



research notes

Feelings and Reactions To Intermarriage

This *Research Note* is the final in a series of four which deals with one of the most critical challenges to the contemporary American Jewish community – intermarriage. After exploring the widely differing intermarriage rates in several cities and discussing possible reasons for those differences, this series turned its attention to comparative studies of the Boston Jewish community over three decades (1965, 1975, 1985). Although intermarriage rates in the Boston community continue to rise, the sharpest increase occurred during the 1970s, and the rate of increase has attenuated during the 1980s. We noted that rates of conversion are currently low: about 15 percent of Boston currently intermarried couples have undergone conversion. Conversionary households were found to behave very much like inmarried households – in some ways they rank even higher in measures of Jewish identity than inmarried households. However, mixed married (unconverted) households rank dramatically lower on every measure of Jewish identity.

This *Research Note* focuses on the attitudes of the Jewish community towards intermarriage. We investigate feelings about and reactions to intermarriage among groups of Jews. We then relate the extent of negative feelings toward and reactions to intermarriage with some basic socio-cultural characteristics of the Jewish community.

Two survey questions in the Boston Jewish population studies of 1965, 1975 and 1985 explored the attitudes of adults in the community, both parents and those without children, toward intermarriage over two decades:

1. "If a child of yours were to consider marrying a non-Jew, how would you most likely feel about it? Very negative, negative, no difference, or positive?"
2. "If a child of yours were to consider marrying a non-Jew, which you would most likely do? Strongly oppose it, discourage it, be neutral, or accept it?"

The first question expresses feelings toward the potential intermarriage of one's own child. The second variable expresses potential behavior—how would a parent react if a child were to be intermarried. Table 1 compares the feelings with the reactions of those interviewed towards intermarriage in the three surveys.

Table 1
**Feelings and Reactions of Boston Jews
to Child's Possible Intermarriage**

	1965	1975	1985
<i>Feelings</i>			
Negative	n/a	57%	57%
No Difference or Positive	n/a	37%	39%
<i>Reactions</i>			
Oppose or Discourage	70%	34%	31%
Neutral or Accept	25%	59%	66%

Fifty seven percent of those interviewed in both 1975 and 1985 feel negative about the possibility of their child marrying a non-Jew. The Boston questionnaire in 1965 did not ask a comparable question about feelings towards a potential intermarriage. However, data on reaction to a child's potential intermarriage do span three decades, and give us valuable information on dramatic changes in the reactions of Jews toward intermarriage. As Table 1 shows, in 1965 the vast majority—70%—of Jews said they would actively oppose or discourage their child's marrying a non-Jew. However, in 1975 and 1985, a dramatic drop is seen; only half as many Jews indicate such a position: only one-third—34% and 31% respectively—of Boston Jews said they would actively oppose or discourage such a marriage. There is more acceptance of the situation, due to complex, interwoven reasons, including possibly the actual rise in intermarriage rates. Intended behavior—like feelings—does not change much from the 1970s to the 1980s. Intermarriage in the Jewish community may have stabilized relatively in the decade from the 1970s to the 1980s, as shown both in intermarriage rates (see prior *Research Note*) and in the feelings and reactions of the community toward it.

Note that Jews clearly differentiate between feelings and reactions within their attitudes towards

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How Jews Feel About Intermarriage

intermarriage. Feelings against intermarriage have been consistently higher than active reactions to intermarriage in every survey of Jewish populations. When feelings are translated into potential actions they are reduced and attenuated. It seems that Boston Jews who try to project how they would feel and react if children they have or may have were to intermarry, do express negative feelings toward intermarriage, but are not willing to react strongly and to risk losing their children. Therefore, they are much less likely to actively oppose intermarriage should their child "bring home" a non-Jewish spouse. Thus, while reactions to intermarriage have stabilized in the decade from 1975 to 1985, this stabilization itself represents a marked departure from reactions in the past.

We can speculate that the stabilized 57% (Table 1) of Boston Jews having negative feelings towards a child's possible intermarriage may also represent a decline in negative responses, compared to the past. Had the 1965 Boston survey included a question about feelings of Jews to a child's possible intermarriage, the vast majority would have very likely indicated negative feelings. Thus we may say that the decade from 1975 to 1985 saw a stabilization in both feelings toward intermarriage and in intended action, but that these stabilized responses represent a marked decline in negative feelings and reactions toward intermarriage from the 1965 data.

Observing differences between groups, Table 2 shows that younger people (ages 18-39) are substantially less negative toward intermarriage than persons over age 40. Among many reasons this may be partially because they don't yet have children of marriageable age, as well as possibly because they are likely to have many more intermarried couples among their friends and acquaintances.

Table 2
Feelings and Reactions of Boston Jews to Child's Possible Intermarriage by Age

Feelings	1965		1975		1985	
	18-39	40+	18-39	40+	18-39	40+
Negative	n/a	n/a	46%	71%	49%	65%
No Diff or Pos	n/a	n/a	49%	25%	49%	28%
Reactions						
Oppose or Discrg	65%	78%	31%	42%	27%	35%
Neutral or Accept	27%	22%	63%	52%	69%	59%

While striking differences remain between the feelings and the reactions expressed in 1975 and 1985, the extent of negative responses to intermarriage has softened considerably from one generation to the next, as evidenced by the differences between both age groups in 1965 and in 1985.

