Exploring Jewish Social Networks

Rela Mintz Geffen *
Baltimore Hebrew University

Introduction
All human interactions, actual or virtual, might be subsumed under the rubric of social networks. For the purposes of this paper, the term will be limited to non-familial associations ranging from territorially based groups, such as neighbors, to common alumnus/a status, to acquaintanceships based on shared values, to enduring friendship circles. The appropriate sociological concepts to describe this continuum vary but surely include communities of interest, social circles, peer groups and reference groups. Already embedded in reference group theory is the idea that members of a group which is salient to the actor need not be physically present, or even alive to have an influence on their thoughts and/or behavior. [1] From the outset, then various types of virtual social communities have to be taken into account from all those who study *Daf Yomi* (a daily page of Talmud) to people on the same listserve or in regular communication in chat rooms.

Over the last two decades measuring context, milieu and social networks has not been a focus of the research conducted in the North American Jewish community. And even when appropriate indicators have been included in surveys, serious analysis has been infrequent. [2] The analyses that are available indicate that we have been too quick to pass over the power of a variety of associational patterns at every point in the life cycle. This power was hinted at in the excellent work of a team who aggregated responses to eight community studies that pre-dated the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) in an attempt to analyze the sources and persistence of Jewish identity in conversionary and mixed marriages. [3] The authors paid close attention to primary groups including close friends. They noted that "The figures...indicate an extremely strong relationship between marriage type and friends..." and then go on to further specify their observation. But, as is the case with most of the extant research, they have only one indicator to utilize as a surrogate for the complex matter of friendship. [4]

In Sidney and Alice Goldstein's cogent analysis of 1990 NJPS data on migration, there is a sophisticated discussion of the importance of the Jewish character of neighborhoods as indicated by the responses of core Jewish population members to a question on the importance to them of the Jewish character of neighborhoods. "For the core Jewish sample as a whole, just under half considered the Jewish character of

the neighborhood to be very important; yet as many as 30 percent held the view that it was not important.[5]

Some more recent thoughts on Jewish networking were explicated in an important paper by Hayim Herring for the Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies.[6] Herring posits that the core-periphery model of construing Jewish community, which was first put forth by Daniel Elazar and later incorporated into the analytic framework of community and national Jewish population studies, obscured the importance of networking for understanding Jewish communal life.[7] He argues that the metaphor of core and periphery (he refers to it as the magnet metaphor) was useful but incomplete and that another metaphor, that of the network, derived from current organizational and management theory will enrich our understanding and vision of community.

Barry Shrage, president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston illustrates this approach by describing the power of the "Face-to-Face" community to strengthen federations. He recounts how an adult learning program was created throughout the Boston area utilizing networks, word of mouth and neighborhood meetings to market the concept rather than conventional mass marketing techniques. Shrage argues that just two or three degrees of separation exist between Jews in most American Jewish communities. Therefore, many planners actually know of half of the people they are seeking to reach. Moreover, the rest are closely tied by invisible but discoverable lines of connection. These informal connections can be tapped to create bandwagon effects, thus attracting unaffiliated Jews to community programs.

Proponents of networking seek to meet the needs of Jews wherever they are and enable them to climb on to the Jewish bandwagon as "free riders." On the other hand, some economists, basing their work on that of Laurence Iannacone's economic analysis of religion, argue that it is precisely the group that demands sacrifice that, in turn, commands respect, devotion and commitment.[8]

Iannacone contends that groups with ancient traditions that seek to prosper in thoroughly modern societies will do better by drawing clear boundaries and making regular demands on their members. Trying to include all potential members by relaxing boundaries will weaken group solidarity and lower the morale of devoted adherents.

Analytical Components of Social Networks I: The Neighborhood Reconsidered

It is common in most cultures to think of spatial collections as units of some importance; and the belief that spatial propinquity leads to social interaction and the development of shared values and action patterns is also widespread. Thus, the local community is often discussed as a concrete social unit. To it are imputed meaningful social bonds, the

generation of social value, and psychological support for the individual. In short, the local community is seen as a primary group.formalized by Tonnies (1887) as a *Gemeinschafft*.[9]

In twentieth century studies of Jewish community in North America, neighborhood, sometimes shortened to the phrase "the Jewish street," was considered an independent variable which "explained" socialization into and the maintenance of Jewish identity in individuals. But as Greer points out in his prescient article, "The more useful approach is to separate the spatial aspect from the social and then to make their relationship problematic" (Greer, p. 122). To put it a different way, one could ask, does propinquity automatically foster common identity, or is it commonality of interest and values that do so and what is the relationship between the two? Of course, commonality of interest and values may be strengthened by spatial arrangements, but it is not automatic that shared turf leads to a communal identity. After all, the group may choose at any time to sub-divide even a fairly small territory according to socially constructed boundaries.

All of this is by way of saying that the interpretation of residence in a Jewish neighborhood (as measured by the concentration of Jewish population in a certain area) as an indicator of identity has sometimes been simplistic. What concepts are being defined here? What relationships are implied? Greer cites boundaries, isolation and inescapable interdependence as the key variables that transform propinquity into "community" (Ibid, p. 122).

