

Synagogue-Federation Relations An Empirical Assessment

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Although the specific focus and subject matter of the debate have shifted over the years . . . , the issues surrounding synagogue-federation relationship remain essentially the same. This discussion summarizes some of the major findings emerging from a recent study examining synagogue-federation relationships in 12 Jewish communities. Inter-organizational theory is applied as the theoretical framework of analysis.

Introduction

The question of relationship between synagogues and federations is certainly not new. Different facets of their relationship have been examined and debated on the Jewish communal agenda for decades. Although the specific focus and subject matter of the debate have shifted over the years as have the basic parameters underlying organized Jewish life in general, the issues surrounding synagogue-federation relationships remain essentially the same. These include delineating the appropriate roles and responsibilities of synagogues and federations in the community, determining the closeness with which these organizations should be linked and for what purposes, and developing appropriate strategies and mechanisms to effect more mutually benefiting relationships.

Over the years, the literature on synagogue-federation relations has frequently included such concepts as competition, turf, autonomy, conflict, cooperation, resources, and linkage to highlight the particular interaction dynamics at work.¹ These terms have entered the popular vocabulary of any discussion on synagogue-federation relations. Despite both an explicit and implicit recognition of the interorganizational processes involved and

the often prominent position this issue has held in Jewish communities across the country, synagogue-federation relations have never been the subject of systematic empirical research approached from an interorganizational perspective.²

The discussion below summarizes some of the major findings emerging from a recent study examining synagogue-federation relationships in twelve Jewish communities. Interorganizational theory is applied as the theoretical framework of the analysis. Simply stated, interorganizational theory is the study of why and how two or more organizations relate to one another and the outcomes and consequences which result from these relationships. While alternative explanatory models have been suggested and applied to help understand particular aspects of synagogue-federation relations, I contend that interorganizational analysis represents the most comprehensive framework under which to order and analyze this multi-dimensional and complex issue.

This study of synagogue-federation relations was premised on the belief that the fate of these two primary foci of Jewish

² Howard M. Weisband, *A Study of Synagogue-Federation Relations as Related to Interorganizational Analysis*. (Unpublished Masters Thesis), Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, 1975. Although interorganizational relations was the perspective applied in this analysis of synagogue-federation relations in Los Angeles, the overall study design was non-quantitative.

¹ Marc Lee Raphael, ed., *Understanding American Jewish Philanthropy*. New York: Ktav, 1979. This volume contains a selection of articles dealing with synagogue-federation relations.

identification and communal activity will inevitably become more closely interwoven in American Jewish life. Deepening resource shortages and pressures affecting both of these organizations coupled with the emergence of overlapping problems and challenges, spilling over traditional domain boundaries, have made increasingly evident to a growing number of Jewish communal leaders the need to explore and expand the scope of programmatic linkages between synagogues and the federation in the community and to establish more formalized mechanisms for ongoing communication.

Methodology

The major source of data was a self-reported questionnaire sent to full-time congregational rabbis (Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox), synagogue presidents, federation executive directors, federation presidents and immediate past presidents from twelve Jewish communities in the northeast and midwest regions of the country. Four communities were selected from each of the following three size categories: 5,000-14,999, 15,000-39,999, and 40,000-100,000. A total of 153 individuals returned completed questionnaires, representing a 54 percent overall response rate.

Although contacts between synagogues and the federation are multi-leveled, engaging both the central federation and the network of Jewish communal agencies linked with it as beneficiaries, federation leaders alone were administered the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire instrument, however, defined "federation" in its broader connotation, i.e., both the central fund-raising and planning organization operating at the communitywide level as well as the network of Jewish communal agencies federated together. Questionnaire items probed for information regarding the nature of contacts between synagogues and the entire federation system.

The questionnaire covered a wide range of dimensions including the perceived quality of relationships, the level and intensity of interorganizational contacts, the salience of importance of these contacts for each organization's goal accomplishment and program viability, the extent of perceived competition, and the factors underlying interorganizational disputes and conflicts.

Personal interviews served as the other primary data source. In-depth interviews were conducted with a select number of synagogue and federation leaders, both lay and professional, in three study cities. The interview process was designed to clarify and extend the information obtained from the survey questionnaires as well as to provide more specific details and insights about particular cases of interorganizational contacts in the communities selected.

