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Identity of immigrants – between majority perceptions and self-definition

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ABSTRACT

Immigration is often accompanied by identity transformation. This article studies the identity of immigrants in the framework of Cooley's 'looking-glass' theory by examining the conceptions of various immigrant groups in Israel of how the veteran majority population perceives them. In addition, it examines the interrelation between immigrant identity as reflected in their self-definition and immigrant beliefs about how the Israeli veteran majority population defines their identity. An empirical analysis was conducted on a representative sample of 437 former Soviet Union (FSU) immigrants and 338 Ethiopian immigrants aged 18–60 who arrived in Israel under the Law of Return. The findings revealed little congruence among Ethiopian immigrants between their self-definition (mainly Jewish) and their perception of how the majority group defines them (mainly Ethiopian). This lack of congruence implies that in the opinion of a substantive share of Ethiopian immigrants, the majority population in Israel is still not ready to include them within the boundaries of the Israeli-Jewish collective. The findings regarding FSU immigrants show considerable congruence between their self-definition and their belief as to how the veterans define them. Most FSU immigrants, who define themselves as Israelis, think that the majority group sees them as such. The effect of socio-demographic characteristics on immigrants' identities was also investigated in the study.

KEYWORDS Identity; immigrants; looking-glass theory; Israel

Theoretical framework and social setting

The immigration of Jews to Israel is one of the formative events in the country's society. The Jewish people consider Israel their homeland, and under Israeli law every Jew has the right to immigrate to Israel. Hence, Israeli society views Jewish immigration as a 'returning Diaspora' and not as an economic migration.¹ However, as with any other migration, Jewish immigration to Israel is accompanied by a transformation of the immigrants' identity.

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Theoretical literature on the topic suggests that immigrants' acculturation in the destination countries is associated with deep changes in identity.² Previous research in various destination countries in general and in Israel in particular reveals that these changes do not necessarily 'erase' the old identity of the immigrant in favour of the 'mainstream' identity of the host society. Rather, as a result of immigrants' identity changes, a complex new identity, which includes both the old and the new, is created.³ Most studies have examined the issue of immigrant identity from the perspective of their own self-definition.⁴ By contrast, this article examines the identity of immigrants from a different perspective – namely, immigrants' perception of how the majority group (the veteran population) members define them in terms of national identity. This perspective, to the best of our knowledge, has not previously been investigated.

Our research initiates from Cooley's 'looking-glass' theory.⁵ According to this theory, in social life other people serve as mirrors through which we see ourselves. The term 'I am in the looking-glass' describes an individual's self-image based on their conception of how they are perceived by others.

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according to whether they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it.⁶

In a classic review of studies on the looking-glass self, Shraugher and Schoeneman concluded that rather than our self-concept resembling the way others actually see us, it is filtered through our perceptions and resembles how we think others see us.⁷ Cooley's looking-glass theory also emphasizes the extent of the importance of the others who serve as mirror: 'the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling'.⁸ In the framework of our study – following Cooley's theory – we argue that a vital component of immigrant identity is their perception of how the majority group (veteran population) defines them. Thus, we aim to examine the conceptions of various immigrant groups in Israel of how the veteran population perceives them as a group. In addition, we examine the interrelation between immigrant identity as reflected in their self-definition and their beliefs about how the Israeli veteran majority population (important reference group) defines their identity.

Since the mid-1980s, Israel has received immigrants from two major diasporas – the former Soviet Union (FSU) and Ethiopia. The massive wave of former Soviet Union immigrants that arrived in Israel between 1989 and 2000 helped to mould a new social dynamic and pluralistic reality. The main features of this group include a greater motivation to leave the Soviet Union than to settle in Israel⁹ and a desire to preserve their Russian cultural uniqueness while integrating into Israeli society.¹⁰ The Ethiopian immigrants arrived in three waves: the first wave in the mid-1980s, the second wave at the beginning of

the 1990s, and the third wave is still ongoing. This group of immigrants has a strong desire to integrate into Israeli society.¹¹

