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Cultural Encoding and Fake Equality in Popular Reality Shows: Lessons from Israel

Amal Jamal, Nelly Elias and Orly Soker

This paper critically examines the representation of two major minorities in Israel, Arab citizens of Israel and Jewish immigrants, by focusing on the widely popular genre of reality shows. We demonstrate that this genre contains sophisticated mechanisms of differentiation and selection that inevitably exclude and stigmatise minority participants. To demonstrate this thesis the paper takes a close look at two Israeli reality shows that were conceived to have a public value—Wanted: A Leader and The Ambassador. The examination of these shows reveals how Israeliness—presented as the space of equal opportunity—contains discriminatory mechanisms based on national and ethnic affiliations. Thus, the study illustrates that national identity could be utilised as a meta-narrative of universality and inclusiveness, but actually refers to a particular type of identity that is ethnically restricted.

Keywords: Reality Shows; Cultural Encoding; Israeliness; Ethnic Differentiation

The egalitarian representation of cultural diversity in the mass media constitutes a major challenge for democratic societies. Despite these societies' claim to uphold equality and cultural recognition, reality proves them wrong. This is true for television programming as well: studies carried out in various countries have noted the unequal representation of various social and cultural groups by most television programmes (Browne 1996; Cottle 2000; Gross 1998). While the representation of minorities has slowly been changing over the years, it still reflects their marginality, stereotyping and estrangement (Orbe 2008; Pullen 2004).

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This issue is highly relevant to Israeli society, where two significant minorities—Arabs and Jewish immigrants—are almost totally excluded from mainstream media despite the fact that each of them constitutes roughly a fifth of the total population (Abraham *et al.* 2004). This said, one cannot ignore the fact that there is a gradual change, reflected in the rising presence of Arabs and Jewish immigrants in Israeli television series and reality shows. Even if such programmes are not abundant, significantly they are broadcast during prime time, and thus potentially capable of generating change in the public's attitude toward these minorities.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the attitudes of the dominant Jewish majority towards the Arab citizens of Israel and to Jewish immigrants are fundamentally different, even opposed (Shafir and Peled 2002). Sociological studies have shown that both Arabs and immigrants are indeed excluded from the Israeli public sphere; the scope, form or means of their respective exclusion are, however, very different (Caspi and Elias 2011; Jamal 2007). While Arab citizens of Israel are not perceived as part of the national collective, Jewish immigrants are officially regarded as central building blocks for the State of Israel and a major component of its Jewish majority, particularly in view of the demographic effort to counter the natural proliferation of the Palestinian population within and outside Israel. This difference makes the comparison between the exclusion of Arabs and of Jewish immigrants from the Israeli media a vital issue for research and theorisation. Hence, the question of how these minorities are represented in television programmes goes with the question as to whether the different location of these two minorities *vis-à-vis* the Jewish majority results in differing patterns of exclusion.

Any examination of the cultural model that conditions the representation—on Israeli television—of Arabs on the one hand and of Jewish immigrants on the other, calls for a close scrutiny of popular programmes that attract a relatively broad audience. These play a major role in the construction of viewers' consciousness and reflect the cultural model of the majority–minority relationship. Deconstructing television texts, one can trace the power mechanisms that operate in these programmes and expose their dominant ideology (Fisk 1987; Newcomb 2007; Postman 1986). This is a valid approach based on the premise that the media field is where institutions, ideologies and social groups struggle over the definition and construction of social reality (Gitlin 1980; Williams 1990). Simultaneously reflecting and constantly reshaping power relations, in this field disciplining, policing, and demarcation of various social groups take place (Hall 1997).

These assumptions will be examined in view of two popular reality shows broadcast by Israeli commercial television channels. This genre was selected on the premise that reality shows are based on a seemingly open, unscripted format, possibly offering a more diverse representation of minority groups, expressing themselves more freely than through more structured genres such as series and documentaries (Goddard 2003; Orbe 2008). This said, research literature also emphasises that reality shows have their own, subtler mechanisms of reinforcing ethnic, racial, gender and other stereotypes, to inevitably exclude the minority participants and present them as

cultural 'others' (Andrejevic and Colby 2006; Hasinoff 2008). Consequently, although they do seem more 'democratic' in nature, reality shows are subject to the hegemonic forces that stigmatise or silence minority groups.

In order to explore the ways in which two major Israeli minorities contend with hegemonic national identity over their place in the public sphere, this article focuses on the deconstruction of two reality shows—*Wanted: A Leader* and *The Ambassador*—aired on Israeli commercial television channels in 2005. Aiming to portray a pluralistic and diverse outlook, both programmes included participants from various national, cultural, ethnic and religious groups, including an Arab female contender on *Wanted: A Leader*, and two Jewish female immigrants on *The Ambassador*. This composition of contenders is what allows us to map out the complex ideological construction of ethno-cultural and national minorities in reality shows within the boundaries of Israeli dominant national identity (i.e. *Israeliness*).

