The Use and Misuse of Distinctive Jewish Names in Research on Jewish Populations

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A recurring problem in social science research involves matching the questions addressed and the problems to be solved with existing data. Research often has to be tailored to meet the deficiencies and inadequacies of the existing data which is hardly an ideal situation.

This problem is frequently met in Jewish social studies of the Diaspora. As census classifications seldom nowadays cover Jewish groups adequately, the researcher is forced to use some surrogate method for identifying the Jewish population he wishes to study. Thus even when the student of Jewish population is not confronted with a major undertaking such as a survey, his statistical problems are compounded by his need to identify a subpopulation unenumerated in the census.

In ethnic research, the identification of names that can be positively attributed to a specific ethnic group has often been used as a means for estimating and mapping ethnic populations. If an appropriate source can be used which will ensure a 'universe' of the ethnic population, then it is possible to make some general statements about the residential location of that population, draw a sample population from it and perhaps make some more detailed comparisons between the nature of the subgroup and the general population.

Yet, the use of ethnic names is a method fraught with pitfalls in modern Western societies. Names change to suit the environment; people drop their names and adopt new ones, often to hide their origins. Often, assimilation into a general society can occur while a name remains. So many are the potential stumbling blocks that it seems as if using ethnic names should be restricted solely to those who know the answers in advance, or at least to those who are very familiar with the population under investigation.

The methodological, conceptual and sociological problems associated with such a research tool undoubtedly produce the type of conflictual evidence which has surfaced in the recent debate in *Public Opinion Quarterly* concerning the Distinctive Jewish Name (DJN) factor and 'Jewish identification' among American Jews (Himmelfarb, Loar and Mott, 1981).

Jewish names have been used for at least 40 years in social research, especially in North America. The method of using a relatively small number of DJNs was reported by Massarik in 1966, the method dating back to the early 1940s for a study of Jews in the New York area (Massarik, 1966). Later studies have followed similar methodol-

ogies, rather than going for names which are definitely Jewish or which try to identify Jews by using a combination of surname and forename analysis. The method outlined by Cohen (1981) chooses 38 surnames which account for 10.6% of a known population of 118,000 Jewish households on the UJA donors' list in the United States. The names chosen are not those which necessarily represent the most frequent occurrences in the Jewish 'universe' but those which are distinctively known to be Jewish. Thus an element of subjectivity creeps in, where the researcher chooses to eliminate some names which he assesses as not 'Jewish enough' even though there are more carriers of this name than some names which he does recognize as Jewish. It goes without saying that many names identified as Jewish in New York or London would not be identified as such in Munich or Zurich, and this factor is recognized by Cohen's amended list (of 21 names) for use in the 'Mid-West' of the United States.

How is a surname recognized as being distinctively Jewish? Obviously, this takes more than simply a high occurrence of a name among a known population. It is conceivable that many Jews might bear a name which might also be borne by large numbers of people who are not Jewish. If so, we are looking for a series of names which are borne by Jews alone, in order to avoid confusion. However, in modern Western societies with long histories of assimilation no name can be guaranteed to be 100% Jewish, so any usage of DJN can only have an optimum reliability. Nevertheless, there is empirical evidence for DJN application on certain levels of analysis within clear methodological guidelines. This paper is intended to set out some interesting empirical findings and to highlight some of the difficulties of applying the DJN for Social Research on Jews in Britain. The study involved a variety of methods in order to reach a reliable estimate and map the number of Jews in Greater London in 1984.

The Jacobs Factor

Our first experiment was to apply the UJA list of DJN and the suggested multiplier factor to a series of Anglo-Jewish population centers. We hoped to be able to measure the applicability of this method to British conditions by comparing the resulting population totals with our own totals based upon the Board of Deputies of British Jews annual collections of birth, marriage and mortality data (Haberman, Kosmin and Levy, 1983).

When applied to private entries in the Greater Manchester telephone directory the resultant total using a multiplier for the average household size was well in excess of the known range for Manchester Jewry. However, we noticed that compared with American Jews we had considerably more cases of two names, Cohen and Jacobs. We decided that the Cohens should be left unadjusted, but instead extracted Jacobs and this reduced the resultant estimate to 35,000 which was inside the possible range.

We believed Jacobs to be a problem in the British setting because, like other biblical names such as Levi, Solomon, David or Abraham, it was popular among members of the Nonconformist Churches and were often adopted in 17th century England as a surname. In a well known instance, that of the Welsh, surnames were infrequently used until the 18th century; persons were (and in some regions of Wales still are) known by their given name and their occupation (e.g. Morgan, the shoe). When surnames were taken, the given name was simply adopted as the new family name. As

the result of Welsh Nonconformism, biblical names frequently became family names, thus the unsuspecting and careless 1985 observer may find that he is picking up several non-Jews if he makes the simple assumption that family names such as Isaacs or Josephs derived from biblical given names are always Jewish. In the British context, some of this influence resurfaced in the West Indies and then found its way back to Britain.

