Social Science Research 47 (2014) 44–60

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Social Science Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch

Correlates of experiences and perceptions of anti-Semitism among Jews in the United States

Uzi Rebhun *

Division of Jewish Demography & Statistics, The A. Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 91905, Israel

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 2 July 2012
Revised 23 June 2013
Accepted 17 March 2014
Available online 1 April 2014

Keywords:
Anti-Semitism
Experiences
Multivariate analysis
NJPS-2000/2001
Perceptions
USA

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates American Jews' personal experiencing of anti-Semitism and perception of its extent. Analysis of NJPS-2000/2001 indicates that lower age, less education, and American nativity increase experiencing of anti-Semitism. Religious identification and attachment to Israel are positively associated with anti-Semitic experience; friendship with other Jews has the opposite effect. Contextual factors are not significant for the experiencing of anti-Semitism but living in a state that leans toward the Democratic Party has a downward effect. Contrary to experience, younger age and higher education are negatively associated with the perception of a high incidence of anti-Semitism. Being a woman, American born, and living in states with high concentrations of Jews positively affect Jews' perception of anti-Semitism. A paramount determinant of the perception of anti-Semitism is the individual's belief that he or she has experienced it. The results are discussed in reference to three working hypotheses of integration, group identification, and environment.

1. Introduction

Anti-Semitism – hostility toward Jews who are prejudged as radically "other" (Chanes, 1999; Halpern, 1981) – is something we should care about because it attests to intergroup relations and the extent of tolerance toward minorities in society. This study examines and seeks to expand our current understanding of anti-Semitism as the targeted population interprets it. The study looks into the origins of experiences of anti-Semitism and the correlates of perceptions of the extent of anti-Semitism among American Jews. The investigation is based on the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) from 2000/2001, which we enhanced by blending area contextual data from official sources.

As a major religio-ethnic group in the United States, Jews are exposed to the possibility of experiences and self-perceptions of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism views Jews as a collective or personal threat in various respects – social, economic, political, and so on. The perceived threat varies in intensity and may ostensibly trace to fringe groups or major political forces (Tobin, 1988). Anti-Semitism is manifested in both attitudes and behaviors. The spectrum of anti-Semitic incidents is broad, ranging from facial expressions or other subtle communication via demonstrations and hate propaganda to severe crimes (Chanes, 1999; Tobin, 1988). More recently, some observers have postulated that anti-Semitism also includes anti-Israel manifestations – a linkage, especially when presented in the United States, where most Americans support the State of Israel (even if questioning aspects of its policies towards the Palestinians), that is contested (Kaplan and Small, 2006; Wistrich, 2010). Anti-Semitism may be expressed in informal contacts between Jews and non-Jews, in the workplace, in residential

* Fax: +972 2 588 1243.
E-mail address: uzi.rebhun@mail.huji.ac.il

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2014.03.007
0049-089X/

neighborhoods, in applying for municipal or governmental services, and the like. It may be manifested by individuals or by larger bodies or movements. Its effect is amplified when propagated by persons in high public positions and when it reaches a larger audience (Tobin, 1988). Notably, in the United States there are racist organizations and anti-religious groups that act against minorities in general, Jews being but one of their targeted populations.

The present study assesses Jewish observation of anti-Semitism as a two-stage process with experience having an important influence on perceptions. The analytical model incorporates socio-demographic characteristics and indicators of Jewish identification. The model also introduces social and economic context variables that are assumed to influence anti-Semitic outcomes. A comprehensive analysis of this kind should yield insights into the yet-unsolved issue of the role of individual characteristics and macro-environmental conditions in influencing or informing experiences and perceptions, and should help understand the dissonance between the successful integration of this religio-ethnic minority into the American social and cultural mainstream (Pyle, 2006) and the same minority's fears of mistreatment due to its group affiliation (Tobin, 1988). Hence, it contemplates the socio-psychological dynamics of anti-Semitism through the eye of the beholder.[1]

2. Experiences and perceptions of anti-Semitism: a literature review

Earlier studies on personal experiencing and perceptions of anti-Semitism among American Jews concerned themselves mainly with describing the levels of these indicators and were limited to local communities. Seldom did they look into factors that might influence these experiences and perceptions at issue. Their findings suggest that most Jews (50–80%) have experienced some anti-Semitism in their lifetimes but that most among them did so to a small extent only (Tobin, 1988). Data confined to a fixed period show a much lower incidence, of course. In local community studies that were conducted in the 1980s the proportion of respondents who reported having experienced anti-Semitism in the preceding twelve months ranged from a low of 17% in Essex and Morris counties in New Jersey to 28% in Washington, D.C. (Tobin, 1988); in local studies in the 1990s, the proportions ranged from 11% in South Palm Beach, Florida, to 31% in Orlando, Florida (Sheskin, 2001). Since local studies are conducted independently of each other, it is difficult to assess whether the differences reflect periodic effects associated with the time of data collection or contextual effects of the specific locality.