Our analysis starts by locating the two shows within the prevalent literature on reality shows, and presents the centrality of *Israeliness* as a meta-narrative that hides the internal ethno-cultural differentiations of the various competitors. From there on, we proceed to deconstruct the flow of each of the shows—focusing on the major turning points that lead to dramatisation, and pinpointing the mechanisms of ethno-cultural differentiation within them. After reflecting the flow of the meta-narrative by focusing on the roles of the main 'protagonists', we compare and contrast the two shows in order to illustrate the similarities and differences in mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of Arab and immigrant participants. Finally, we offer some concluding remarks concerning reality shows and ethno-cultural differentiation in the media.

Reality Shows and the Sociology of *Israeliness*

The most popular reality shows are characterised by the protracted filming of events in the lives of individuals or groups, aiming to lend these events a dramatic aspect within a realistic and seemingly authentic outlook (Quellette and Murray 2004). Usually, participants are not professional actors and are initially unknown to the general public. Moreover, the shows often impart a pluralistic appearance by seeming relatively open to all social groups portrayed side by side as 'ordinary people' on an allegedly equal footing, almost totally unencumbered by script or staging (Holmes and Jermyn 2004; Smith and Wood 2003).

Competition among the participants, a dominant feature of the genre, is portrayed as real and motivated by their desire to win. The television screen is turned into a seemingly neutral stage, unmediated and in no way non-allegorical, where the social forces operating in the background are allegedly silenced (Orbe 2008). This image of neutrality is the secret of reality-show appeal. The framework of constructed neutrality conceals the dominant power structure while presenting a facade of fair play among the competing participants. The actors in these programmes are constructed as autonomous subjects and successful individuals whose personal drive and need to

succeed constitute a major impetus for their willingness to undergo ordeals in their quest of the ultimate prize (Orbe 2008).

The two reality shows selected for the present study were designed to find the finest example of the Israeli collective in its search for leaders to successfully represent it domestically and abroad. Both shows were broadcast at a time of social and political crisis afflicting Israeli society at the dawn of the third millennium. *Wanted: A Leader* sought a leader with strong commitment to a potentially important social project, while *The Ambassador* was designed to find a representative with outstanding rhetorical and communication skills to represent Israeli foreign policy abroad—in view of the prevailing sentiment in Israel that its propaganda has failed following the second Palestinian Intifada.

Both shows were based on a competition between individuals with high personal potential who consider themselves willing to dedicate their energy and skills to promote public enterprises. However different their objectives, both shows presented Israeli citizenship as equivalent to ethno-cultural ‘neutrality’, dismissing the ethnic background of the participants as a factor that could influence their competition. Such constructed ‘neutrality’ is presented as if all Israeli citizens are treated equally, without bias of gender, national or ethno-cultural origin, thus reflecting a liberal civic identity. The discourse of ‘neutrality’ encouraged the participants to ignore external constraints and regard their own national or cultural background as if it were transparent.

But as the analysis of the two shows illustrates, Israeli identity is far from being neutral, neither culturally nor ethnically. *Israeliness* is not a mere legal-contractual bond between state and citizens—it requires, rather, a highly defined behavioural pattern, cultural background and value system. Participants coming from minority groups must meet certain prerequisites and adopt behaviour codes which inevitably challenge their own particularistic identity. They are required to make adjustments and modifications in their own culture, language, customs, beliefs and values in order to be admitted to that exclusive club called *Israeliness*. This club is saturated with a hegemonic ideological and cultural conception that is far from neutral *vis-à-vis* the structure of power relations in Israeli society. Thus, although this cultural model is encoded as universal and neutral, it actually mirrors a conception of the hegemonic group that is Jewish, born in Israel and of European (i.e. Ashkenazi) origin.

The programme *Wanted: A Leader* included a female representative of the Arab minority. Thus it automatically became one of the very few attempts at cultural-national diversification on Israeli television. The programme is therefore an appropriate research field for tracing the cultural model that governs the power relationships between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in Israeli popular culture. A key hypothesis of ours in the present paper is that, despite its pluralistic and seemingly neutral image, *Wanted: A Leader* abounds with editing devices manifesting mechanisms of control, exclusion and estrangement of the Arab ‘Other’.

There were no Arab participants in *The Ambassador*, as the entire programme bears a distinctly Zionist national character. It did, however, incorporate representatives of a wide range of the ethnic and social minorities comprising the Jewish social mosaic

of Israel. In this case too, a deconstruction of the show's ideological codes illustrates the complexity of the disciplining, exclusion and estrangement of the intra-national 'Other' (e.g. newly arrived immigrants) for the sake of a dominant national image. Thus, despite the guise of cultural diversity and ethno-cultural pluralism, *The Ambassador*, too, sets forth clear-cut criteria for the meaning of hegemonic *Israeliness*, on the basis of which various contenders are excluded.

Wanted: A Leader . . . But S/He Must Be Jewish

This section examines the complexity of the cultural model characterising relationships between the Jewish participants and the Arab female contender Abir Kobti, in *Wanted: A Leader*. The show consisted of a diverse panel of twelve participants who represented the various ethnic and cultural groups in Israeli society and were competing for a prize of five million shekels [= 1 million Euro] to promote their own social enterprise. In each episode, participants were divided into two competing teams. Members of the losing team then had to choose two contestants who they felt had not contributed enough to succeed in their task. These contestants appeared before the judges who had the exclusive power to disqualify them from the show. The panel of judges consisted of three prominent representatives of Israeli hegemony, led by a successful businessman as a role model for the contenders.