The rationale that underlies interpretation of results of the neighborhood data so commonly included in Jewish community and national studies goes something like this. Concentration of Jews enables the initiation, support and maintenance of institutional life including schools, *shuls*, kosher food markets, Jewish bookstores and the like. The very presence of these cultural "markers" acts to unobtrusively promote identity maintenance of non-affiliated and marginally affiliated Jews who are constantly reminded of their identity just by walking down the street. This subtle but pervasive "milieu effect" is most evident in areas of New York City, Miami, Boston, Philadelphia and Los Angeles sometimes leading to stock phrases such as "everyone in New York feels Jewish."

When carefully unpacked, the concept of neighborhood includes the ability to fund and create institutions which serve the committed core; the visibility of cultural markers continually reminds all Jews of who they are and teaches strangers about organic Jewish life; and finally, the casual social relationships developed by walking the same streets, shopping in the same stores and attending movies at the same theaters.[10]

But what is the meaning of neighborhood when shopping is done at malls miles away; when the important mail arrives on a small screen; when walking the streets is considered a dangerous activity and one must be sure to get into their car while it is still in the garage? And what is the meaning of a Jewish neighborhood when Empire chicken is in every supermarket along with kosher markings on thousands of products; or when congregants ride miles on freeways to centrally located synagogues for prayer, celebration and education; when Jewish books are purchased at Borders or through Amazon.com; or when adults study by listening to tapes as they commute daily by car or commuter train?

Analytical Components of Social Networks II: Friendship Groups
According to one sociologist: friendship is a voluntary, close and enduring social relationship. Values about friendship...can be summarized as involving closeness, solidarity, absence of ulterior ends, reciprocity, impulsiveness in mutual choice, and, perhaps, independence of social distinctions such as age, sex and class. Friendship is intimate, but less so than love and some family ties. Supplementing sexual and familial ties, friendship is a residual cultural category subsuming close and expectedly enduring ties. Since friendship involves voluntary commitment, intimacy and spontaneity, its consequences for the individual and for society, through individual growth and security, are presumably crucial. Possibly for this reason, to be without friends often involves shame.[11]

Early in the 1980s, I conducted a survey (co-sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations) of the attitudes toward marriage and family of more than 1,200 Jewish college students. One of the factors highly associated with participation in Jewish activities on the campus was the "Jewishness" of the social circles in which the students moved as indicated by the proportion of their close friends who were Jewish. Thus, of those who reported that all or most of their close friends were Jewish, about half (52% and 46%) had a high level of participation in Jewish campus life, while of those who said that some or none of their close friends were Jewish, a fifth or fewer (21% and 16%) had a high student participation level. This correlation was equally powerful for undergraduate and graduate students, and for men and women. It was also maintained within denominational groups. For instance, students who called themselves Conservative and had predominantly Jewish friends and dates were more likely to be active participants in Jewish activities on campus than those identifying as Conservative who had fewer Jewish friends. I wrote then that "Faith and ideology may sustain the identity of a Jewish

student, but informal ethnic community is also a significant reinforcer."[12]

At the time, it was also evident that there were strong associations between Jewish educational experiences such as youth group membership and/or summer camp attendance during adolescence and subsequent particularistic Jewish associations on the campus. Later, in · 1985, I undertook a study of responses to the challenge of juggling family and career of Jewish women utilizing a sample of one thousand.[13] Somewhat to my surprise, the "social circle" factor, even circles established in adolescence persisted in those data as well, though 90% of the women in the sample were over thirty and about a fourth were over fifty years old. For example, more than half (55%) of the 300 single women (including both "never" married and "ever" married) who had had multiple informal Jewish educational experiences, but just over a third (37%) of those who had not been in Jewish youth groups, overnight camps or on trips to Israel as teens reported that all of their serious dates were with Jewish men.

In similar fashion, all but a handful (4%) of the single Jewish career women who responded that over 75% of their present close friends were Jewish said that at least three-fourths of their serious dates were with Jewish men. In sharp contrast, of the women who reported that fewer than 25% of their close friends were Jewish, just 20% said that the majority of their serious dates were with Jewish men. Finally, when asked if for themselves intermarriage was "definitely out," a "remote possibility," "an option," or if "religion is not a factor," two-thirds of those who had all Jewish friendship circles, but just 20% of those who had half or fewer of their close friends Jewish said that interfaith marriage was "definitely out" for them. While the more striking finding overall (this was after all adult Jewish women in 1985) was that even one-third of the single women who moved in all Jewish friendship circles didn't rule out mixed marriage for themselves, the interaction of peer group and attitudes is clear to see.

The Challenge We Face as Social Scientists
During the decade when I worked on the two studies noted above, I viewed the relationships between social circles and identity as intellectual and experiential, but static. That is, I assumed that the knowledge gained and the experiences shared before university created some Jewish Identity Quotient (Jewish IQ) "particles/ions" which had a "half-life" within individuals who had participated in them. Since then, I have come to see the impact of precursor experiences on subsequent positive Jewish identity and identification in a much more fluid and dynamic way. An important component of the dynamism lies in the creation and maintenance of ongoing social circles or peer groups.