Dimensions of Interorganizational Relationships

Interorganizational relationships have been analyzed from a number of perspectives and approaches in the empirical literature. Prominent among these are studies which examine certain relational properties or dimensions characterizing the linkages formed between an interacting pair or network of organizations. Relational dimensions focus on the nature and structure of interorganizational linkages.³ Two of these dimensions, *intensity* and *perceived quality (cooperation/conflict)* of

³ For examples, see Howard Aldrich, "Resource Dependence and Interorganizational Relations: Relations Between Local Employment Service Offices and Social Services Sector Organizations," *Administration and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (1977), pp. 419-454; Richard Hall, J. Clark, P. Giordana, R. Johnson, and M. Van Rorkel, "Patterns of Interorganizational Relationships," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1977), pp. 457-474; Roland L. Warren, Stephen M. Rose, and Ann F. Bergunder, *The Structure of Urban Reform*. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1974.

interorganizational contacts, received extensive attention in this study.

The *quality of interorganizational contacts* is a subjective indicator of the underlying level of cooperation or conflict in the relationship as perceived by respective organizational leaders.³ The quality-of-contacts question included in this research asked synagogue and federation leaders to characterize the current level of cooperation and conflict between synagogues and the federation in their respective communities along a continuum ranging from *almost always conflicting* to *almost always cooperative* relationships. Included were questions on the overall quality of synagogue-federation relationships in the community, lay leader and professional relations, and the quality of communication between synagogues and the federation.

Intensity measures have been suggested and applied extensively in interorganizational research to examine the extent of involvement between organizations, particularly those in the health and welfare arenas.⁴ In each case, intensity measures are designed to quantify the amount of resource flows between interacting organizations, both in terms of the amount of resources exchanged and the frequency of their exchange.⁵

The *intensity of contacts* measure developed in this research was based on two premises:

1. a multi-indicator scale offers a more valid measurement of intensity than do single item measures; and

2. not all types of organizational interaction involve the same level or magnitude of resource investment. Rather, there are various levels of resource investment implied by different forms of interaction.⁶

Ten potential contact types between synagogues and the federation were identified in the questionnaire. Each respondent simply checked those contacts from this list his/her organization had engaged in over the past five years. Note that the respondent merely indicated the presence of a contact type and not the frequency or regularity of its occurrence over the specified time period. These ten contact types were ordered from low to high in level of resource commitment and investment. As a means of distinguishing among these different degrees of resource investment, the contact types were each assigned a weight of either one, two, or three. Following is a listing of the ten contact types and their assigned weights:

Contact Type	Weight
Exchange information	1
Coordinate efforts	1
Plan future programs	2
Share physical facilities	2
Exchange membership lists	2
Fund-raising events on behalf of federation	2
Direct federation subventions of synagogue activities	3
Joint leadership development seminars	3
Technical assistance by federation to synagogues	3
Joint planning of facilities	3

The weights, then, represented an attempt to capture the differences in the amount of an organization's resource investment and commitment demanded by each contact type. In addition, the assigned weights reflected the relative importance with which each of these particular forms

⁴ For examples, see Aldrich, *ibid.*, pp. 419-454; J.K. Benson, J. Kuse, C. Thompson, and D. Allen, *Coordinating Human Services: A Sociological Study of an Interorganizational Network*. Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri, 1973; Andrew Van de Ven, "On the Nature, Formation, and Maintenance of Relations Among Organizations," *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 4 (1976), pp. 24-36.

⁵ Cora B. Marret, "On the Specification of Interorganizational Dimensions," *Sociology and Social Research*, Vol. 56 (1971), pp. 83-99.

⁶ For an example of an intensity scale based on this premise, see David L. Rogers, "Toward a Scale of Interorganizational Relations Among Public Agencies," *Sociology and Social Research*, Vol. 59 (1974), pp. 61-70.

of interaction were regarded by synagogue and federation leaders.

For example, a respondent who indicated that his/her organization had the following synagogue-federation contacts: to exchange information, to plan future programs, to coordinate efforts, and to share physical facilities, received an intensity score of 6. The calculation of this score is as follows: contact type X weight = score

Contact Type	Weight	Score
To exchange information	1	1
To coordinate efforts	1	1
To plan future programs	2	2
To share physical facilities	2	2
Total		6

An organization's intensity score as reported by either its lay or professional leader could range from zero (no contact types checked) to twenty-two (all ten contacts indicated).

The two dimensions defined above, intensity and perceived quality of inter-organizational contacts, are helpful tools of interorganizational analysis; they provide valuable information about the nature of the linkage between organizations at any given time.