As we set out to map the complexity in the ideological encoding of the attitude towards the Arab contender, we must first analyse the central theme of the show, which is the narrative of equal opportunity and fair competition. This narrative is constructed from the beginning through technical devices such as the equal division of the time slot among the various actors, as well as through narrative devices showing the actors speaking or acting in a particular way in various phases of the show. Furthermore, the myth of equality and fairness is highlighted by structural devices: all of the candidates have undergone a series of tests, proving themselves to possess high leadership potential, under the assumption that their baseline conditions and background are equal. In this way, the Arab contender is assimilated in the framework of a national competition as if she were equal and similar to any of the others. Abir thus becomes an equal partner in a national Israeli project within the framework of the liberal image of Israeli society.

The narrative of equal opportunity and fair competition is also structured by means of the seemingly similar personal qualities and skills of the competitors. All of them are portrayed as successful and self-confident individuals with advanced leadership capabilities. Despite her national, cultural and linguistic difference, the Arab contender is presented as similar in her personal qualities to the rest of the competitors. A resident of the Arab city of Nazareth, Abir is a young, secular, educated and highly ambitious young woman. Presenting the Arab contender in this way obscures her ethno-cultural identity, emphasising instead multicultural and neutral *Israeliness* as the show's meta-narrative.

Along this line, the personal identity of each of the participants is highlighted, whereas their particularistic collective identity is introduced as less relevant to the competition. The programme's meta-narrative emphasises the belief that it is possible for anyone to succeed in Israeli society, if only he or she can develop the skills necessary for success. The liberal ethos is thus grounded in the programme, implicitly serving the neo-liberal ideology which guides commercial television on the one hand, and Zionist ideology that strives to integrate Arabs as individuals into *Israeliness* as an all-embracing identity, on the other.

The emphasis on the liberal worldview as meta-narrative does not overshadow the importance of the image of multiculturalism as a key ideological theme in the Israeli self-image. At first, the programme locates each of the contenders in their respective social setting, in order to highlight the principle of representation as a central characteristic of *Israeliness*. The various contenders come from different backgrounds, appearing as a socially, culturally and geographically diverse group. The programme thus constructs an image in which the Arab contender purportedly enjoys full recognition of her identity, accepted as an equal participant in an open competition, free of any national or ideological constraints.

But the effort to combine the liberal-pluralistic and multicultural worldviews fails to hide the fact that it is the Jewish contenders who represent the dominant cultural, linguistic and national environment of the show. This environment was in many senses unfamiliar to Abir, even though the dominant narrative of the programme insisted on stressing her success in being 'like everyone else'. The tasks assigned to the participants, the parameters for judging their skills and the dominant discourse throughout the show were embedded in the conceptual framework of *Israeliness* that is steeped in Jewish-Israeli culture. Marginalising social, cultural and linguistic differences, the programme thus camouflages one of the key control mechanisms in operation in its meta-narrative, as well as in Israeli society at large—Jewish cultural hegemony.

The mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation embedded in the programme's meta-narrative were exposed by three instances in the second half of the show, revealing their implications in the Arab contender's chances of getting an equal opportunity to win. The three instances were 'Making the *Tabuleh* salad', 'Preparations for the football game' and 'Singing the national anthem'. In the first case, unbeknownst to them, the contenders were flown to Cyprus. After having to find their way about one of the island's towns, they were required to split into two gender-based teams. Each team received an initial sum of money to start a project that would increase that sum. The team ending up with more money would be the winner. Abir proposed to her teammates the idea of making *Tabuleh*, a classic Arab salad very commonplace throughout the Middle East. Her idea was to use the money to buy the basic ingredients and prepare a large quantity for sale at the local market. Other participants agreed and the operation began.

Shortly afterwards, however, they realised that the locals were reluctant to buy the salad. In the wake of this business failure, Abir was subjected to personal criticism not strictly limited to business. The most stringent criticism came from a contender

living in a Jewish settlement in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This contender diverted her criticism to the national context, charging that Abir's idea originated in her desire to accentuate her own identity and aggrandise her culture as a Palestinian, thereby jeopardising the entire group's chances of success. Such criticism was not countered by the other participants, implying their complicity with the settler.

The second event reflecting the Arab contender's inequality and alienation from the other contenders took place in the preparations for a football match. The six contenders remaining at this stage were divided into two gender-based teams. The teams were required to organize a football match between two neighbourhoods in the city of Rehovot—*Maccabi Shaarayim* and *Hapoel Marmorek*, notorious in Israeli football history for their tradition of mutual animosity. Both teams are affiliated with Zionist movements—*Maccabi Shaarayim* with the *Maccabi* movement, and *Hapoel Marmorek* with *Mapai*, the Israeli Laborers Party (currently Labor).

