

Narrating Jewish Identity: A Response to Bruce Phillips

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Abstract In this response to Bruce Phillips on the delivery of his Sklare lecture, I revisit the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research arguing that qualitative work provides important responses, meanings and challenges to issues raised by social demographers. Such responses have the potential to move us, as in the case of the erosion/survival debates, beyond concerns about growth to a new level of conversation about the meaning and measure of Jewish continuity and its related research corollaries: secularity, ethnicity, authenticity and religiosity. Since all social science research is limited by the kinds of narrative discourse we bring to it, demographic trends in exogamy and “assimilation”, for instance, not only reflect an “erosion” or “growth” of population size and composition, but tensions about the measure and meaning of Jewish identity and the development and maintenance of consensus on core Jewish values. Therefore, whether we see erosion or resilience in our research depends on how a study is designed, what categories are used, how the data are collected and what interpretive framework is presented for its analyses. In this sense, it matters not if we are qualitative and/or quantitative in our approach but rather where we enter the conversation, why we see it as important, and to what end we will tell our research stories.

Keywords Qualitative sociology · Narrative research · Theory · Jewish identity

In “Shakespeare Unauthorized,” a major gallery exhibition on view at the Boston Public Library (2016–2017), the curator has recovered some rare early editions of well-known plays, including a first edition of Hamlet. In this new edition, the often-

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quoted line “To be or Not to be” ends *not* with the familiar “that is the question,” but rather with “Aye, there’s the point.” Bruce, you combine both endings in your work: you know the important social science questions to ask and you make important critical points about each. You are in the forefront of research on what “to be Jewish or not to be Jewish” means for twenty-first century Jews.

Today you have given us three examples of the ways in which your work on Jewish demography is enhanced by incorporating both theory and qualitative research. While I am not an expert in your specific fields of inquiry, I do have a deep and abiding interest in qualitative methodologies: what they contribute to quantitative studies, especially demographic surveys, and what they contribute to theory. I believe our methodologies, quantitative, qualitative or multivariate, are linked to our theoretical approaches and the narratives we believe important to the study of Jews. Those narratives guide our choices about whose experiences and whose “Judaism” will serve as the yardstick against which we will measure Jewish identity. Such decisions determine the samples we choose, the questions we ask (or more importantly don’t ask) and almost invariably, the conclusions we reach.

The importance of qualitative work to contemporary Jewish identity research and to sociological theory is worthy of emphasis. It can and does provide a meaning structure for the ways in which the “population at large” expresses and connects to its Jewishness. And, while idiosyncratic data from qualitative studies cannot, as quantitative findings, be generalized to the “population at large,” they can be generalized to theory. For instance, survey findings about increasing rates of interracial marriages, as you, Bruce, have pointed out, led to a host of qualitative studies that, in turn, I would argue, changed some of the very underpinnings of race theory itself. Understanding race from the perspective of those who experience interracial marriage changed our taken-for-granted thinking about race itself. Qualitative data provide the nuance and perspective that turns “white” from a normatively given, if not static, category of analysis to a more fluid and socio-historically constructed one.

From your earliest work to the present, qualitative research has been integral to your demographic work, especially around intermarriage. You have and continue to use qualitative studies as a way of pointing to what is missing in our socio-demographic research: from sampling, e.g., the absence of non-Jewish partners in interfaith marriage studies, to the recognition that respondents’ identity narratives might not cohere in conventional or expected ways.

My mentors taught me that theory emerges when we can no longer explain experience in conventional terms. Sociological theory is at its best when we challenge taken for granted assumptions within our models and when we change the definition of a situation. For example, when, as you do, we no longer take for granted that one size intermarriage fits all. Given that gentiles outnumber Jews at about 30 to one, sociology is at its best when we turn our questions around to ask, as you do, not why Jews intermarry, but why they marry other Jews. Or, as you point out, when we discover that the path to suburbanization is a mixed not a direct path to assimilation, we turn to more sophisticated models about the intersection between modernity and tradition; between the secular and the sacred in contemporary times.

Perhaps one of your best contributions is your insistence on bringing sociological theory into policy-driven research.

