Perceptions of social strategies in intercultural relations: The case of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel

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ABSTRACT

Social strategies are a central component of intercultural competence, and are vital in understanding, theoretically and practically, the immigration and acculturation process. This study focused on an immigrant group experiencing identity threat, namely young Ethiopians in Israel, and examined their perceptions of social strategies in intergroup relations. Thematic analysis was performed on two types of qualitative data: (1) newspaper articles in which members of the Ethiopian community addressed aspects of their social strategies (31 reports collected from seven newspapers and magazines) and (2) data from two focus groups conducted afterwards with young adult members of the Ethiopian community (five to seven participants in each group). A major pattern emerging from the immigrants' reports is the adoption of the hosts' perspective and attitudes regarding the effective norms of social behavior. In their daily coping, on the other hand, the immigrant youth tended to exhibit a complex and at times ambivalent variety of behavioral patterns in their social interactions with members of the host culture. This spectrum of social strategies suggests dynamic processes of trial and error and reflects the unique complexity of intercultural competence. Findings were analyzed in terms of the immigrants' perception of the threat to their identity and of their ways of coping with those threats.

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I act out of the evil that hurt me. I have a lot of anger in me; those who have adapted and are better off are those who fought each and every battle. You must know how to stand up for yourself like a lioness protects her cubs. You don't have to be liked by everyone.

Personal conversation with a young girl of Ethiopian origin

1. Introduction

Social strategies, defined as "coherent collections of actions which have a reasoned chance of improving results" (Brunson, 2013), play a central role in intercultural transitions (e.g., Chen, 1992; Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). These strategies can be seen as part of a broader construct of intercultural competence, which refers to the scope of knowledge, attitudes, and skills people bring to intercultural encounters, and to their ability to explain, evaluate, and negotiate

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the viewpoints and practices of their own and other cultures (Byram, 1997; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012). In a similar vein, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) defined intercultural competence as "The appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world" (p.7). They pointed to the limited research on the communication that takes place in intergroup relations, and particularly to the ways in which people manage the intercultural interactions. Our research is thus set to examine the immigrant perceptions of the interaction management, primarily of their social strategies in intercultural relations.

We chose to examine this among Ethiopian immigrants in Israel because they are regarded as a group experiencing threat to their identity (Shabtay, 2001); thus, the challenges they face with respect to intercultural relations are particularly consequential. Ethiopian Jews, most of whom immigrated to the State of Israel in two waves (1984–5 and 1991) under the "Law of Return", which grants citizenship to groups of Jewish origin, moved from patriarchal, traditional, and rural societies to a modern society. The differences between the two cultures are evident in many areas including community, leadership, external appearance, education, occupation, and social codes (Ben-Ezer, 1992). Threat to identity can occur when the social status of an immigrant group is markedly low or when members of the group feel unwanted or even rejected. This perception of threat can be detrimental to self-esteem, self-efficacy and identification with the receiving society (Schwartz, Vignoles, Brown, & Zagefka, 2014). Shabtay (2001) concludes from a series of studies carried out in Israel that Ethiopian youth have to a significant degree internalized negative messages from their environment and abandoned their efforts to cope with and belong to Israeli society.

Indeed, most of the findings on Israelis of Ethiopian origin—about 120,000 people constituting 1.7% of the Israeli population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012)—point to a dangerous trend. For example, the incidence of poverty among Ethiopians is the highest in Israel, and affects 51.7% of families, according to the Bank of Israel report (*Globes*, 4 April 2007). A study based on telephone interviews with 680 immigrant youth in Israel comparing immigrants from different countries of origin (Kahan-Strawczynski, Levi, & Konstantinov, 2010) notes that Ethiopian youth experience greater feelings of alienation toward school than young immigrants from other countries. Ethiopian youth also show a much lower sense of personal security in at least one of their life domains (school, neighborhood, and town), and academically, they constitute the highest proportion of immigrant adolescents who failed in three or more subjects. These patterns were found to be unrelated to the number of years Ethiopian immigrants have been in the country. In addition, among immigrant youth reported two or more types of at-risk behavior (e.g. absence from school, criminal behavior), more than half are Ethiopian. By 2005, the number of criminal files for minors of Ethiopian origin was nearly twice that of youth in general (*The Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews*, 27 July 2007).

With respect to professional status and aspirations, a 1997 study using in-depth interviews showed that Ethiopian youth assumed that very little was expected from them by their superiors (on a professional level) and that they are seen as not taking an active part in social life, despite their efforts. This tends to lead to a vicious circle of emotions, which they see as resulting from their skin color, and the external reactions from the larger society, and this pattern affects other areas of their lives, leading them to despair and hopelessness (Ben-David & Ben-Ari, 1997). More recently, young Ethiopian immigrants reported being labeled through categories of stigmatization (Ben-Eliezer, 2008), and many reported feeling that racist attitudes were directed toward them (Walsh & Tuval-Mashiach, 2012). It seems, then, that following their transition to a new country, Ethiopian immigrants' social strategies are continuously challenged, and they are required to constantly reinforce and define them anew.

Shelton, Richeson, and Vorauer (2006) indicate that one of the main factors contributing to individuals' preoccupation with their cultural label is the salience of their social identity. This salience is high in interethnic interactions, giving rise to two concerns on the part of these individuals: that the out-group member may view them in a stereotypical manner and that their behavior will confirm stereotypes about their group. In such situations, the authors explain, these individuals can be understood "to be operating in terms of both their personal and social identity, focusing on how they personally are being seen through the lens of their group membership" (p. 324).

The ways in which people will react to threat to their identities depend, among others, on the extent to which the individual feels committed to his or her group; those strongly identifying with the group will tend to react defensively by derogation of the out-group (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). Another possible response, particularly in those situations where the individual is not able to promote her or himself on an individual basis, would be to engage in a reconstruction of their identity in creative ways, so that the group will be perceived less negatively (Schwartz et al., 2014). This raises the question on the ways in which these reactions are turned in practice into social strategies for the management of intercultural interactions.

One of the few studies examining the social strategies that characterize Ethiopian immigrants in their interaction with members of the non-immigrant population found that immigrant adolescents from Ethiopia have a low level of assertiveness compared to their non-immigrant peers (Korem, Horenczyk, & Tatar, 2012). In addition, they show a relatively high level of passivity in comparison to both non-immigrants as well as immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Similarly, a study conducted among middle school students (Ringel, Ronell, & Getahune, 2005) observed that Ethiopians seemed shy and spoke in a gentler manner compared to their peers in the non-immigrant group. It must be stated that these expressions of passive strategies are not necessarily a product of traditional rudiments but also can be the expression of a dynamic system in which immigrants employ such strategies to avoid direct conflict with those who hold the power (Kaplan, 1998). These findings and their two possible explanations highlight the need to better understand the different aspects of immigrants'