The rivalry in the field was channelled by the contenders for building the two teams and mobilising fans. Building up to the match, the Jewish-Israeli discourse unfolded, centering on the Jews' historical struggle as the few against the many, manifested repeatedly in the stories of David and Goliath, the Evil Hamman, the destruction of the Temple and others. These stories draw on Jewish history and emphasise themes of the victimisation and victory of the People of Israel. Within such a discourse, Abir was obliged to show leadership while finding herself restricted by the production's rules and directives, presented as neutral and objective. In this episode, Abir showed up for two minutes (out of 45 minutes in total), in which she supported the other two contenders in their preparations for the game. However, she did not take an active part in enlisting players and fans. She seemed to be operating in a social arena unfamiliar to her, and was thus structurally excluded due to the lack of common cultural ground with the other contenders.

The third instance, which more than any other reflected the processes of exclusion and alienation of the Arab contender, was the anthem incident. The national anthem of the state of Israel—*Hatikva* (The Hope)—is regularly played before national team games or, in rare cases, prior to national league matches. In lower league games, as in this case, there was no reason to play the anthem. It must be noted here that the Israeli anthem is fraught with distinctly Jewish national and religious motifs, making it impossible as such for non-Jewish Israeli citizens to identify with it. The anthem's exclusively Jewish content is a known fact, and the cause of considerable tension between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority (Jamal 2007). And indeed, while the anthem was played before the game, Abir decided not to honour it by standing up. This expressed her protest, and the insult she sustained by the very decision to artificially incorporate the anthem in the programme, turning the whole event into a national Jewish ceremony and showing a lack of sensitivity to her own position. It is possible, then, to view the production's decision to have the anthem played as an attempt to put the loyalty of a member of the Arab minority to the test, assuming she would 'fail'.

Abir's portrayal as 'traitor' was further augmented by the outraged response of other contenders and the judges who expressed their disappointment with her conduct, describing it as hurtful and inconsiderate of the basic values of *Israeliness*. At this point, the other contenders ceased to relate to Abir on the basis of her leadership skills, and adopted, instead, a set of criteria extraneous to the programme and related to the hegemonic relationship between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority. The focus on Abir's continued participation in the programme, with the state's national symbols in the background, exposed the structural and cultural conditioning that is clearly implied in the relationship between Abir and the majority group. Accepting her as an equal was conditional, demanding her own *a priori* acceptance of the majority's fundamental values, which proved to be neither nationally nor culturally neutral. Against this conditional acceptance, Abir gave voice to a basic human need when she said: 'I deserve to feel that I belong', by which she meant an egalitarian civic affiliation that would allow her to compete without any structural or political preconditions.

Seen in this light, Abir's eventual eviction did not result from the central criterion which the programme proclaimed to set forth, i.e. the contenders' leadership skills. Abir's disqualification stemmed from a hidden issue that was well-disguised but still lashed out at the right moment. She was disqualified as a result of her refusal to accept the dictates of the hegemonic discourse. This criterion never came up regarding the other participants. The contender who was a settler in the Occupied Territories was not questioned about the legitimacy of her presence there. The programme also aggrandised the military service of another contender, a veteran army officer. Since military experience was perceived as an honorary degree awarded for morality and patriotism *per se*, the contender was not asked about having possibly taken part in the military oppression of Palestinians. Comparing the treatment of the Arab contender, and her positioning within the programme's meta-narrative, with that of the others in the group, illuminates the discrepancy between them, in terms of her very acceptance as a legitimate player in a game that was not hers to play.

Moreover, the process of disqualifying and excluding the Arab contender underwent a sophisticated refinement phase designed to legitimise the move through the extraordinary cooptation of two Arab participants—a foil to accentuate the contrast. The invitation of Zuhair Bahalul and Mazen Ganayim—the first as the commentator for the football game and the second as a temporary member of the jury, reflected the programme's hidden dynamics of power and control. Both of these figures constitute an example of the 'normative' relationship between Jews and Arabs in Israel, as perceived by the Jewish majority. Both are regarded by dominant Israeli society as 'good Arabs': Bahalul is a popular sports commentator while Ganayim is the chairman of the Arab-Israeli football club of Sakhnin; both avoid challenging Jewish hegemony in public. Thus, they unquestioningly fulfilled the role assigned to them by the production team: Ganayim's affirmative response to the question whether he stands up for the anthem was predictable. The very posing of that question to Ganayim corroborates the claim that his presence served to highlight Abir's negative image as a 'bad Arab', thereby lending legitimacy to her eviction.