I'd like to end by posing some questions to you, not so much for immediate answers, but as a way of expanding on some of the important issues you raise in the study of contemporary Jewish identities and the relationship of the researcher to her/his research. I argue that since all social science analyses are in part rhetorical accomplishments, we must pay as close attention to the narratives we, as social scientists and/or as Jews, bring to our research as we do to those we collect from our respondents. In your article "From the Ends of the West: My Jewish Demographic Narrative," you provide us with a narrative of your early experiences growing up in a multicultural/multiethnic neighborhood in Los Angeles. Your research into ethnoburbs and enclaves, such as, "The Emergence of Jewish 'Ethnoburbs' in Los Angeles 1920–2010" (2014a, b) reveals your abiding curiosity in urban and multicultural communities. How, and in what ways, does this interest in multicultural communities guide your theoretical choices and methodological approaches?

In much of your later work, you urge us to use the important qualitative literature that has emerged over the past few decades on the nature of bi-racial identity and the factors that influence it as a starting point for our thinking about "mixed ancestry" among Jewish adults. Alternatively, could you expand (as you did with spatial/assimilation theories) on the ways in which Jewish sociology might revise and/or expand sociological and multicultural theories?

You also emphasize that political pressure from the multiracial community influenced the United States Census Bureau to include a multiracial category of response in its questionnaires. You conclude that the changing composition of the population at large, the increasing rates of interracial marriages, and a push from those who themselves have an interracial heritage, produced a variety of qualitative studies to help define, if not redefine, this emerging demographic phenomenon. Interestingly, many of those studies were done by a growing number of researchers who themselves were multiracial. Do you see a similar pattern emerging among contemporary Jewish social scientists in their interest, for instance, in intermarriage? That is, do you see the increasing call for shifts in our models and metrics about intermarriage and Jewish identity (away from policy driven concerns and more toward the meaning of the responses and experiences from the perspectives and experiences of respondents) as driven not only by shifts in the composition of the Jewish population toward increasing rates of intermarriage and by a growing number of young millennials who claim to be Jewish not by religion (highly correlated with intermarriage), but also by a growing familiarity for many of us both in our professional lives (as social scientists) and in our private ones (within our own families) with mixed-ancestry persons and families?

I admire your willingness to move community studies away from Jewish policy-oriented research alone to social inquiry informed by sociological theory and within the larger US context. Alternatively, as you did with spatial/assimilation theories, could you expand on the ways in which *Jewish* sociology might revise and/or expand sociological, multicultural and religious-identity theories and narratives?

Many of us who do qualitative research are guided by critical theories associated with a feminist and a postmodern turn; theories about fluidity and the instability of categories. These theories not only challenge old narratives about identity, authority and tradition, but also offer new narratives about the meaning and measure of those categories of analysis. I have argued that such narratives not only put flesh on demographic bones, they change the skeletal shape altogether.

Using quite different language, you argue something similar in your caution about the limitations of the 2000–2001 National Jewish Population Survey and the 2001 American Jewish Identity Survey, when you note that logistic regression analyses will not provide the substantive understandings we need to do this kind of research. You reiterate this in your article on new demographic perspectives on studying intermarriage in the United States (2013). Could you expand on the kinds of substantive understandings logistic regression analyses cannot provide, beyond just its inability to probe the meaning of responses from respondents' point of view?

In *Contemporary Jewry* (2014) and elsewhere (2005, 2010, 2011) I have argued the need for more qualitative work to provide important responses and sometimes critical challenges (new narratives) to issues raised by demographers. In so doing my hope is that we will move beyond the erosion/survival debates to a new level of conversation about the meaning and measure of Jewish continuity and its related research corollaries: secularity, ethnicity, authenticity and religiosity. You allude to this possibility as well, but not necessarily from my point of view. How do you see moving social scientists beyond this erosion/survival dichotomy?

All social science research is limited by the kinds of narrative discourse we bring to it. For instance, demographic trends in exogamy and “assimilation” not only reflect an “erosion” or “growth” of population size and composition, but tensions about the measure and meaning of Jewish identity and the development and maintenance of consensus on core Jewish values. Whether we see erosion or resilience in our research depends on how a study is designed, what categories are used, how the data are collected and what interpretive framework is presented for its analyses. In this sense, it matters not if we are qualitative and/or quantitative in our approach but rather where we enter the conversation, why we see it as important, and to what end we will tell our stories.

Thank you, Bruce, for opening so many important conversations for us in so many innovative ways.

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