Both the former Soviet Union immigrant group and the Ethiopian immigrant group are characterized by unique ideological, cultural, social, and economic attributes and, in several parameters, the Ethiopian immigration and the FSU immigration are very different.¹² First, nowadays the FSU immigrants represent in Israel a large population of over 1 million individuals, while the Ethiopian immigrants are a relatively small group of 119,300.¹³ Second, the Ethiopian Jews are mostly religious, while the overwhelming majority of FSU immigrants are secular.¹⁴ Third, the FSU immigrant population contains a large number of educated and professional individuals (a higher percentage than in the general population of Israel);¹⁵ by contrast, the Ethiopian immigrants have a very low average level of education, as in their origin country, characterized by a rural traditional culture, 90% of the adult population is illiterate.¹⁶ Finally, but not less important, while FSU immigrants can be considered an invisible minority in terms of skin colour, the blackness of Ethiopian immigrants positions them as the most visible minority among the Jewish-Israeli population. Moreover, the black Ethiopian community provoked for the first time a debate regarding race and Jewishness in Israel.¹⁷

Nevertheless, disregarding their socio-economic disparities, in Israel both immigrant groups are minority, subordinate 'out-groups' in relation to the veteran Jewish majority population (the dominant 'in-group'). The veteran majority population serves as a reference group for the out-groups, and thus the majority attitude affects the moulding of the immigrants' identity. Since these two immigrant groups are out-groups, which in addition arrived in Israel at more or less at the same time, comparing their complex identities is especially meaningful. The differences between the groups - namely their size, socio-economic status, degree of religiosity, level of education, and colour of skin - lead us to expect substantial variance in their identity, as reflected in their belief of how the majority population defines them as a group.

On top of the 'between groups' differences, there are also 'within group' differences in demographic and socio-economic characteristics that may affect identity perceptions within each of the two immigrant groups. Previous theory and research emphasized several important determinants of immigrant identity worldwide and in Israel specifically: years since integration, level of education, proficiency in the language of the new country, degree of religiosity, and labour market participation.¹⁸

Following the described theoretical framework and social setting, our empirical analysis attempts to answer three research questions:

- How do the two immigrant groups (Ethiopian and FSU immigrants) perceive that the veteran majority population defines their identity?

- Can we detect a pattern of relationship between the immigrants' self-definition and their perception of the way veterans define their identity?
- To what extent do demographic and socio-economic characteristics affect the immigrants' identity among Ethiopian and FSU immigrants, as reflected in their perception of the veterans' definition of their identity?

Methods

Sample and procedure

The data for this study were taken from a telephone survey commissioned by the Centre for Immigration and Social Integration at the Ruppin Academic Centre, performed in 2007 by the Dahaf Institute using the stratified sampling method. The present analysis was limited to the samples of FSU and Ethiopian immigrants aged 18-60. FSU immigrants were defined by country of origin (FSU republics) and year of immigration (since 1989); Ethiopian immigrants were defined by Ethiopia as their country of origin.¹⁹ The final research sample consists of 437 FSU immigrants and 338 Ethiopian immigrants. The interviews were conducted in Russian and Amharic languages.

Measures

The key variable of this study is *immigrant perception of the majority population's definition of their identity* (in other words, immigrant identity according to the 'looking-glass' theory's definition of identity). We measured this variable through the question, 'How do veteran Israelis mainly perceive you – as an Israeli, as a Jew, or by your country of origin?'

We also examined the *immigrants' identity according to their self-definition*. We measured this variable using the question, 'Which of the following terms best defines your identity – Israeli, Jewish or your country of origin group?' We examined this variable not as a separate research topic, but in the context of the immigrants' identity as they believe the veterans perceive it.²⁰

The analysis also included the following individual demographic and socio-economic attributes which may explain *immigrant perception of the majority population's definition of their identity*: degree of religiosity (measured on a four-point scale), number of years since migration to Israel, number of years of formal schooling, labour market position as a series of dummy variables (employed, unemployed, and not in the active labour force), and self-reported assessment of Hebrew fluency (measured on a five-point scale). Individual characteristics for control purposes were gender, age, and marital status.

Method of analysis

To examine patterns of relationship between immigrant self-definition and their perception of the majority population's definition of their identity, we used crosstabs and Cramer's V correlation test. In order to examine the impact of demographic and socio-economic factors on immigrant identity (as they believe the majority population perceives it) we estimated a series of multi-nominal logistic regressions, which are the most appropriate for a nominal dependent variable with more than two categories.

Findings

Immigrants' perception of their identity as defined by the majority group

Table 1 displays the distribution of the responses to the question regarding immigrant perception of the Israeli majority population's definition of their identity.

The data reveal that about 42% of FSU immigrants assume that the veteran population in Israel perceives them as 'Israelis'. A similar proportion of respondents consider that they are perceived by the majority population as 'Russians', and only 16% believe that they are mainly defined by the majority population as 'Jews'.

A different picture emerges for the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants. Two-thirds of this group claims that the veterans define them by their country of origin, i.e. as 'Ethiopians'. By comparison, 21% assume that they are perceived as 'Israelis' and 13% claim that they are defined by the veteran population as 'Jews'.