The inclusion of Bahalul and Ganayim was meant to intensify Abir's otherness, even among the Arab citizens of Israel. She was doubly contrasted with them: not only is she a woman while they are men, she also represented a feminist worldview while they stood for the macho world of football. Furthermore, she represented a group of Israeli Arabs with a far more enhanced national awareness and a greater readiness to rebel against the hegemonic powers. In contrast, Bahalul and Ganayim are representatives of a social segment that has striven for integration in Israeli society, even at the expense of recognition of their national difference. This contrast facilitated the Arab candidate's removal while toning down any national antagonism that surrounded the 'anthem event'. It follows that the presence of Arabs in Israeli television programmes does not always serve the benevolent goals of representing cultural diversity. The presence of Arabs in this instance was an integral part of the control mechanisms of the dominant national meta-narrative.¹

Wanted: An Ambassador . . . But S/He Must Be A *Sabra*

The Ambassador was designed in a format similar to *Wanted: A Leader*. The first season aired ten weekly episodes, based on collective and individual tasks dealing with the participants' future role as national spokesperson outside the borders of Israel. At the end of each episode the participants were asked to point to the least competent counterpart, but the final disqualification rested with the judges—three prominent representatives of Israeli hegemony. Like *Wanted: A Leader*, *The Ambassador* too was packaged in a neo-liberal guise clearly manifested in the locations chosen for the show (luxury hotels, golf resorts, private jets) as well as in the personal qualities of the contenders. These were presented as highly ambitious individuals endowed with the qualities and skills required for the prestigious role of 'ambassador'. Nevertheless, the contenders' starting points in 'the real world' are very different, and may be located on a continuum of social and cultural diversity, ranging from representatives of the Ashkenazi cultural and economic elite at one end, and two female immigrants—Maharata and Daphna—at the other end of the spectrum.

Maharata Baruch, a film actress by profession, is an Ethiopian Jew who immigrated to Israel at the age of 10, having made the long journey through Sudan on foot. Maharata's character represents the most successful integration of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel: her Hebrew is fluent and she is married to a native-born Israeli, a *Sabra*.² In visual terms, her look successfully combined her ethnic origin with Western dressing codes of classic tailored power-suits, as befits the future ambassador. Throughout the series, Maharata emphasised the Ethiopian Jews' journey through the Sudan to Israel, attempting to draw an analogy between their sufferings and the plight of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. By doing so, she sought to position that journey as part of Israeli collective memory.

Daphna Alfarsi, an MA student of Diplomacy, is the daughter of a Moroccan-born father and a Dutch mother, who immigrated to Israel from Holland in her twenties. Daphna has a distinct presence—a tall blond, somewhat distant and formal, emitting

a visibly European outlook. She admitted certain cultural differences between her and the rest of the group, but throughout the series she repeatedly stressed that she had immigrated to Israel because of her desire to be part of Israeli society, saying ‘There are differences of culture, there is a wall [between her and the native-born Israelis] . . . I’ve come to Israel not to be an outsider!’.

Despite the programme’s pluralistic façade, the interaction between the native-born contenders and Maharata and Daphna did not allow for representation of cultural diversity which would acknowledge the diverse layers of these contenders’ identities. As early on as the second episode it was already obvious that the programme’s meta-narrative constructed the two immigrants as cultural ‘Others’, neither born nor raised in Israel. Thus, the gap between the native-born contenders and the immigrants became the dominant theme to drive the unfolding plot. The leader of the ‘native camp’ was Yael Ben-Dov, a young female lawyer of Ashkenazi descent. She was presented in the programme as the ultimate *Sabra*—a direct, spontaneous and often blunt individual abounding with initiative and original thinking. Through the show, her *Sabra* image was enhanced and used as an antithesis of the two female immigrants, labelled as ‘not Israeli enough’ by the other contenders. That is, from the show’s inception, the rest of the contenders sought to highlight the cultural otherness of Maharata and Daphna, attributing to them ethnic stereotypes which excluded them from the Israeli collective. We illustrate these claims with the analysis of three central events in the course of the programme: ‘The Knowledge Quiz’, ‘Making the MTV Clip’, and ‘The Immigrants’ Revolt’.

We should note, first and foremost, that due to Maharata’s Ethiopian origin and black skin, her peers tended to attribute to her those qualities associated with the ‘Orient’: passivity and ignorance (Ghandi 1998; Saïd 1978). Their utterances also implied that these qualities were incompatible with the desired image of an ‘ambassador’—educated and ambitious—thereby disqualifying Maharata for this job. Such labelling culminated in ‘The Knowledge Quiz’, where contenders were required to pass a trivia test full of culturally biased questions drawing on knowledge ingrained in a long-standing, unmediated familiarity with the Israeli experience. The test presented the native Israelis as more knowledgeable, and they used it to enhance Maharata’s image as culturally inferior and alien.

Maharata, for her part, was aware of the fact that she belonged to a social group labelled as inferior in the Israeli public discourse. She therefore sought to offer an alternative interpretation of the negative traits attributed to her as an Ethiopian immigrant. She argued that Ethiopians are endowed with unique qualities, such as tolerance, honesty, warmth and genuineness that are misinterpreted by native Israelis. By emphasising these traits, Maharata implied her criticism of *Israeliness* that does not tolerate the ethnically and culturally different newcomers.

