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The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel: What Have We Learned?

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**Learning from Taglit-Birthright Israel:
An Academic Symposium**

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Context

“ ... too many ... fail to understand the need for objective evaluation at all stages of a project’s trajectory.

... Instead, they content themselves with anecdotes told in the rhapsodic language of a love song. Such elegies share common traits: they prove the program’s success, affirm the wisdom of the director, and validate the good sense of the donors.

- Michael Steinhardt (2004), *Why we need measurement and accountability.*

Outcome Evaluation Goals

- **Assess Program Impact:**
 - Jewish Identity
 - Love of Israel
 - Sense of Peoplehood
- **Develop policy conclusions that:**
 - Isolate program's contribution
 - Understand both distal and proximal effects
 - Include behavioral and attitudinal measures

Evaluation Designs (2000-20012)

- **Observational studies**

- Participant observations to understand “construct”
- Currently conducted by *Mahon Szold*

- **Short-term outcome**

- Pre-trip and 3-24 months post-trip
- Compare participants/non-participants

- **Long-term outcome**

- Pre-trip and 3–11 years post-trip
- Compare participants/non-participants
- Longitudinal panel study

Impact Measures

- **Attitudinal**

- Jewish identity
- Israel
- Peoplehood
- Community

- **Behavioral**

- Engagement in Jewish learning
- Participation in Jewish life
- Involvement with Israel
- Personal/life decisions: marriage, family, philanthropy

Avoiding Selection Bias

- **High response rates**
 - Central goal
 - Coupled with non-response analysis
- **Short-term studies**
 - Surveys of entire population (Ps/NPs)
 - Intensive follow-up of sub-sample
- **Long-term study**
 - Financial incentives, interviews with collaterals
 - Response rate: ~65% Ps/~45%+ NPs; 85% on multi-wave

Participant/Non-Participant Comparison

- **Central evaluation strategy**
 - Possible because of interest in program (400k+ applicants)
 - No differences in background between Ps/NPs
- **Applicants (Ps/NPs)**
 - Represent diversity of Jewish young adults
 - Pool includes more than 1/3 of all Jewish young adults
- **P/NP comparison is conservative**
 - If applicants have higher Jewish motivation than population, program effects should appear less
 - Potentially moderated by NPs later becoming Ps

What have we learned?

- **Possibility of change**
 - Trajectories of Jewish identity/engagement can be altered
 - Impact occurs for virtually all levels of prior Jewish education
- **Peer group experience**
 - Critical to Jewish identity development
 - Hunger among young adults
- **Israel**
 - Context for actualization of Jewish identity
 - Foundation is the relationship with Israelis

What do we need to learn?

- **Mechanisms?**
 - How can a mere 10 day experience have large impact?
 - What role does Israel play?
- **What's the role of follow-up programs?**
 - If participants don't learn, engage, live Jewishly when they return, how can the program have impact?
 - What kinds of follow-up would accelerate impact?
- **Long-term trajectory?**
 - Will participation in Taglit change P's Jewish life course?
 - Will the effects be magnified or tempered by social network effects?

Evaluation in Perspective

- **“Shoestring Evaluation”**
 - Cost was less than 0.2% of Taglit’s budget
 - Possible because of the size of the program and the use of a pseudo-randomized design
- **Scientific norms**
 - Research/analytic models drawn from the broader evaluation/education field
 - Enlisted external reviewers, journal editors to vet
- **Compelling evidence**
 - Simplicity of design facilitated dissemination
 - Large numbers aided generalizability

Resources

www.brandeis.edu/cmjs

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Taglit Research Team

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