-bred cognitive psychologist, Daniel Kahneman, now at Princeton University. A Nobel Prize laureate, Kahneman has reshaped thinking in a host of disciplines, from economics to medicine and psychology (Goldstein, 2011). Kahneman’s work focuses on understanding biases in how we process information and the difficulty of applying rational analysis, particularly to problems with which we have substantial knowledge or experience. Although sometimes mischaracterized as an anti-rationalist, Kahneman’s ideas are about the ways in which our intuitive system of thinking interacts with rational, evidence-based thinking. Kahneman’s insights provide the rationale for applying scientific logic to understanding the Jewish community and the dangers in failing to do so.

Kahneman believes that we live “... in a world rife with illusions of validity” and that we are “blind to our blindness” (2011b). In his recent book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011a), Kahneman details how cognitive biases – availability, anchoring, hindsight,



Daniel Kahneman

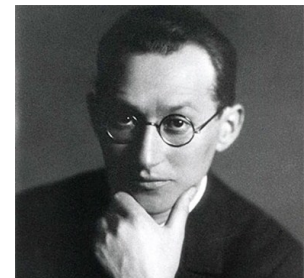
optimism – lead us to ignore or reject objective evidence. He identifies two systems which describe how we understand the world: System 1, a fast intuitive process that is governed by “What you see is all that there is,” and System 2, a slower, rational process of weighing evidence. We are problematic processors because we think we are System 2 rational thinkers, but we are heavily dependent on System 1.

Many experts, including professionals and scholars concerned with the Jewish community, believe that they understand the problems of contemporary life. And, no doubt, we/they are sometimes correct. But cognitive biases invariably lead us to understand problems through the lens of past experience. Understanding the past is necessary to understand the future, but it is not sufficient. Particularly in a world of fast-paced technological change, relying solely on the past may be ill-suited to new problems. Kahneman would urge us to think “slowly” and systematically consider the evidence. But how we do that and how can our brand of science be applied to understanding Jewish life?

*Kurt Lewin.* For a scientific framework to understanding Jewish life, I am indebted to another psychology giant, Kurt Lewin. Lewin is famously remembered as the

“practical theorist” and the intellectual father of modern social psychology. Lewin was a German Jew who came to the United States in 1933. His experience living in a society saturated with anti-Semitism shaped his view of human behavior and his interest in group process. He pioneered the development of “field theory,” a framework that sought to explicate mathematically how individuals conceptualize their world (Saxe, 2010). But his greatest contributions were about how we should study human behavior.

Lewin believed that not only was group behavior an essential focus for psychologists, but that social problems should be central to the concerns of psychologists (Saxe, 2010). His critical insight was that to understand complex social phenomena – and issues of Jewish identity, education, and engagement are certainly such – one had to try to change them. Rather than passive observation or asking individuals how they think or feel, one should introduce changes and assess their impact. “Action research,” as Lewin called it, was an approach to studying the dynamics of change. It engaged psychologists directly in the study and amelioration of social problems where knowledge creation, intervention, and practice were interconnected. His experimental studies of group leadership, showing the link between autocratic environments and aggression, were an outgrowth both of his personal story and his approach to research (Lewin, Lippit, & White, 1939).



Kurt Lewin

Near the end of his too short life, Lewin considered how his approach could be

applied to Jewish Education (1944). Lewin tackled the problem – not very different than that which obsesses leaders of the present-day Jewish community – of how to ensure that Jewish children will continue to embrace their tradition and how Jewish education can promote “healthy development.” His approach is echoed by Kahneman who has suggested that, whichever problems we tackle, we not allow our “emotions, blind forces and too little rational consideration” to prevail (2011a, p. 263). Lewin urged the application of systematic research to inform and address the problem of Jewish education and engagement.