Similarly, ethnic stereotypes—albeit of a different nature—were employed against Daphna. Due to her European origin and appearance, Daphna was presented as diametrically opposed to Maharata. The characteristics attributed to her by other contenders were supposedly the positive qualities of a Western person—rationality,

self-control and restraint—but in her case they were presented in a negative light, in contrast with the spirit of *Israeliness*. Thus, when Daphna's team was asked to choose a representative to travel to London in order to present an Israeli propaganda clip to the management of *MTV* channel, Daphna was voted as the most appropriate delegate due to her familiarity with 'European mentality', as her colleagues put it. But when the clip failed, native-born contenders accused Daphna, blaming her 'Europeanness' and 'professionalism' (being a student of diplomacy) for her purely professional approach, rather than an emotional one—possible only when one is linked to Israel by birth. In addition, the argument highlighted the contrast between the features of the 'Israeli spirit', which the native contenders wished to appropriate—warmth, openness and informality—and the stereotypical traits attributed to the 'European' Daphna—coldness, remoteness and arrogance.

The judges, too, assumed an active role in defining normative Israeli identity by labelling and excluding the immigrants. An analysis of the discussions among the judges suggests that they were actively involved in the construction of Daphna's and Maharata's Otherness—Maharata as passive and Daphna as cold and aloof—thereby affirming the existence of the 'native-immigrant' divide in the programme's plot. Conversely, there was an obvious attempt by the judges to boost the *Sabra* image; in this vein, it was even said sympathetically to native-born Yael: 'There's an old image, but very accurate in your case, of the Israeli *Sabra*—prickly on the outside, but sweet-tasting and appealing inside'. Hence the judges, rather than being external to the discussion on cultural diversity in the show, are actually to be regarded as the agents of Israeli hegemony, capable of defining the collective's boundaries and determining who is excluded.

As a result of the labelling, exclusion and estrangement of Daphna and Maharata by contenders and judges alike, the two immigrant participants were pushed to join forces and to grow closer. This bonding between the two immigrants may be seen as a major strategy in their struggle for an alternative and more pluralistic Israeli identity, reaching its culmination during 'The Immigrants' Revolt' event. The basis for this event was the two contenders' realisation that they were both about to be evicted by the rest of the team. Therefore, when asked to suggest to the judges their own candidates for eviction, the two, in a bold and unprecedented move, opted to evict themselves, citing the following rationale:

After great deliberation we have arrived at two names. They do not seem to be particularly Israeli. Neither has an Israeli accent. They have odd, very unconventional ideas. They are not conformists and, above all, they are problematic, and very different from the rest of the group: Maharata and Daphna.

This event bears special significance because it reflects the connection between the two immigrants who drew power from each other, lending their statement a dimension of collective protest against their host society. Moreover, in their eviction letter, the two contenders used the stereotypes hurled at them in order to unmask the conservative nature of the 'native' group: they placed a mirror-of-sorts in front of the

contenders and the judges, reflecting their own intolerance of anyone daring to challenge the dictates of hegemonic *Israeliness*.

The judges, however, refused to accept this change in the script and the resulting breakdown of hierarchy of power embedded in the programme's meta-narrative. Therefore, in order to discourage the 'Immigrants' Revolt', the judges decided to invite each of them separately to a special hearing, in which they were supposed to defend themselves against eviction. That encounter was soon revealed to be a test of 'normative' *Israeliness*, whereby the contenders were asked to answer questions regarding the geography of the State of Israel, Israeli literature and popular culture. Moreover, the two were asked to bring a 'character witness' who would corroborate their suitability for the role of ambassador—a highly extraordinary request considering the fact that none of the other contenders were ever required to face the judges supported, or rather subordinated, by other figures. This requirement should therefore be regarded as an attempt to reinstate the power relationship between immigrants and hosts. The character witnesses were expected to come from the ranks of the hegemonic majority to the rescue of their immigrant *protégés*—in keeping with the traditional location of immigrants versus the native majority in the Israeli context.

During the hearing, Daphna continued to challenge the hegemonic definition of *Israeliness*, even when she realised that this would jeopardise her chances to remain in the show. First, she refused to bring a witness in her defence to attest to the degree of her 'proper' *Israeliness*. Furthermore, when she spotted the judges' attempt to test her compatibility with majority values, using questions such as 'Which Israeli writer do you like?'; 'What Israeli movie have you watched recently?'; 'Have you ever visited Kiriyat Shmona?',³ she refused to collaborate with the questioning, offering instead her Israeli identity card as an undeniable proof of her affiliation with the Israeli collective. Finding themselves actually criticised by Daphna for lacking tolerance, the judges reacted with impatience and hostility, clutching at the same negative stereotypes attributed to Daphna throughout the programme, such as aloofness, chilliness and arrogance. By the end of the hearing, the judges decided to evict the 'rebellious' contender, using the argument made by Yaakov Perry (former head of the Security Services), that an Israeli citizen 'must visit the Galilee and smell flowers in the Negev', thereby utterly rejecting the multicultural agenda that Daphna wished to promote.

Maharata was subjected to a similar test but, unlike Daphna, she chose to join the hegemonic group. That is, she readily cooperated with the judges and willingly answered their every question, emphasising her familiarity with Israel's landscapes and popular culture. As a result, in contrast with their weak position *vis-à-vis* Daphna's dissidence, in their encounter with Maharata the judges resumed their patronising attitude and were openly satisfied with her answers which were fully consistent with their own perception of the desired power relationship between immigrants and hosts.