Thus, whereas most immigrants from Ethiopia believe that veteran Israelis view them as Ethiopians and only one-fifth believe that they are viewed as Israelis, the share of FSU immigrants who believe that they are viewed as Russians is similar to the share that believe they are viewed as Israelis. A relatively low percentage of both FSU and Ethiopian immigrants think that the majority population sees them as 'Jews'.

Relationship between immigrant self-definition and immigrant perception of the majority group's definition of their identity

Before discussing the relationship between these two types of identity definitions, we present the distribution of responses related to immigrant self-definition

Table 1. Immigrant perception of the majority group's definition of their identity.

	Israeli	Jew	Country of Origin
FSU Immigrants	41.6%	16%	42.4%
Ethiopian Immigrants	21.1%	12.8%	66.1%

Table 2. Immigrant self-definition.

	Israeli	Jew	Country of Origin
FSU Immigrants	33.7%	39.7%	26.6%
Ethiopian Immigrants	18.3%	59.3%	22.4%

Table 3. Rate of overlap between two identity definitions: immigrant self-definition and immigrant perception of the majority group's definition of their identity.

	FSU immigrants	Ethiopian immigrants
Israeli	69%	24%
Jewish	33%	15%
Country of origin	78%	70%

(Table 2). Evidently, whereas most immigrants from Ethiopia define themselves as Jews and relatively few of them (18.3%) define themselves as Israelis, quite similar proportions of FSU immigrants define themselves as Israelis, Jews, and Russians, respectively.

The data presented in Table 3 demonstrate that approximately two-thirds of the FSU immigrants (69%) who define themselves as Israelis believe that the majority population also views them as Israelis. A similar picture (and with a slightly higher rate of overlap) is revealed regarding their Russian identity. On the other hand, only one-third of the immigrants from the former Soviet Union who define themselves as Jews assume that the majority members also view them as such.

Cramer's V test result ($V = 0.403$; $p < 0.01$) indicates a statistically significant and relatively strong correlation between immigrants' self-definition and their perception of the way the veteran population defines them among immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

The picture for Ethiopian immigrants differs considerably. The only meaningful rate of overlap between self-definition and immigrant perception of their identity as defined by the majority group was found for Ethiopian identity: 70% of respondents who define themselves as Ethiopians also assume that the majority population defines them as Ethiopians. However, only a quarter of those who identify themselves as Israelis think that the majority also perceives them as Israelis. Moreover, only 15% of Ethiopian immigrants who define themselves as Jews believe that the majority population does the same.

The statistical test (Cramer's V) indicates that the correlation between self-identity definition and perceived identity definition among Ethiopian immigrants is not statistically significant.

The influence of socio-demographic characteristics on immigrants' identity (as reflected in their perception of the veteran's definition of their identity)

The final question of this article refers to the effect of socio-demographic characteristics of immigrants on immigrant perceptions of the majority population's

Table 4. Non-standardized Multi-Nominal Regression Coefficients (STD) Predicting Immigrant Perception of their Identity as Defined by the Majority Group.

	Immigrants from the former Soviet Union		Immigrants from Ethiopia	
	Israelis 1A	Jews 1B	Israelis 2A	Jews 2B
Constant	-4.12	-4.22	-4.02	-2.02
Degree of religiosity	0.49*(0.15)	1.21*(0.18)	0.01(0.20)	0.37(0.31)
Number of years in Israel	0.22*(0.04)	0.02(0.05)	0.05(0.04)	-0.08*(0.04)
Years of education	-0.03(0.04)	-0.12*(0.05)	0.08(0.05)	-0.03(0.06)
Age	-0.03*(0.01)	0.01(0.02)	0.01(0.03)	0.01(0.02)
Degree of fluency in Hebrew	0.60*(0.15)	0.39*(0.19)	0.29(0.23)	-0.05(0.22)
Unemployed ¹	-0.59(0.60)	0.93(0.65)	0.09(0.54)	-1.14(0.83)
Not in the active labor force ¹	-1.12*(0.30)	0.03(0.35)	0.73*(0.35)	-0.13(0.44)
Male	0.33(0.23)	0.40(0.30)	-0.42(0.32)	0.12(0.40)
Married	-0.43(0.14)	0.14(0.32)	-0.52(0.41)	0.29(0.49)
Chi-Square		219		74
Pseudo R-Square		0.34		0.23

¹Comparison category – employed.