Data regarding Jews' feelings in 1985 by denominational identification and by synagogue membership are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Feelings of Boston Jews about Child's Possible Intermarriage by Denominational Affiliation and Synagogue Membership in 1985

Denominational Identification	Feelings	
	Negative	No Difference or Positive
Orthodox	76%	22%
Conservative	76%	19%
Reform	52%	45%
Other	21%	72%
Synagogue Membership		
Orthodox	90%	9%
Conservative	83%	9%
Reform	67%	31%
Overall Members	80%	16%
Non-members	45%	55%

Denominational identification was measured via a direct question concerning the respondents' Jewish identity: "Do you think of yourself as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or just Jewish?" Table 3 indicates a marked difference of negative feelings toward intermarriage in a descending order from Orthodox to unidentified Jews. While the difference between feelings among Orthodox and Conservative Jews is not significant, we see a dramatic drop among Reform Jews and still another dramatic drop among those not identifying with the denominations. Synagogue members are much more likely to express negative feelings toward intermarriage than non-members—80% vs 45% respectively—higher even than the self-defined Orthodox Jews (80% vs 76% respectively) and much higher than the general population 80% vs 57% (Table 1). As a member, a person has made an active commitment to belong to a synagogue. The results for 1975 (not shown) are similar to those in 1985.

The intended reactions of Jews towards intermarriage by denomination and by synagogue membership are presented in Table 4 and Figure 1. Denominational identification affects intended reactions, as seen in Table 4. The results show an expected descending order of negative response, from Orthodox to the

non-identified Jews. Note the wide differences that exist even between the unidentified Jews and the Reform Jews, who are the most accepting of affiliated Jews toward the phenomenon. The results of the 1975 survey (not shown) are similar to the 1985 data.

Table 4
Reactions of Boston Jews to Child's Potential Marriage by Denomination

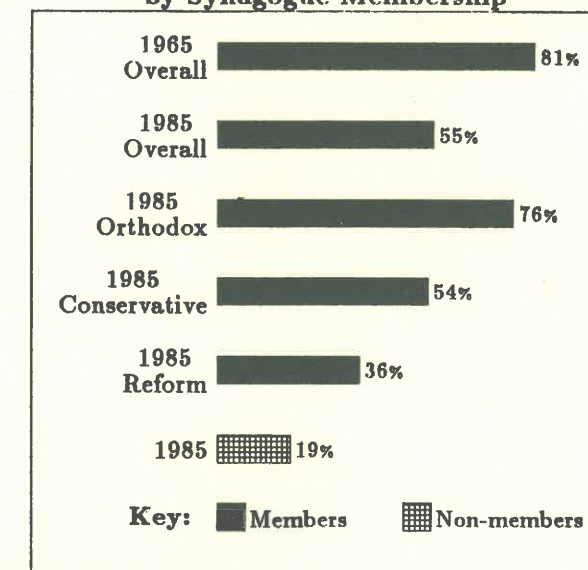
Years	Reactions	
	Oppose or Discourage	Neutral or Accept
1965		
Orthodox	84%	13%
Conservative	83%	13%
Reform	60%	38%
Other	31%	57%
1985		
Orthodox	62%	37%
Conservative	48%	49%
Reform	23%	75%
Other	7%	91%

Note also that all denominations show a great increase in tolerance, especially Boston Reform Jews. In 1985, many more Reform Jews say they are accepting or neutral toward intermarriage (75%) than opposing or discouraging (23%), while in 1965 it is the opposite (38% vs 60% respectively). This reversal among Reform Jewish attitudes contrasts also with their attitudes presented in Table 3: in 1985, their attitudes are more negative (52%) than positive (45%), while their expected behaviors (in Table 4) are more neutral or accepting than negative.

Although the percentages of Jews who would actively oppose or discourage intermarriage has dropped sharply in every group, synagogue members continue to be proportionately much more actively opposed to intermarriage than non-members, as seen in Figure 1. The figure graphically illustrates the decline in expected active discouragement of a child's potential intermarriage among Boston's Jews. In 1985, 55% of the members indicate they would react negatively to a child's potential intermarriage vs only 19% of non-members. This is a substantial difference.

Similarly large differences were found when taking into account denominational affiliation: Orthodox members are much more opposed to the child's potential intermarriage than Conservative members and Reform members. Even among Orthodox members, however, opposition to intermarriage declined substantially.

Figure 1
Boston Jews Who Would Oppose or Discourage Child's Potential Intermarriage by Synagogue Membership



In summary, Boston Jews have negative attitudes and, to a lesser degree, intended behaviors towards intermarriage. The articulated negative reaction of the population towards intermarriage is much less pronounced than their highly negative feelings. Attitudes remained relatively negative during the last two decades, and are more negative among the older population. Reactions to intermarriage, while stable from 1975 to 1985, were far more strongly negative in 1965. The relative stabilization of attitudes is concomitant with the relative stabilization of intermarriage rates. Jewish identity, expressed in denominational affiliation, is related strongly to negative feelings and intended reactions toward intermarriage. Synagogue members were found to be a group which tends to oppose, discourage, and have negative feelings towards intermarriage at much higher rates than among the general Jewish population. When taken as a group today, the majority of Boston Jews would prefer that their children not intermarry—but only one third would actively oppose such a marriage.

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