Our findings showed that the less Jewish an area the higher the 'Jacobs factor'. In the county of Kent, Jacobs alone accounted for over 40% of the total of the 24 surnames. Table 1 shows how the ratio between the most popular Anglo-Jewish surname Cohen and that of Jacobs varies and reverses itself according to the Jewishness of an area.

One feature to identify in Table 1 is the apparently anomalous position of Manchester Jewry. The number and proportion of Jews in Greater Manchester is known

TABLE 1. COHEN-JACOBS RATIO, 1980s

Area	Ratio	Jewishness
N.W. Kent	1 : 3.1	least Jewish
N.E. Surrey	1 : 1.4	
Greater Manchester	1 : 0.3	
London postal area	1 : 0.6	
USA Jews	1 : 0.2	most Jewish

to be lower than that in London, so how does it emerge as closer to the American figure? The explanation lies in another important empirical finding: that of the variation in the 'Cohen count and ratio' across Britain and other national communities.

The Ratio of Jews to Cohens

More than a decade ago an investigation by the Research Unit of the Board of Deputies revealed that among the 40,000 members of the London-based United Synagogue 2% had the surname Cohen, which was by far the most common Jewish ethnic name. We went on to investigate birth and death notices in the *Jewish Chronicle* to see if the same pattern occurred. In that study it was found that for persons born in the years 1973–1974 only one in 60 had this surname, but among those dying the figure was one in 38. This ratio of one Cohen for every 38 Jews reoccurred in our researches into Jews among the British Armed Forces in World War I (Kosmin, 1975).

We had thus uncovered an interesting social process of ethnic name attrition of the order of 37% over 75 years. The actual rate of change was revealed by investigation of Deed Poll changes in the registers of the Public Record Office. These showed that most name changes occurred in the years following both World Wars. It is therefore possible to arrive at some sort of 'Jewish insecurity index' for Britain using the data in Table 2. This information is of some significance for the social psychologist and political scientist as well as the historian and demographer.

TABLE 2. DEED POLL CHANGES BY COHEN SURNAME, 1920–1970

Year	Number
1920	11
1933	4
1946	41
1947	34
1953	6
1970	2

The next step was to apply this empirical finding to local studies in London so as to test the utility of the Cohen ratio for social research. In a number of studies in Hackney and Redbridge in the 1970s, and in Barnet in 1984 we found that the one in 50 ratio was a useful guide for a quick assessment of total Jewish households and numbers (Kosmin and Grizzard, 1975; Waterman and Kosmin, 1985).

Moreover, in the case of the Manchester problem, we were aware that the proportion of Cohen surnames in that population was much higher. The New York figures showed that 1.3% or one in 77 Jews had a Cohen surname. However, in Manchester the figure was much closer to our turn of the century sample of Great War veterans, for our population estimates suggested that nearly 3% or one in 38 have the Cohen surname. The same situation was found in Leeds where the ratio was one in 37. This indicated that there were different historical processes involved whereby the proportion of Cohen surnames was higher in the North of England than in London. Whether this was due to the greater Litvak as against Polish representation along the trans-Pennine route is open to historical interpretation. Certainly the northern population, which entered through the East coast ports of Hull and Grimsby, may have had less sophisticated immigration officials to deal with than those in the Port of London, so possibly more Jews were simply listed as Cohen rather than some name which involved complicated foreign spelling. It may also be that provincial Jews are more conservative about name changes. On the other hand, going further north into Scotland, the Glasgow Jewish population which is again very Litvak in origin showed a lower ratio of one in 58.

Of course, it might be said that all our findings, however varied, are biased because we have used population estimates or surveys which have inevitably been biased toward identifiable Jews. It was thus decided to turn to census-enumerated Jewish populations in western countries. Our method was to collate the number of private telephone entries for the surname Cohen in the telephone books for Melbourne, Australia and for three Canadian cities – Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg – for the year 1981. The number of Cohen surnames was then divided into the number of Jewish households revealed by the census. Our findings are set out in Table 3. Montreal, Melbourne and Winnipeg were all found to have ratios very similar to that of London. The exception was Toronto which more closely resembled the position in Glasgow and that among our 1973–1974 Anglo-Jewish birth cohort.