* $p < 0.05$.

definition of their identity. Table 4 displays non-standardized coefficients of multi-nominal regression equations predicting the odds to believe that the majority population defines them as Israelis or Jews (as compared to Russian/Ethiopian) among FSU/Ethiopian immigrants. Models 1A and 1B predict the odds among immigrants from the former Soviet Union, while models 2A and 2B predict the odds among immigrants from Ethiopia.

Model 1A shows that among FSU immigrants, the odds of believing that the majority population defines them as Israeli (versus Russian) tend to increase with the degree of religiosity, the time spent in Israel, and the degree of fluency in Hebrew. This belief is weaker among FSU immigrants who are not in the active labour force and among older immigrants. For instance, the odds of believing that the majority population perceives you as Israeli (versus Russian) for individuals not in the active labour force are 0.3 times the same odds among the employed (as implied by statistically significant and negative coefficient: $b = -1.12$). The findings presented in model 1B reveal that among FSU immigrants, the odds of assuming that the majority group defines them as a Jew (versus Russian) increase with the degree of religiosity and fluency in Hebrew, and decreases with years of education.

Model 2A reveals that for Ethiopian immigrants, employment status is the only socio-demographic characteristic that affects their belief that the majority population defines them as Israelis (versus Ethiopian). For Ethiopian immigrants who are not in the active labour force, the odds of believing that the majority population views them as Israeli (versus Ethiopian) are twice the odds of employed immigrants (as implied by the statistically significant and positive coefficient: $b = 0.73$). It seems that interaction with the majority population in the labour market reduces the odds of Ethiopian immigrants believing that

they are perceived as Israelis. As for Jewish identity, the results presented in Model 2B show that among Ethiopian immigrants, the odds of believing that veteran Israelis define them as a Jew (versus Ethiopian) tend to decrease with the length of time in Israel (as implied by the statistically significant and negative coefficient: $b = -0.08$). Other socio-economic attributes exert no significant effect on Ethiopian immigrants' perception of their identity (as the majority group defines it).

Discussion and conclusions

This article examined national identities of two groups of immigrants that came to Israel in significant numbers in the last two decades, from Ethiopia and from the former Soviet Union. Whereas previous studies have investigated the issue of immigrant identity from the perspective of immigrants' own self-definition, the present research examines immigrant identity following Cooley's 'looking-glass' theory. According to this theory, people in our social life serve as a mirror through which we see ourselves. In other words, the identity of the individual is not necessarily reflected only in his self-definition, but also in his perception of how others define him. Applying the 'looking-glass' theory to the context of relationships between ethnic groups in Israeli society, it is reasonable to suggest that immigrant perception of how the majority group – veteran Israelis – defines them is most relevant to the question of immigrant identity.

Following this definition of identity, our study reveals that among Ethiopian immigrants in Israel, their Ethiopian identity is most highly pronounced, while among FSU immigrants, Russian and Israeli identities have almost equal weight.

An individual's national identity may also be viewed as an 'admission ticket' to a certain collective. To be included in the Israeli-Jewish collective, an individual must hold at least one of the two identities: Israeli or Jewish. The admission of immigrants to the Israeli-Jewish collective depends not only on their self-definition as Israelis or Jews, but also on their belief that this definition is accepted by the majority population. Among Ethiopian immigrants, the findings reveal little congruence between their self-definition and their perception of how the majority veteran group defines them. Most immigrants from Ethiopia who define themselves as Israelis or Jews think that the majority veteran population does not see them as such. This lack of congruence implies that in the opinion of a substantive share of Ethiopian immigrants, the majority population in Israel is still not ready to include them within the boundaries of the Israeli-Jewish collective.

The findings regarding FSU immigrants show considerable congruence between their self-definition and their belief as to how the veterans define them. Most FSU immigrants who define themselves as Israelis think that the

majority group sees them as such. In other words, the Israeli identity of FSU immigrants serves as an 'admission ticket' to the Israeli-Jewish collective.