Perhaps they would be better termed as reference groups because as previously noted, they do not have to be physically present to have an impact on the thinking and behaviors of individuals. Reference group theory may be the most appropriate conceptual rubric for analysis of milieu influences in a time when "virtual" reality has become "the real thing" for so many Americans.

There was a time when block or neighborhood was the cradle of these circles, just as it was the incubator of "pools of eligibles" of future spouses. Territoriality was clear and defined by the streets one walked in, the people who sat on the stoop and exchanged gossip, the students from the local public school whose parents were friends of one's own mother and father. Propinquity meant just that and was a crucial element in the determination of life's vistas or possibilities. But, that is no longer the case, and it remains for us, the social scientists, to listen to the actors, to observe their behavior, to understand the meaning of concepts that have had their meaning altered. Then we can ask the "right" questions or at least know what the meaning is of the indicators we have so carefully crafted.

NOTES

* This paper was originally prepared for the North American Jewish Data Bank Conference "Establishing a Research Agenda for the Jewish Community" in October 1999. At that time, I was affiliated with Gratz College and on sabbatical as a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University.

[1] When I teach the concept of reference group to my students, I often use the example of putting a ketchup bottle on the dining room table. If I do so, I will invariably return to the table within a few minutes and remove it. It does not matter that my mother is not in the room, she is indelibly present in my head, part of my reference group, reminding me of such important rules as those about bottles on tables.

[2] An exception to this rule is found in Bruce A. Phillips' 1998 analysis of some social networking variables in *Reexamining Intermarriage, Trends, Textures, Strategies*, published by the Wilstein Institute and the Petchek National Jewish Family Center. For example, he analyzes the impact of a range of high school dating patterns and non-formal Jewish educational experiences on later interfaith marriage. To be fair, he had more to work with. Most of the demographically based studies funded nationally or by communities have not asked the kind of questions, the answers to which would enable such analysis.

[3] Peter Y. Medding, Gary A. Tobin, Sylvia Barack Fishman and Mordecai Rimor, "Jewish Identity in Conversionary and Mixed Marriages." *Jewish Sociology Papers*, published originally in the 1992 *American Jewish Year Book*, p. 27.

[4] A quick look at Ira M. Sheskin's excellent summary work, *How Jewish Communities Differ: Variations in the Findings of Local Jewish Population Studies*, published by the North American Jewish Data Bank, reveals the paucity of indicators of social networks. Table 56, titled Jewish Friendship Patterns, shows responses of respondents from eight communities where they were asked the actual number (as opposed to proportion or percentage) of three best friends who are Jewish. Unfortunately, frequency distributions only reveal the fact that over 80% of respondents in the eight communities had a least one close Jewish friend.

[5] Sidney Goldstein and Alice Goldstein, *Jews on the Move – Implications for Jewish Identity*, Chapter 7, "Informal Networks," pp. 302-303.

[6] Hayim Herring and Barry Shrage: *Jewish Networking: Linking People, Institutions, Community*, The Susan & David Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies, Boston and Los Angeles, 2001. Herring's work ties in with that of Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen in their book on moderately affiliated American Jews entitled *The Jew Within* and that of Bethamie Horowitz in her report *Connections and Journies: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity* written for the UJA Federation of New York in 2000. They suggest a much more individuated path to community and identity, stressing the hegemony of the "sovereign self" and individual "journies." They recommend a communal public policy where organizations adapt to individuals rather than assuming that individuals will "live up" to a certain set of Jewish behaviors.

[7] The central thesis of Daniel Elazar's work can be found in *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry*, 2nd Edition, Jewish Publication Society Revised Edition, 1995. The concentric circle paradigm of community organization that Herring calls the magnet theory of Jewish identity was first put forth in the 1976 edition of *Community and Polity*.

[8] For an extended explication of this theory, see "Religious Extremism: Origins and Consequences" by Laurence R. Iannaccone in Vol. 20 of *Contemporary Jewry* 1999, especially pp. 17-19.

[9] From the article on "Neighborhood" by Scott Greer in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, David L. Sills

Editor, The Macmillan Company & the Free Press, 1966, Volume 11, p. 121.

[10] I think of this last part as the Sesame Street neighborhood effect–as in the now classic song that introduces people with various occupations whom children will encounter regularly. The chorus goes like this: "Who are the people in your neighborhood, the people that you meet when you're walking down the street, they're the people that you meet each day." One of my learned colleagues suggested that I had given short shrift to Mr. Rogers, known to millions of children through his creation of a whole virtual neighborhood for children introduced daily with the song, "Oh, it's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, won't you be my neighbor?" Both programs are interesting examples of the kind of "neighborhood" which is completely ignored in our research, but is very powerful and present in North American life.

[11] Odd Ramsoy in the article on "Friendship" in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Ibid, Volume 6, pp. 12-17.

[12] Rela Geffen Monson, *Jewish Campus Life, A Survey of Student Attitudes Toward Marriage and Family*, American Jewish Committee, 1984, p. 23.

[13] Rela Geffen Monson, *Jewish Women On The Way Up-The Challenge of Family, Career and Community*, American Jewish Committee, 1987.