One cause of the apparent variation in the Cohen ratio might be our reliance on only one form of spelling derived from the Hebrew Kohen or priest. The most com-

TABLE 3. JEW-COHEN RATIOS FOR SELECTED POPULATIONS, 1914–1983

Place	Year	Ratio
	Low	
Glasgow	1983	58
Anglo-Jewish births	1973-74	60
Toronto	1971	61
USA (UJA)	1980	77
	Medium	
Barnet (London)	1983	46
Montreal	1971	48
Redbridge (London)	1978	49
Melbourne	1971	50
Winnipeg	1971	50
United Synagogue London	1975	50
Hackney (London)	1971	51
	High	
Manchester	1981	34
Leeds	1981	37
British Army	1914-18	38
Anglo-Jewish deaths	1973-74	38

mon spelling in English is Cohen, but several variants occur, such as Cohn, Kohn, Kahan, Kagan, Kahn. Further variants such as Katz (an acronym for Cohen-Tzedek = 'righteous priest') or Hacohen are not infrequent. However, here the inexperienced should beware of trouble lurking not too far in the background and names such as Kuhn or Cohane, though looking and even sounding like some of the Cohen variants should be avoided. It could be that if Cohen variants were incorporated into our ratios, then the range across different communities would be narrowed.

Table 4 shows that there is indeed a noticeable trend in the relationship between the proportion of Cohen and Cohen-variant surnames in Jewish populations. In Manchester, with a high proportion of Cohen surnames, there are relatively few Cohen variants, whereas in the United States the opposite is true and more Germanic and Russified forms of the surname are found than in England.

TABLE 4. RATIO OF COHEN TO COHEN VARIANTS, 1980s

Area	Year	Cohen	Variants
Manchester	1981	100	6
London	1984	100	25
USA	1980	100	78

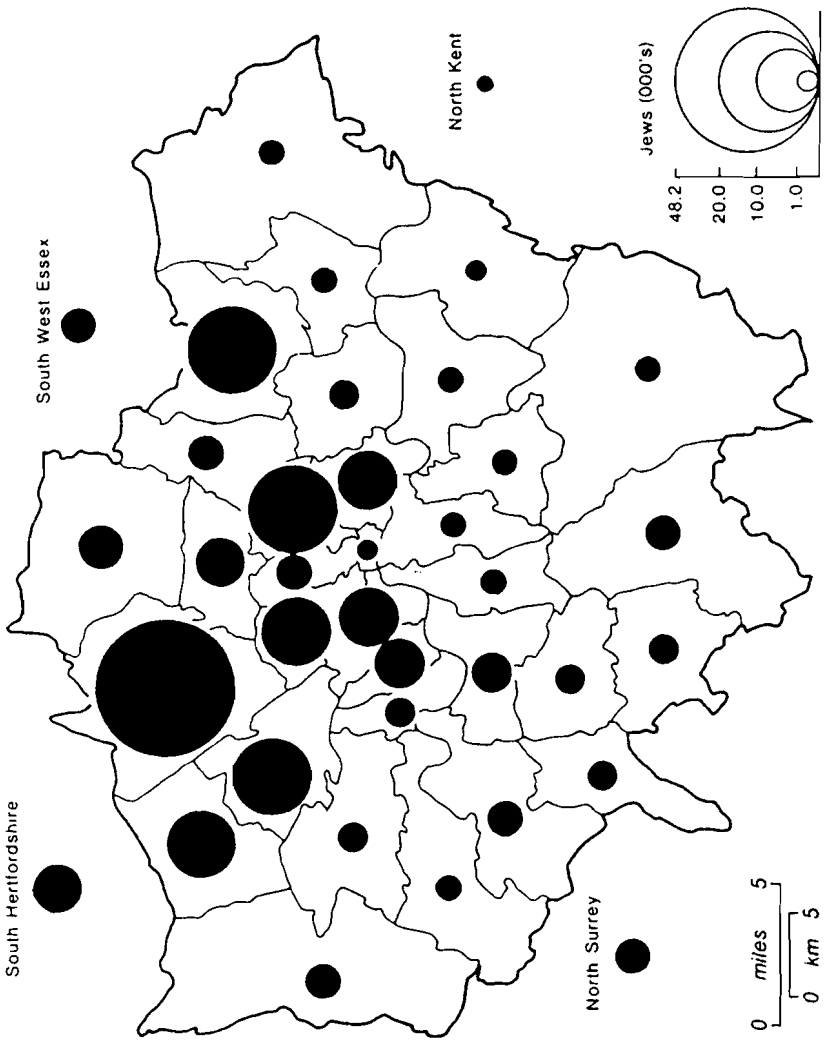

FIGURE 1. JEWISH POULATION DISTRIBUTION, BY ADMINISTRATIVE AREA, LONDON, 1984

Nevertheless a common pattern fails to emerge as is evident from Table 5 which demonstrates that there is no clear relationship between all the Cohen variants and several other distinctive Jewish names. The surname Levy appears to be more popular in Britain but on the other hand distinctive Ashkenazic names occur more frequently in America.