Research Questions

Before presenting the findings of the research, this methodological discussion concludes with a brief summary of some of the leading questions which guided the examination of synagogue-federation relationships.

1. What is the current intensity level of interorganizational contacts between synagogues and the federation network? What contacts are currently taking place?

2. How similarly do federation and synagogue leaders report the intensity of contacts between their respective organizations? What factors account for any differences in their responses?

3. What are the perceptions of synagogue and federation leaders regarding the overall quality of contacts between their organizations?

4. What differences, if any, are there in the perceptions of lay and professional leaders on the quality of interorganizational relationships?

Results

Over the course of this research project, synagogue-federation relations were characterized in many different fashions, ranging from excellent to "miserable," close to distant, positive to negative, extensive to nonexistent, supportive to competitive, trusting to suspicious, encouraging to depressing, and friendly to antagonistic. It was rarely the case that this issue failed to evoke some form of reaction from Jewish communal leaders. In general, however, the survey data painted a very positive picture of synagogue-federation relationships. Cooperative sentiments were reported by synagogue and federation leaders alike. Turning to the actual data, it is remarkable how closely the responses of synagogue and federation leaders correspond.

As Table 1 indicates, rated on a continuous scale ranging from "one" to "five," with a "one" signifying mostly conflicting relationships and a "five" mostly cooperative contacts, the four respondent groups indicated high levels of synagogue-federation cooperation in their respective communities.

TABLE 1

Mean Scores on Quality of Contacts Variables by Organizational Leader

Variable	Mean Scores			
	Rabbis Presidents	Synagogue Executives	Federation Presidents	Federation Presidents
Overall quality of contacts in community	4.0	3.9	4.3	4.0
Professional Relations	4.3	4.5	4.8	4.2
Lay leader relations	4.4	4.7	4.8	4.6
Quality of communication*	3.5	3.3	3.8	3.6

*The response categories to the Quality of Communication questions ranged from (1) very poor to (5) very good.

Both synagogue and federation leaders responded less positively as groups, however, on one perceived quality dimension, the quality of communication between rabbis and federation professionals in the community. Here all the mean responses fell between "adequate" and "good" (3-4) on the scale. Given the relatively large number of respondents reporting the quality of communication as only adequate or worse, it does seem that this particular dimension of relationships touched a more sensitive chord among some leaders of these organizations (especially synagogue leaders).

Despite these sanguine perceptions of cooperative relationships, a cross-tabulation analysis of these quality-of-contacts variables by respondent group revealed subtle though revealing trends worth commenting upon.

To the inquiry about the overall quality of synagogue-federation contacts in the communities (Table 2), a number of synagogue leaders reported a predominance of conflict in the relationships (rabbis - 11%, synagogue presidents - 10%). On the other hand, no federation executive responded in such negative terms.

Interestingly, some federation lay leaders disagreed with their professional counterparts and reported a greater degree of conflict in federation relationships with the synagogues in their communities. It is also noteworthy that seven rabbis and four synagogue presidents chose the "no contacts" response category for this question. No federation leader responded "no contacts" to any of the quality of contacts questions.

The same response patterns were evident for other quality of contacts dimensions. In evaluating the quality of contacts between rabbis and federation professionals (Table 3), federation leaders were overwhelming in their praise. 91 percent of the federation executives (11 out of 12) indicated that professionals from the respective organi-

TABLE 2

Overall Quality of Contacts Between Synagogues and the Federation by Organizational Leader

Quality of Contacts	Rabbis	Synagogue Presidents	Federation Executives	Federation Presidents
	Primarily Conflicting	11%	10%	—
Equally Cooperative and Conflicting	11	24	9%	17
Primarily Cooperative	78	66	91	72
Total N	74	38	11	18

*The cooperation-conflict scale has been condensed from 5 to 3 response categories for this and the following table.

zations almost always cooperate with each other. The table shows, however, that synagogue leaders, especially rabbis, were more critical of rabbi-federation professional relations in their communities. Thirteen percent of the rabbis indicated that these relationships were primarily conflicting. Nevertheless, even for rabbis, the dominant perception was that of mostly cooperative relationships between the organizations.