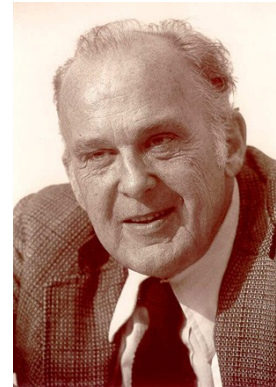
*Donald Campbell.* There is one more psychological thinker on whose shoulders I stand; a non-Jewish scholar, Donald Campbell. Campbellian logic is often associated with advocacy for quantitative experimentation, but actually his approach emphasizes qualitative understanding. Perhaps his most important contribution has been to inject skepticism and humility into our thinking about science and the “fallibility of knowledge construction.” Campbell is the progenitor of the framework – internal, external, construct, and statistical conclusion validity – for some, the “Torah,” of social scientific thinking.

Campbell’s emphasis was on how one probes “cause-effect” relationships; although he was unlikely aware of it, an elaboration of Maimonidean thinking. He promoted

thinking about the problem in terms of “counterfactuals” (see Morgan & Winship, 2007), what we think would happen in the absence of a cause. Campbell’s insight, building on programs of social research pioneered by others, including Lewin, was that this logic could be applied widely to social phenomena.

For Campbell, validity refers to the “approximate truth of an inference” (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, p. 34). It is relativistic in that we are attempting to improve understanding.

Campbell’s logic – that “validity is a property of inferences,” not a function solely of methods or data – is key to the scientific understanding of contemporary Jewry. Whether describing the characteristics of Jews, interpreting an evaluation study of Jewish education, or assessing the effectiveness of institutional policy, our conclusions are judgments. The same study/data can yield conclusions about which we are highly confident and those about which we are not confident. Campbell’s framework provides the intellectual scaffolding to assess the validity of these inferences.



Donald Campbell



## Taglit-Birthright Israel

Although any area of research on contemporary Jewry could serve as the case study for how our scientific lens is applied, I am going to focus on Taglit-Birthright Israel. I have devoted nearly 13 years – much of my career as a student of the Jewish community – to thinking about and studying this initiative (see, eg., Saxe & Chazan, 2008). It illustrates how I have tried to apply the lessons of Kahneman, Lewin, and Campbell and the advantages, as well as the limitations, of social scientific paradigms.

For an intervention that today is a fixture in the Jewish world, engaging hundreds of thousands of Jewish young adults, Taglit had radical origins. Nearly twenty years ago,

**As Kahneman might have explained, because observers did not already have experience with Taglit, they were not primed to see its possibilities.**

it was the “birthright” of every Jewish child to travel to Israel. His goal was to promote the creation of a connected worldwide Jewish community and to reverse Israel’s supplicant status with the Diaspora. In the wake of the findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study (Kosmin, et al., 1991) he believed that American Jewry was threatened. In 1998, when philanthropists Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt adopted the idea for Taglit, their bold objective was to create a program that would stem the tide of assimilation (Saxe & Chazan, 2008).

Yossi Beilin (2000, 2011) proposed that the Jewish Agency for Israel be scrapped, with its budget directed to funding educational trips for Diaspora youth to visit Israel. Beilin proclaimed

When Taglit was initially proposed, the “System 1” intuitive reaction was overwhelmingly negative. It was going to be “free” and how could anyone value something they didn’t pay for? It was going to be brief and how could one replace years of study with a “mere” ten day experience? And, it was going to focus on college students, who many believed were past the point of being influenceable in something as fundamental as their Jewish identity. Even its founding philanthropists were skeptical that unengaged college students would enthusiastically embrace the program. As Kahneman might have explained, because observers did not already have experience with Taglit, they were not primed to see its possibilities.

I got involved with Charles Kadushin to propose a study of Taglit in part because the project was straight out of the Lewinian playbook. As a newcomer to the study of Jewry, I was looking for an opportunity to study whether one could change the trajectory of Jewish identity development. I also wanted to distinguish myself from Marshall Sklare who had been the “voice of the conservative Jewry.” From my perch on his shoulders, I wanted to understand a broader segment of Jewish life – the less traditional and unengaged. I saw Taglit as an opportunity to conduct a large-scale social experiment, an idea that Campbell championed to promote innovation. I was confident Taglit would be far more popular than the philanthropists believed and we could use the waiting list as a control group. The popularity of the program would provide the basis for broad generalizations.