Common among Jews in different communities is the high proportion of young people among those who report having experiencing anti-Semitism – a proportion that declines inversely with age. First- and second-generation American Jews who spent their formative years in the first half of the twentieth century retain memories of prejudice and discrimination in acceptance to universities, workplaces, residential neighborhoods, and social clubs, aimed at Jews from all social strata, as well as tensions with non-Jews that sporadically escalated into violence (Diner, 2004; Sarna, 2004; Sorin, 1997). Subsequent generations of Jews were socialized while young after World War II, when where negative feelings about Jews in America declined dramatically (Shapiro, 1992), or even later, since the 1960s, following the civil rights movement and the growing ideological emphasis on multiculturalism (Wistrich, 2010). Thus, they no longer needed to struggle; their successful social integration in America is a fact. Due to their intensive involvement with non-Jews in both formal and informal circles and their exposure to the general world, however, they "are more likely [than their predecessor] to come into contact with anti-Semitic behavior and attitudes where they exist" (Tobin, 1988: 20).

Empirical evidences also suggest a strong relationship between Jewish identification and self-reported experiencing of anti-Semitism (Dubow et al., 2000). Among Jews in early adolescence (middle-school students), the higher they score on measures of Jewish identity the more they express ethnic-related stress, including remarks about other children making anti-Semitic comments about them.

[1] For historical and social background, it is noteworthy that even though anti-Semitism in America dates to the seventeenth century and attained special pinnacles during the Civil War (Sarna, 2004), it was never translated into the kind of official political action against the Jews à la Europe (Diner, 2004). Furthermore, by and large, it did not seriously affect much of American Jewry in those years; it was channeled toward Jews in the military and attacks by evangelists and missionaries in the media and popular culture (Gurock, 1998). A conspicuous change took place in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as more and more Jews from Eastern Europe immigrated to America and climbed the socioeconomic ladder (Gurock, 1998). At this time, prejudices and social discrimination against Jews were also part of an attempt to mitigate the threat that the recent immigrants posed to America's white Protestant complexion. Illegalities by Jews that evolved into public scandals, mainly concerning illicit sales of alcohol and conspiracies with gamblers to "throw" sporting events, contributed to this. In those years and up to World War II, social discrimination against Jews was manifested in various ways, e.g., student quotas at leading universities and limits Jewish membership in clubs, residence in certain prestige neighborhoods, and staying in hotels. Physical violence against the background of anti-Semitic tension also occurred at times (Sarna, 2004). A dramatic change took place after World War II, American anti-Semitism beginning a major decline. As religion in America gathered strength, Americans' interest in Judaism took an upward turn as well. It was then that Judaism became widely recognized as America's "third faith," alongside Protestantism and Catholicism (Herberg, 1955). These developments placed anti-Semites on the defensive and powered a perceptible decrease in organized anti-Semitic activity. Anti-Semitism now became mostly a fringe social phenomenon (Diner, 2004). Furthermore, by means of federal and state legislation coupled with pressure from returning war veterans and the highlighting of Jews in government and the media, anti-Jewish discrimination in employment, housing, and daily life decreased significantly. Practically speaking, by the early 1960s, almost all quotas for Jews at colleges were eliminated, all entrance barriers to the liberal professions were downed, and the use of restrictive measures in residential and recreation venues ceased (Diner, 2004). The salient decline in American anti-Semitism has also been reflected in changes in the traditional images of Jews in business as assertive, deceitful, and tricky. Concern among Americans that Jews have too much power has also waned markedly (Quinley and Glock, 1979). Although anti-Semitism has not disappeared and no few Americans continue to adhere to anti-Jewish images and prejudices, overtly or covertly (Smith, 1991), most do not think anything should be done about the Jews' power or money. Anti-Semitism in the U.S. is not a strong social and political factor today. Concurrently, positive attitudes toward specific characteristics of Jews have become more prevalent (Tobin, 1988), non-Jews are more willing than before to marry Jews, and the number of Jews in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives has grown (Shapiro, 1992).