TABLE 3

Quality of Contacts Between Rabbis and Federation Professionals by Organizational Leader

Quality of Contacts	Rabbis	Synagogue Presidents	Federation Executives	Federation Presidents
	Primarily Conflicting	13%	6%	—
Equally Cooperative and Conflicting	7	10	9%	27%
Primarily Cooperative	80	84	91	73
Total N	72	31	12	15

Summarizing the foregoing analysis, synagogue and federation leaders perceived the quality of interorganizational contacts as predominantly cooperative. Federation leaders were especially positive in their assessments. The data indicate, however,

that synagogue leaders were somewhat more critical of the quality of interorganizational communication than were their federation counterparts.

Attention next turns to the intensity of synagogue-federation contacts in the twelve surveyed communities. Interest in this dimension was heightened by the somewhat surprising finding that high levels of cooperation apparently existed between synagogues and federations in all the communities surveyed. Did these perceptions of cooperation derive from sustained and positive interorganizational contacts? Were actual resource flows the basis of the strong cooperation theme? If not, what other motives could have generated this one-sided appraisal of the quality of synagogue-federation relationships? In the following discussion, survey and interview data are integrated in order to present a fuller picture of the scope of synagogue-federation relationships in the communities surveyed.

The data on the intensity variable provided the first indication of a relatively low level of interorganizational activity between synagogues and the federation in the twelve communities. Nearly 45 percent of the respondents obtained intensity scores ranging from 0 to a mere 5 on the scale. Nine respondents indicated no synagogue-federation contacts whatsoever. The mean intensity score was only 6.268. No organization's intensity score surpassed 16 on the scale while only 14 percent of the scores fell within the relatively high range, 11-16, on the scale.

This finding of a relatively low intensity of synagogue-federation contacts in the communities was supported by the perceptions of many organizational leaders interviewed. Here is how a rabbi from a mid-size city expressed the nature of relationships in his community: "Cordial, polite and cooperative relationships exist around relatively unimportant matters such as calendar clearance and community cele-

brations. However, on issues involving power, clout, finances, relationships are anemic." One federation president responded to the claim of perceived cooperation in his community with a mixture of skepticism and surprise: "If a picture of cooperation between synagogues and federation in this community has been painted, I wish it were actually supported and enhanced by real programmatic endeavors. While I am not aware of any specific conflicts in the community, cooperation exists mostly around issues superficial in nature."

This perception of low intensity was not shared to the same degree by all respondent groups however. Table 4 brings initial evidence to this effect. In this display, the intensity scale has been collapsed into three score categories, 0-5, 6-10, 11-16:

TABLE 4

Intensity Scores by Organizational Leader

Intensity Scores	Rabbis Synagogue Federation Federation			
	Presidents	Executives	Presidents	
0-5	51%	53%	17%	22%
6-10	43	33	50	56
11-16	6	14	33	22
Total N:	81	42	12	18

The thrust of these statistics is that a substantially higher percentage of the intensity scores for synagogue leaders fell in the lowest intensity category (0-5) than those of their federation counterparts. Over 50 percent of both rabbis' and synagogue presidents' scores aggregated in this category. Correspondingly, a much higher percentage of federation leaders obtained intensity scores at the relatively high end of the scale (11-16) than did their synagogue counterparts.

Lay and rabbinic leaders concurred in their assessment of a relatively low intensity of synagogue-federation contacts involving their own congregations. This finding received strong support in the interview statements of synagogue leaders. In the

majority of cases, synagogue leaders identified very few ongoing organizational contacts with the federation network. Potential contact points with the federation network were regarded as quite limited. Those contacts actually engaged in with federation were considered marginal for the most part to the primary concerns and domain of the synagogue. Most rabbis interviewed offered the following assessment of the extensiveness of contacts: "Points of contact are limited. Each organization simply goes its own way. Separate agendas are followed. In short, contacts are limited and episodic" (Reform rabbi, mid-size community). Another rabbi added that "beyond my personal involvements in federation work, the congregation has very little to do with federation or any of its constituent agencies" (Conservative rabbi, mid-size community).

Some synagogue leaders characterized this limited interaction state more bluntly than others. According to one synagogue president: "Contacts are so seldom they are almost nonexistent." Another synagogue president simply asked, "What contacts?" A Conservative rabbi from one of the largest communities remarked: "We (synagogues and the federation) live in worlds of splendid isolation." A Reform rabbi echoed this notion: "We (his synagogue and the federation) have arms-length friendly relationships although actual collaboration is seldom the case."