The study, as designed, included both qualitative and quantitative data collection, with an initial emphasis on ethnography. When the program was launched in late 1999

– before we had a research agreement – my personal credit card funded half a dozen Cohen Center staffers who traveled as group observers. We observed everyone, including the bus drivers, and our group ethnographies were critical to providing confidence and color to the inferences we drew from later quantitatively-focused surveys.

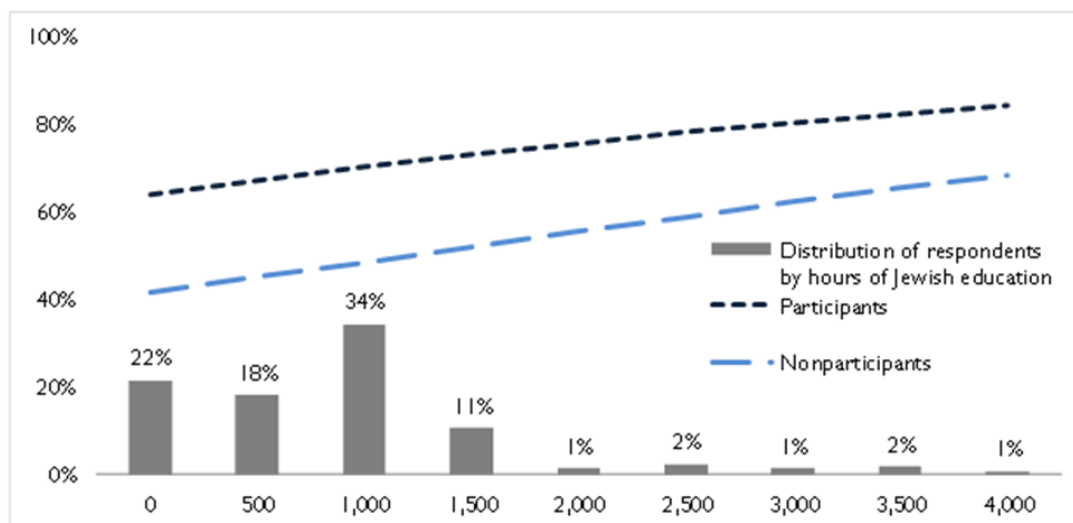
Our research design reflected the simplicity of a true experiment: a comparison, among applicants to the program, of those who participated and those who did not. Unlike studies where one does not know the characteristics of comparison subjects, we knew a lot about the control group. On virtually all measures, they were not different from those who participated. Although random assignment had not been used, a variety of administrative policies made it mostly random. If anything, in Taglit’s early years, participants had lower levels of Jewish education than non-participant applicants.

One feature of the design, made possible by Taglit’s scale – with nearly 50,000 applicants per year – is that we have been able to do

both sample and population studies. We often survey all of those who applied/participated, but also select a sample for detailed follow-up. It allows us to assess bias. As well, by following large groups, we are able to understand differences among sub-groups and develop highly reliable estimates of outcomes.

As Taglit celebrates its bar mitzvah, it’s a chance to review what we have learned and discussed in dozen reports, papers, chapters, and books about the project (see, e.g., Saxe & Chazan, 2008; Saxe, et al., 2004; Saxe, Kadushin, Kelner, Rosen, & Yereslove, 2001; Saxe, et al., 2009; Saxe, et al., 2011; Saxe, et al., 2012). The findings are complex, but can be summarized simply. Across dozens of studies, tens of thousands of interviews, we find consistent positive effects – on attitudes as well as behavior – that can be attributed to Taglit. “Standing on one foot” my conclusion is that, for the vast majority of participants, Taglit changes the trajectory of their Jewish engagement; and, it does so both for those with and without substantial Jewish education. Several

Figure 1: Inmarriage by Hours of Jewish Education and Taglit Participation  
(Predicted Probabilities for those Married after Taglit Participation)



observations emerge out of our work on Taglit relevant to the scientific study of Jewry:

1. *Comparison group design.* I sometimes label the design as a “queasy-experiment.” It’s my nod to Campbell and acknowledgement that we have created a hybrid cousin to a true randomized design. Its strength is that it yields relatively unambiguous evidence of program impact. The counterfactual design has been essential to our ability to claim that the program works. That said, it does not necessarily provide the basis for understanding why the program has effects.