TABLE 5. RATIO OF COHEN NAMES TO OTHER SELECTED DJNs, 1980s

Area	Year	Cohen names	Levy	Goldstein/ Goldberg	Rubin/ Rubinstein	Total of 3 DJNs
Manchester	1981	100	34	15	6	55
London	1984	100	57	29	8	94
USA	1980	100	19	42	16	77

The evidence outlined above suggests that researchers should be wary of the dangers of using such tools as DJNs. It is obvious that results obtained in one field area cannot be directly applied to another, as we know that not all groups of Jews are identical or even similar. Thus we cannot use the same Jewish population surrogates universally without an adequate knowledge of the social composition, milieu, and historical experience of each community. However, we can make an assumption that within a specific geographical area both the ratios and the rates of change of these ratios will be relatively constant. This is certainly the case among London Jews.

Applications in the London Area

In Table 3, we showed that Cohen surnames comprised 2% of the London Jewish population. Four separate studies have indicated that between 1.95 and 2.19% of Jewish households bear the surname Cohen. The range across London is thus shown to be very narrow even though the populations concerned showed distinct differences in social class, geographic location and age composition.

The data indicate that Cohen surnames in the London telephone directories dropped by 5.8% between 1974 and 1984 from 1,664 to 1,567. This probably indicates overall decline as the attrition rate in Cohen surnames that can be observed at younger ages has been offset by increased telephone ownership among the elderly. Using the 2% of Jewish households bearing the Cohen surname, the data in Table 6 indicate that Jewish households in the London area fell from about 83,350 to 78,350, or from 237,000 to 216,000 persons (after those living in institutions and reduction in average household size have been accounted for).[1]

The table also shows that the fall is not uniform throughout London but is more heavily concentrated in Inner London. Within the London postal area itself the decline is concentrated in a small number of postal areas (Table 7). In fact, almost all the decline is accounted for by two areas, East and North, the former of which includes the East End and other poor working-class districts. This is even more signifi-

TABLE 6. LONDON AREA TELEPHONE ENTRIES FOR COHEN SURNAMES IN PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS, 1974–1984

Year	London postal area	Outer suburbs	Total for Greater London area
1974	1,121	543	1,664
1984	1,027	540	1,567
Difference	-94	-3	-97

TABLE 7. COHEN NAME HOUSEHOLD COUNT FOR LONDON POSTAL AREAS, 1974–1984

Postal area	1974		1984	
	No.	%	No.	%
Total	1,121	100.0	1,027	100.0
E.C.	3	0.3	9	0.9
W.C.	7	0.6	8	0.8
E.	239	21.1	174	16.9
N.	340	30.5	300	29.2
N.W.	304	27.2	322	31.4
W.	118	10.6	103	10.0
S.W.	76	6.8	77	7.5
S.E.	34	2.9	34	3.3

cant because it is these very areas which have recently shown the most marked increase in telephone ownership. On the other hand, there has been a marked increase in N.W. London with small increases elsewhere, as in S.E. and S.W. London and in the E.C. postal district, the City of London – almost all due to the growth of the Barbican redevelopment.

At the postal district level, the change can be more closely pinpointed. In E.C.4. (the Barbican), the number of Cohen surnames rose from 0 in 1974 to 7 in 1984. The largest declines were recorded in the London Borough of Hackney where the number of Cohens in the Dalston area (E.8) was halved from 38 to 19, and in Stamford Hill (N. 16) where it fell from 108 to 77 during the same period. This suggests a significant loss of over 4,000 Jewish residents from this district over a single decade. In the more prestigious inner areas of the Northwest London sector, St. John's Wood (N.W.8) showed a decline from 35 to 26, whereas the district lying immediately north, Hampstead (N.W.3) rose from 32 to 49. In the most peripheral zone of the London Postal Area, in Mill Hill (N.W.7), Cohen households more than doubled, rising from 8 to 18.

Conclusion

The process we have outlined above shows that in a relatively restricted geographical area a variant of the DJN method can have very useful practical application. In particular, it provides a cheap, rapid, and useful tool in desk research, focusing on social geography. Rather than providing answers to sophisticated questions it is an indicator of patterns and trends. It is a useful monitoring device but perhaps more importantly it can be useful in assisting research design and in prompting relevant questions that require more detailed investigation. Even though there is a certain disappointment at being unable to develop a specific research tool which could have general or universal application, it is nevertheless possible to utilize a DJN methodology among British Jews once local field conditions are appreciated.

Note

1. This correlates well with the mortality based estimate in Haberman, Kosmin and Levy (1983) which showed London Jewry at 225.000 around 1977.

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