With a few notable exceptions, programmatic contacts between the synagogues and federation constituents in the three case-study cities were virtually nonexistent. Synagogue leaders claimed that in the final analysis, their congregations had little in common with the constituent agencies. While some rabbis recognized the value of calling upon the assistance of a constituent agency on an individual case basis, e.g., Jewish family service counseling services for a congregant, sustained linkages with constituents were the exception rather

than the norm. A rabbi from one mid-size community expressed the situation in this way: "We have little programmatic contact with federation constituent agencies, Jewish Family Service, Jewish Community Center, etc. Actually, the constituent agencies in our community have very little of substance to contribute to our synagogue programming. We do our thing, they do theirs." This sentiment was shared by many synagogue leaders.

Federation leaders, for their part, reported more intense synagogue-federation contacts. Referring back to Table 5, it is clear that federation leaders perceived a greater level of interorganizational activity than their synagogue counterparts. There are three possible explanations for the differences in the scores of synagogue and federation leaders on the intensity of contacts dimension.

1. The higher federation intensity scores are explainable, in part, by the nonsymmetric design of the survey question. Federation leaders were directed to consider all the synagogues in the community as potential linkage partners. In addition, they were responding on behalf of an entire network of agencies. These two factors increased the likelihood that more of the interorganizational contacts listed in the survey might have occurred with at least one if not more of the synagogues in the community. Nevertheless, when exploring the intensity dimension more closely with federation leaders during the interviews, the main themes expressed were: (a) the very limited scope of ongoing programmatic linkages and resource exchanges between the synagogues in the community and the federation, or any of its constituents and (b) pervasive feelings of frustration and disappointment that opportunities for collaboration were being lost.

2. Federation leaders tended to emphasize contacts of a general communitywide nature, for which support and participation are periodically requested from all syna-

gogues in the community. These include communitywide observances, celebrations, rallies, community relations endeavors. Generally speaking, these are episodic encounters which do not require significant resource commitments. Synagogue leaders, in general, down-played the significance and intensity of these episodic and limited contacts.

3. Federation leaders stressed "people contacts" as distinct from organizational contacts. Synagogues, qua organizations, may not be linked very extensively, if at all, with the federation or its constituents via ongoing resource exchanges or joint programs. Nevertheless, individual synagogue leaders, including rabbis, are represented on a wide variety of decision-making bodies, task forces, campaign committees, etc., and are consulted where appropriate. As one federation executive commented: "We stress people contacts, not necessarily programmatic linkages. This is the basis upon which cooperative relationships are fostered and strengthened." Thus, even with their higher intensity scores, federation leaders were hard pressed to describe cases of ongoing collaborative linkages with synagogues involving relatively substantial investments of organizational resources.

The paucity of interorganizational contacts was regarded almost universally as unfortunate, at least in the public statements of various organizational leaders. Many synagogue and federation leaders interviewed recognize that important benefits could be derived from closer organizational ties. Nevertheless, in reality, most synagogue and federation leaders admitted that their organizations pursued separate functions and collaborated only on rare occasions. As one rabbi described the situation in his community: "There is always talk about the potential for increased joint programming, but in actuality, the initiatives are scarce. Each organization pursues its own independent course of

action. That's the first priority." A federation president reinforced this sentiment with an expression of frustration over the lack of initiative in this area: "We can't keep talking about cooperation with the synagogues. It must be backed with actions. In most cases, we never get beyond the idealistic talking and planning. The potential is enormous."

Conclusions

To summarize, the following description of synagogue-federation relations emerged from the data collected in this study:

1. Synagogue-federation relations were perceived as predominantly cooperative. Most leaders agreed that synagogues and the federation network generally get along with each other in their communities. Organizational domains are fairly well demarcated and respected. Contacts, for whatever they are worth, are typically cooperative in nature.

2. The intensity of synagogue-federation contacts in the twelve study communities was measured as rather low. Synagogues and the federation function in separate domains without interfering to any large degree with each other's respective roles and activities. Deliberate interorganizational contacts involving significant resource exchanges are still uncommon. Cooperative endeavors tend to be confined to low salience areas, i.e., those areas around which interorganizational consensus is most easily attainable. As a result, the "lowest common denominator contacts," those which involve the least controversial subject matter and make the fewest demands on the respective organizations, are the most common.

There are undoubtedly exceptions to this general characterization of the nature of synagogue-federation relations today. Indeed there have been impressive initiatives in recent years linking synagogues and the federation in more extensive, innovative, and mutually benefiting ways. Never-

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theless, the finding of limited interaction emerging from this study still reflects the

general current of synagogue-federation relationships in many communities today.