What if our design did not incorporate a control group? We would, for example, have evidence of very positive attitudes among participants toward Israel and their Jewish identities. But we would not know if those positive attitudes were the result of self-selection rather than the program. As an example, consider the graphic display from our recent report (Saxe, et al., 2012) of the long-term effects of Taglit (Figure 1). The outcome measure is inmarriage – as a measure of Jewish identity – and the predicted probability of non-Orthodox inmarried Taglit alumni is plotted against their hours of Jewish education. It indicates that the majority of married alumni are inmarried (average =71%) and that the rate is correlated with hours of prior Jewish education. But how do we know if the rate of inmarriage has been affected by the program? The average inmarriage rate is assumed to more than 50%, but perhaps it is higher for Taglit applicants, who may be the most committed to their Jewish identity.

Only when we examine the rate of inmarriage for our control group is it clear that the change is associated with being part

of the program. It is a stunning finding, in part because the test is likely a conservative estimate of program impact. The control group includes individuals who traveled to Israel on non-Taglit programs and also includes individuals married to Taglit alumni. Furthermore, the least engaged are also the least likely to respond to our entreaties to be interviewed. The data allow us to test a variety of competing hypotheses, including the possibility that it is not Taglit, but that Taglit triggers other behaviors (e.g., return trips to Israel). Analyses of those who have returned and those who don’t show an independent effect, not dependent on a return trip.

2. *Outcome measures.* There is much about Jewish life that is ineffable and no questionnaire, or interview, or observation can capture its fullness. Our approach has been to explore outcomes that are specific to program goals (Jewish identity, love of Israel, *Klal Yisrael*) or we believe are related. As a Lewinian, my concern includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. We do not have much choice but to focus on what individual respondents tell us, but one way to ensure the reliability and validity of these measures is to make them as concrete as possible. Thus, for example, we ask respondents about what they did last Friday night, not how often they observe Shabbat. We have explored a host of different ways to assess how interest and engagement in Jewish life might be expressed. One of the challenges is that, unlike their parents’ generation, for Millennials, institutional engagement is not the sine qua non of being connected and “membership” is a toxic concept.

Where does assessing inmarriage fit in this scheme? It’s not a goal of the program – despite some who call the program

“birthrate.” Inmarriage is simply a behavioral measure that we theorize is related to a key program goal, enhancing Jewish identity. It became a focus because we sought a way to evaluate skeptics’ claims that the program could only have an ephemeral impact – proportionate to its short length. Along with inmarriage being a focus of communal angst and debate, we believed that it was the most important Jewish decision made by emerging adults on their journey to adulthood. It is an objective measure that strengthens the construct validity of claims about program impact. Although there is an obsession in the Jewish community with point estimates such as the inmarriage rate, our focus is on relationships between past and present behavior.

3. A final issue about Taglit concerns the length of time we have been involved in the study of the intervention. From Kahneman’s perspective, it is possible that our experience with the project blinds us to negative effects. I worry about that possibility and, while awareness does not inevitably lead to a solution, several strategies help to keep our vision clear. One strategy is to submit our work to peer review, both by social scientists within and outside the Jewish research community. As much as I value the web and the way in which it has created possibilities for disseminating research, it needs a quality filter. All knowledge is not created equally nor are all inferences equally valid. Another is to enlarge the circle of researchers engaged in study of Taglit, both by adding new/younger members who come with research expertise and the experience of having been

Taglit participants or staff and by developing collaborative relationships with other researchers.

Whatever the dangers of long-term study of any problem, there are also substantial advantages. Too much research in the Jewish community, often dictated by resource constraints, is episodic and too limited in time or scope to extract significant value. It is acontextual. Funders often act as if they have attention deficit disorder and, perhaps, those who are similarly afflicted are attracted to such projects. If we are to develop the field as a scientific enterprise, we need funders who have the foresight to engage researchers in the development process and have the patience to partner with us to support sustained study. Given the life-cycle nature of Jewish engagement, snapshots of the moving stream of development may, even if beautiful, be less enlightening than grainier movies of the stream across seasons and years. We need to cultivate a love of movies.