Another indication of Maharata's conformity may be found in her consenting to bring a character witness as the judges' demanded. She chose to summon a counsellor from the boarding school she had attended during her first years in Israel. His image was the epitome of Israeli hegemonic characteristics, both in physical appearance (a native-born male of European origins) and in social standing (Doctor of Education). Similarly to the judges' patronising attitude towards her, the counsellor too emphasised Maharata's successful assimilation in Israel as a result of her rapid learning and internalisation of the local cultural codes. In this way, the counsellor positioned Maharata as a model of successful integration of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, necessarily relinquishing fundamental aspects of their particularistic identity. Maharata's willingness to accept the existing hierarchy in Israel between immigrants and hosts seemed to match the judges' own hegemonic conceptions, resulting in their decision to keep her on the show while evicting the subversive Daphna.

The analysis of the programme's meta-narrative, then, suggests that the representation of the immigrants was not grounded in an equal basis of mutual inclusion and recognition, because the hegemonic *Israeliness* promoted by the show did not leave room for their particularistic identities. As we have shown, when Daphna and Maharata tried to reject their stereotypical representation and put forth a more open and multicultural Israeli identity instead, the jury chose to emphasise their Otherness as newly arrived immigrants, thereby setting them apart from the native contenders who meet the definition of 'us'—hence deserving the title of ambassador.

Yet although the two contenders tried to exploit the openness of such shows to extend the boundaries of hegemonic identity, their attempts were thwarted by the hegemonic powers so distinctly embodied in the show's meta-narrative. Apparently, Israeli hegemony is not yet ready to expand the scope of its collective identity so as to include particular minority identities. Despite their totally different tactics during the hearing, each of the immigrant contenders highlighted how closed Israeli society remains towards its immigrants: Maharata managed to survive in the show by virtue of her surrender to the 'immigrants–hosts' hierarchy and her acceptance of dominant cultural values, while Daphna was disqualified for her very resistance to these values.⁴

Discussion and Conclusions

The media constitutes an interesting arena for examining the inter-relationship of majority and minority groups. It allows the tracing of inclusion and exclusion mechanisms of various minorities on the one hand, and the way in which minority groups seek to represent themselves in the mainstream media on the other. The reality-show format promises to be even more fruitful for such an examination, as these programmes purport to present 'non-mediated' reality, while rating considerations necessitate the intensification of drama by highlighting the prevailing social norms and worldviews.

And indeed, the relationships between Jews and Arabs and between immigrants and native residents are radicalised in both programmes chosen for this study. Exacerbation of tensions exposed the hegemonic worldviews in Israeli society, along with the way in which reality shows create dramatic illusions to serve their main objective, measured in financial terms. In this context it must be noted that, although these programmes were largely unscripted in advance, they were nevertheless edited according to the production's professional and cultural values. This fact, hidden from the audience, plays a major role in constructing the meta-narrative of such shows, furthering the cultivation of the dominant ideology.

Examination of both programmes reveals, on the one hand, the similarity between representations of majority and minority contenders—enabling the latter's alleged inclusion in the programme's meta-narrative—while on the other hand, it exposes the dominant majority's implicit fear of the minorities 'becoming one of us', a fear that eventually leads to their eviction. In both shows, mechanisms of imitation and differentiation, attraction and rejection are in operation throughout, reflecting the ambiguity of majority–minority relations in Israel. On the one hand, the Arab candidate is introduced as belonging to Israeli society. On the other hand, she is also an integral part of the 'Other camp'. As such, Abir is signified in various ways as representing an exotic, tempting 'Other', but at the same time unreliable and disloyal because she belongs to a national and religious minority.

The immigrant contenders in *The Ambassador* were also introduced both as belonging to Israeli society and as an exception to it. They were signified as representing the 'Other', who may be similar to the majority in their nationality, but ethnically and culturally different. However, unlike *Wanted: A Leader*, where the deconstruction of the programme's ideological codes clearly illustrates the complexity of the exclusion and estrangement of the national 'Other', here this deconstruction exposes the intra-national complexity and highlights the dominant national image of the Jewish majority. Hence, despite the guise of cultural diversity and ethno-cultural pluralism, both programmes set clear criteria for the meaning of *Israeliness* and apply them in excluding or including various participants.

The representation of the minority contenders in both shows reflects the ambiguity of power and the cunning of control mechanisms hidden behind the dominant attitudes towards the ethnic and cultural 'Other' in Israeli public discourse. The otherness of the Arab and immigrant contenders was tolerated as long as it was controlled. Namely, the attitude towards the 'Other' is that of aliens, tolerated as long as they meet the expectations of the dominant Jewish majority. Such expectations are rooted in the premises and values encoded in both shows. And so liberalism is presented as the core value of respecting the other and his or her particularistic identity (Jamal 2001). This value acknowledges the existence of universal moral values and ethics which disregard national and ethno-cultural disparity. The second value promoted in the shows is the recognition of 'civic patriotism', by which citizens are equally obliged to accept the symbols of the culture they inhabit, regardless of their formulation and relation to various groups. In the ethno-republican political

culture that characterises Israeli society, such patriotism constitutes a major inclusion/exclusion mechanism, sorting various citizen groups according to national, ethnic and cultural parameters (Peled 1992).