It is noteworthy that in both groups most immigrants who define themselves as Jews do not believe that the majority group members use the same definition for them. This result is not surprising, considering the history of the two groups' integration in Israeli society. The large immigration wave from the FSU since 1989 brought to Israel, for the first time, a substantial number of immigrants who are not Jewish according to *halacha* (the Jewish religious legal code that defines a Jew by his/her matrilineal descent). Nevertheless, these individuals are entitled to citizenship upon arrival according to the 1950 Law of Return and its 1970 amendment.²¹ These laws extend Israeli citizenship to every Jew by *halachic* definition, as well as to the children and grandchildren of Jews, and to the spouses of Jewish immigrants. As a result, this wave of FSU immigrants has challenged the traditional definition of Jewishness in Israeli society. By comparison, Ethiopian immigrants have faced reluctance on the part of the rabbinic authorities to recognize their Jewishness and have experienced stigmatization due to their skin colour. Thus, the immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel has provoked a debate regarding race and Jewishness in Israel.²²

Furthermore, our study found that the effects of socio-demographic characteristics are strikingly different for both groups. Whereas these characteristics have almost no effect on the identity of Ethiopian immigrants, they do affect the identity of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. For example, FSU immigrants' belief that the veterans see them as Israelis (applying the 'looking-glass' theory's identity definition) strengthens with the number of years in Israel, with the degree of religiosity, and with fluency in Hebrew. Thus, these three attributes apparently relate to the degree of integration and acculturation in the new country, which is a contributing factor to the acquisition of Israeli identity. It is interesting to note that Rajzman and Hochman found that tenure in the country, fluency in Hebrew, and level of religiosity are the main characteristics according to which Israeli-Jewish veterans define who is an Israeli and who is not.²³

The influence of socio-demographic characteristics on Ethiopian immigrants is much less pronounced, and even points in directions different from those expected when following the literature on immigrant integration. The number of years in the country reduces Ethiopian immigrants' belief that the majority group members perceive them as Jews (versus Ethiopians), and active participation in the labour market reduces their belief that the majority views them as Israelis. This finding may imply that with tenure in Israel, and with participation in the labour market, Ethiopian immigrants become aware that the majority group does not tend to include them in the boundaries of the Israeli-Jewish collective. It seems, therefore, that for Ethiopian immigrants (a visible minority), time in the country and interaction in

the labour market is counterproductive to receiving an admission ticket to Israeli society. It is thus possible to conclude that the theoretical argument that labour market integration and length of time spent in the host country as are the most important contributing factors of social integration does not necessarily apply to all groups. Future research should definitely investigate these somewhat surprising findings in order to increase understanding of underlying social, cultural, and political processes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Lewin-Epstein et al., "Institutional Structure and Immigrant Integration."
2. Berry, "Psychology of Immigration."
3. Regarding Israel's case, see Horenczyk and Ben-Shalom, "Multicultural Identities Adaptation"; Peres and Ben-Rafael, *Cleavages in Israeli Society*. For international studies, see Frideres, "Immigrants, Integration, Identities Intersection"; Matsunaga et al., "Ethnic Identity Development"; Phinney et al., "Ethnic Identity, Immigration, Well-being"; and Stryker and Burke, "Identity Theory."
4. Al-Haj, "Identity Patterns"; Ben-Rafael et al., *Building a Diaspora*; and Kurman, Eshel, and Zehavi, "Personal and Group Acculturation Attitudes."
5. Cooley, *Human Nature*.
6. Ibid., 184.
7. Shrauger and Schoeneman, "Symbolic Interactionist View of Self-concept."
8. Cooley, *Human Nature*, 84.
9. Cohen and Haberfeld, "Self-selection and Earnings Assimilation"; Peres and Ben-Rafael, *Cleavages in Israeli Society*.
10. Ben-Rafael, Olstein, and Geist, *Perspectives of Identity*.
11. Shabtay, *Between Reggae and Rap*.
12. Hacothen, "Mass Immigration"; and Peres and Ben-Rafael, *Cleavages in Israeli Society*.
13. Central Bureau of Statistics, "Press Release."
14. Hacothen, "Mass Immigration."
15. Remennick, "Language Acquisition, Ethnicity"; and Peres and Ben-Rafael, *Cleavages in Israeli Society*.
16. Lazin, "Israel and Ethiopian Jewish Immigrants."
17. Offer, "Ethiopian Community in Israel"; Elias and Kemp, "New Second Generation."
18. Al-Haj, "Identity Patterns"; Chiswick, "Economic Progress of Immigrants"; and Chiswick, "Immigrant Earnings."
19. For further information on the sampling procedure, see Amit, "Determinants of Life Satisfaction."
20. We acknowledge that single item measures are often less capable of capturing complex social phenomena than multi-item measures, and may suffer from possible reliability issues. However, the measures we used are theoretically

relevant and validated by their content. These measures are based on straightforward questions and do not raise the typical problems of meaning and interpretation that generally accompany attitudinal research.

21. Elias and Kemp, "New Second Generation."
22. Ibid.
23. Raijman and Hochman, "National Attachments, Economic Competition."

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