With time, we can potentially cure aspects of the lacunae with the current program of research on Taglit and understand why and how the program affects participants. We have lots of ideas. One focus is on how Taglit reconfigures participants’ social networks and, through the relationships that are built, allows participants to draw meaning from their involvement with other Jews, with Israel, and with Jewish tradition. The implications of our theorizing about social networks reach beyond Taglit (cf. Kadushin, 2011).

Given the life-cycle nature of Jewish engagement, snapshots of the moving stream of development may, even if beautiful, be less enlightening than grainier movies of the stream across seasons and years. We need to cultivate a love of movies.

## Common Ground

I said that I would attempt to find common ground among our perspectives on the social scientific study of Jewry. If it's not already abundantly clear, by dint of my personal experience and disciplinary training, I have a unique perspective on our collective enterprise. One source of difference is my personal experience. I am aware, for example, that the giants I have discussed are exclusively male. As well, while our field has evolved primarily from scholars identified with the conservative and orthodox movements, that isn't my background. But, if we are a scientific field of study, I need to be able to communicate with you and vice versa. Like members of Congress who may fiercely guard divergent perspectives about the path away from the fiscal cliff, but hopefully work within a common frame of reference toward similar goals, we social scientists of Jewry need to agree on some core principles. I will suggest three:

1. *Controlling bias.* As social scientists we are committed to bringing objectivity to understanding the experience of Jewish life. You don't need to accept my explanation of the problem – our collective overemphasis on System 1 thinking – to agree that controlling bias is essential. Our goal in applying a scientific perspective is not to claim prescience, but to be more objective than we would be without it.

Practically, this means that we need to be concerned with validity – the accuracy of our claims. Even if we describe validity in different language, it requires that we design studies with synchrony between governing questions and methods used to provide answers. To be a social scientist is to think rigorously about the relationship between ideas and data. I am not advocating a

particular kind of research, just good research. Too often, “best available” data do not answer the questions that have been posed. Our commitment to controlling bias means, as well, that we need to be able to admit that the evidence or our analytic strategies are inadequate.

An underlying problem is that the world we seek to understand is inherently multivariate and our scientific approach has to match the complexity of the phenomena. Although control group designs need not be considered the “gold standard,” to the extent that we are investigating questions of causal relationships (even implicitly), we need comparison groups and/or trend data to understand the phenomena. We also need to be concerned with the adequacy and reliability of our measures. Perhaps, most importantly, a focus on controlling bias means that we need to be more circumspect and openly acknowledge the limitations of our conclusions, including the inherent error in any estimate from a sample.

Because we are applied researchers, whose work is often funded by interested parties, we also have to control bias that comes from our sponsors. In my case, it has meant refusing support if it is accompanied by restrictions on publication, along with rejecting funding that is insufficient to enable us to answer the questions being posed. Because much of my support does not come directly from program sponsors, I can afford to choose projects carefully. Often, I make the decision by asking a potential sponsor, “What would happen if our conclusions fail to support your expectations?”

2. *Generalizable knowledge.* As social scientists of Jewry, our focus is to understand how Jews live their lives as influenced by their heritage and by identification with a

collective. My Lewinian orientation draws me to try to understand contemporary behavior and the links between affect, behavior, and cognition. It does not preclude studying other facets of Jewish behavior, nor is it necessarily restricted to studying the contemporary situation. Historical analyses, and investigations of groups and institutions are, among other types of work, part of our purview. What I hope we have in common is a commitment to developing generalizable knowledge. We study particular phenomena in order to help us understand something broader than the problem itself. If our understandings of Jewish life are disconnected factoids, we will have failed to live up to the promise of our field as a science. The techniques of science can be used to generate facts, but information bits need to be organized to be scientific.