The presentation—common to both programmes—of Israeliness as universal makes three basic premises, implied in their meta-narrative. The first premise is that *Israeliness*, and not *Jewishness*, is the dominant identity in Israeli society. That identity is presented in the programmes as an all-embracing identity that should encompass and include all the citizens of the state, disregarding the inherent dominance of hegemonic Jewish identity. Although Jewish identity does constitute a key aspect of the conception of *Israeliness*, the programmes present the Jewish component as an open and liberal one. The second premise is that, since Israeliness is universal, its acceptance necessitates the acceptance of its symbols and codes of behaviour, however defined and controlled they are by the hegemonic elite. This premise eliminates the right of the Arab contender to participate in the definition of *Israeliness*, and jeopardises the right of the immigrant (albeit Jewish) contenders to expand its boundaries, a right to which all minority contenders repeatedly referred, each in her own way. The third premise is rooted in the very equation of *Israeliness* with multiculturalism, as if Israeli identity is indeed inclusive and actually contains all the diverse groups that comprise Israeli society. This premise rests on a thin liberal multicultural conception that does not allow genuine national or ethnic diversity even as it does, allegedly, allow different minorities to present themselves on their own cultural terms (Tamir 1998; Yona and Shenhav 2005).

Furthermore, the analysis of the social, political and cultural dynamics in both programmes exposes the power relations between majority and minority in Israeli society, suggesting that the reality-show genre is no different from other media genres in terms of constructing the otherness of certain social groups. Such analysis points to the way in which reality shows effectively encode an ideological meta-narrative that constructs a dominant national identity, promptly excluding anyone who does not accept its definitions. Despite the discourse of equality and fair competition that characterises the programmes, they both contain powerful inclusion/exclusion mechanisms working to boost the social image of a monolithic *Israeliness* at the expense of competing images. Furthermore, both programmes expose the cunning of cultural control manifested in the power vested in the judges—representing Israel's cultural elite—to dictate not only who wins the competition, but also what characterises normative Israeli identity, thereby turning the reality show into yet another tool of national and political socialisation.

The Israeli discourse of multiculturalism is thus exposed as inevitably limited, and its limitations are manifest in both shows. Moreover, although there are fundamental differences in the attitudes of Israeli society towards Arab citizens as opposed to Jewish immigrants, our analysis reveals a great similarity in the cultural mechanisms of exclusion embedded in the shows' meta-narrative. That is, both Jewish Daphna and Arab Abir were evicted from the competition because of their refusal to subordinate themselves to Israeli hegemony, while Maharata, Bahalul and Ganayim

have been included in normative *Israeliness* by virtue of their cooperation with the hegemonic powers.

In conclusion, both programmes aim to present an image of cultural diversity in Israeli commercial television, but this attempt is far from successful, because it remains subject to the power relations characterising the relationship between the majority and minority groups. Our findings suggest that the problem of minorities' representation is manifest not merely in the relative weight of Arab and immigrant presence on Israeli television. It is indeed a structural discrimination which cuts across Israeli media, and is not the only one. Representation does not mean the mere presence or absence of minority participants in television programmes. Representation means respecting diversity and translating it into effective impact upon the dominant cultural model within media discourse. Both programmes have indeed managed to partially overcome the obstacle of the minorities' presence on screen, but they have failed to translate the existence of structural disparity into cultural diversity.

We should emphasise that the minority contenders did not have to win the competition in order for the programmes to truthfully reflect cultural diversity in Israel. It would suffice had their particular identities been accepted as legitimate and equal to the others', and not seen as an insurmountable barrier to their chances of ever winning. The exclusion of Arabs and immigrants from the Israeli media is reflected in the nature of their participation, their placement, and their very ability to legitimately express their own values and attitudes. In both shows they are represented in a manner that constructs them as 'Others' and qualifies their integration as depending upon their full obedience to the dictates of the dominant majority. The images of equality and integration are thus revealed as a phantom designed to de-legitimise the struggle of minority groups for recognition—and become yet another means for the preservation of a clearly unequal reality.

Notes

- [1] Although the show as a whole did not gain any attention in the Israeli media, Abir's reluctance to stand in honour of the national anthem did not go unseen by the main online and print newspapers. The main framing chosen for the coverage corresponded with the interpretation given to this act in the show—as the Israeli Arabs' disloyalty to the major national symbols.
- [2] *Sabra*—literally a 'prickly pear'—is the common nickname for the native-born Jewish Israeli.
- [3] A northern town on the border with Lebanon.
- [4] Although Maharata did manage to reach the final stage, the title of Ambassador was awarded to another contender—a native-born male contender of European origin—whose selection reinforces once again the cultural dominance of the Israeli veteran elite. We should also mention that the final episode of the show was the only one that drew some attention (even if very modest) in the Israeli press and online media. All items emphasised the role of Maharata in the show as one who contributed to the multicultural outlook of Israeli society, whereas the internal tensions between the immigrant and the native-born contestants were completely overlooked.

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