Our work need not be directed towards developing “universal laws of human behavior.” Some of what we do will focus on measurement of behavior, but even when we are in a descriptive mode, our task is to develop narratives. In this respect, we are all qualitative researchers. Even though some of us primarily tell our stories through numeracy, describing relationships is essential to sciences. We are not technicians of Jewish life; rather, we are scholars seeking understanding. This is theory in its broadest sense. We study different phenomena, sometimes we are deductive, while other times inductive, but our goal of illuminating relationships and seeking generalizable knowledge is core to what we do.

3. *Enhancing Jewish life.* My institution, Brandeis University, was founded to be the Jewish contribution to higher education – a

center of learning, open to all and dedicated to exposing “truth even unto its innermost parts.” It was named for a great American Jew – Louis Brandeis -- whose life was bound up in the pursuit of justice. Although debate our mission is embedded in the fabric of life at Brandeis, there has been steadfast commitment to social justice and to service for the Jewish community. As social scientists of Jewry, I want to suggest that we share this vision and, in particular, we have a collective interest in preserving the values and vibrancy of Jewish culture and life.

If we were cancer researchers, no one would question our loyalty to science because of our dedication to

promoting health and long life. Most of us are personally involved in Judaism, Jewish culture and Israel. But we sometimes act as if we are scholars who, by happenstance, decided to examine the behavior of a rare population with an unusual capacity for survival, but we do so because we care. Our personal interest is, no doubt, a bias that we need to control carefully, but it is also an obligation.

Social research is not *Torah l'shema*. It is, however, our way to make a positive difference in society. And, I would like to suggest, that because we are obligated social scientists, we agree that:

We sometimes act as if we are scholars who, by happenstance, decided to examine the behavior of a rare population with an unusual capacity for survival, but we do so because we care.

- Our research needs to be done well and address the complexity of informing policy, planning, and program design;
- Our task is to weave together knowledge into mosaics of understanding for the common good.

I hope that these “common ground” principles have some resonance for those who identify as social scientists studying the Jewish people. I have no illusions, however, that even if there were agreement about them, that it would propel us smoothly into a new era. To be scientific is to hold conflicting ideas in tension. I am a Kuhnian (1996) scientific revolutionary and see the clash of paradigms – our different ways to study and understand our world – as healthy. Kuhn’s conflict model may be overly dramatic, but scientific progress is about our willingness to engage with one another and allow new perspectives to replace the old. If we are to realize this goal and communicate with one another in a way that lays bare our substantive agreements and disagreements, it will come about only if we share a common sense of the task.

According to Rashi, G-d calls the Israelites “stiff-necked” because they are inflexible, unable to turn to the left or right to consider other points of view (Exodus 34:9). We social scientists of Jewry might deserve a similar moniker. The Israelites who wandered b’midbar together, as do we, the tribe of scholars of Jewry. In our pursuit of a common objective, we agree to disagree. To be scientific is to seek to have our ideas to be considered in the marketplace of ideas – in journals, in books, in the public square – and to agree to engage with one another to make a better world.

Which brings me back to acknowledging my debt to others in our collective, interconnected endeavor. Much of today’s discussion has focused on those who provided shoulders on which my intellectual perspective developed. I am indebted, as well, to a host of individuals who – on a personal and professional level – affect my daily life and thinking. Along with a many of you in this room and my colleagues at Brandeis, I am indebted to three scholars who have educated me about what it means to be part of the Jewish people and Israel: Daniel Bar-Tal, Barry Berger, and Barry Chazan. I take it as a mark of the strength of our relationships that we have profound differences in views, yet continue to engage with one another.

And I need to acknowledge my family. My late parents instilled in me a love of ideas, of Judaism, (and, yes) of argument, but their most important teaching was that my role was to join with others to make the world a better place. I also want to acknowledge my extended family, including my brother and sister-in-law, Howard Gardner and Ellen Winner. Howard and Ellen are distinguished psychologists and public intellectuals who make even mundane family gatherings worthy of academic credit. Finally, I want to note the two people who give my life meaning and purpose: my wife, Marion Gardner-Saxe and our son, Daniel. Marion is my life-partner and love. Daniel is our proudest accomplishment and makes me hopeful both about the future of the Jewish people and our society.

## References

- Beilin, Y. (2000). *His brother's keeper: Israel and diaspora Jewry in the twenty-first century*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Beilin, Y. (2011). *Birtheright: The true story*. Charleston: Create Space.
- Goldstein, E. R. (2011, November 8). The anatomy of influence, *Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Kadushin, C. (2011). *Understanding social networks: Theories, concepts, and findings*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kahneman, D. (2011a). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kahneman, D. (2011b). 'We're blind to our blindness'. *The Independent*.
- Kosmin, B. A., Goldstein, S., Waksberg, J., Lerer, N., Keysar, A., & Scheckner, J. (1991). *Highlights of the CJF 1990 Jewish Population Survey*. New York: Council of Jewish Federations.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kurt Lewin [Photograph]. Retrieved December 12, 2012, from: [http://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia//fotos/lewin\\_kurt.jpg](http://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia//fotos/lewin_kurt.jpg)
- Lewin, K. (1944). Jewish education and reality. *Jewish Education*, 15(3).
- Lewin, K., Lippit, R., & White, R. (1939). Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created 'social climates'. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 10, 29.
- Morgan, S. L., & Winship, C. (2007). *Counterfactuals and causal inference: Methods and principals for social research*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Photograph of Donald T. Campbell [Photograph]. Retrieved December 12, 2012, from: <http://jsaw.lib.lehigh.edu/campbell/>
- Pirsig, R. (2005). *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- Saxe, L. (2010). Lewin, Kurt (1890-1947). In J. M. Levine & M. A. Hogg (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Group Process and Intergroup Relations* (pp. 534-536): SAGE Publications.
- Saxe, L., & Chazan, B. (2008). *Ten days of Birtheright Israel: A journey in young adult identity*. Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press/ University Press of New England.
- Saxe, L., Kadushin, C., Hecht, S., Rosen, M. I., Phillips, B., & Kelner, S. (2004). *Evaluating Birtheright Israel: Long-term impact and recent findings*. Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.
- Saxe, L., Kadushin, C., Kelner, S., Rosen, M. I., & Yereslove, E. (2001). *The Impact of birtheright israel*. Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.
- Saxe, L., Phillips, B., Sasson, T., Hecht, S., Shain, M., Wright, G., et al. (2009). *Generation Birtheright Israel: The impact of an Israel experience on Jewish identity and choices*. Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.
- Saxe, L., Sasson, T., Hecht, S., Phillips, B., Shain, M., Wright, G., et al. (2011). *Jewish Futures Project: The impact of Taglit-Birtheright Israel, 2010 update*. Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.
- Saxe, L., Shain, M., Wright, G., Hecht, S., Fishman, S., & Sasson, T. (2012). *The Impact of Taglit-Birtheright Israel: 2012 Update*. Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.
- Shadish, W. R., Cook, T. D., & Campbell, D. T. (2002). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for generalized causal inference*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- [Untitled photograph of Daniel Kahneman]. Retrieved December 12, 2012, from: <http://lareviewofbooks.org/author.php?id=1127>



## Leonard Saxe

Leonard Saxe is Klutznick Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies and directs the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Steinhardt Social Research Institute at Brandeis University. Professor Saxe is a social psychologist, as well as a methodologist, and is concerned with the application of social science to social policy issues. His present focus is on religious and ethnic identity and specifically addresses issues relevant to the Jewish community. Professor Saxe's current research on the Jewish community involves socio-demographic studies of American Jewry and a program of research on Jewish education and its relationship to the Jewish engagement. he is co-author of a 2008 book, *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity*, the story of Birthright Israel, an intensive ten-day educational program designed to connect Jewish young adults to their heritage.



The Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is a multi-disciplinary research institute dedicated to the study of American Jewry and religious and cultural identity.

The Steinhardt Social Research Institute, hosted at CMJS, is committed to the development and application of innovative approaches to socio-demographic research for the study of Jewish, religious, and cultural identity.

**Brandeis University**



Cohen Center  
*for Modern Jewish Studies*