

How Young Immigrants from Ethiopia Perceive their Socio-Cultural Adaptation in Israel

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Abstract

The study rests on the premise that understanding immigrants' adaptation must take into account the perspective of the immigrants themselves. We focus on young Israeli immigrants from Ethiopia, a unique minority in Israeli society due to its special cultural and ethnic characteristics. Previous studies found that social coping strategies are especially important for immigrants and Ethiopian immigrant youth are typically less assertive than their nonimmigrant counterparts. By eliciting and analyzing these immigrants' perspectives on their own socio-cultural adaptation, this study aims to broaden our understanding of this group's experience.

Our investigation adopted a qualitative multi-method approach. Two studies were conducted. The aim of the first was to identify major themes in these young immigrants' socio-cultural adaptation; its methodology was adapted to the characteristics of the research population. Traditional Ethiopian culture deems the disclosure of feelings or thoughts in direct communication unacceptable. Therefore, we collected our data indirectly, through newspaper articles (thirty-one reports from seven newspapers and magazines) in which Ethiopian-Israelis addressed aspects of their socio-cultural adaptation without being asked direct questions. Content analysis identified the major themes.

The aim of the second study was to deepen the understanding of the identified themes (derived from study 1) and to examine their facets. To do this, data obtained from two focus groups composed of young adult members of the Ethiopian-Israeli community (5–7 participants in each group) were subjected to a content analysis. The questions posed in the group discussions included the following: Who was considered a sociable person in Ethiopia? What do they advise young immigrants in order to become socially integrated in the Israeli society? Do the respondents behave similarly toward

nonimmigrants and toward fellow immigrants, or do they behave differently? How do nonimmigrants react to them when they act assertively? Do they recommend their peers to act assertively? Do they seek ways to express the uniqueness of the social values of their original culture in their interactions with nonimmigrants and, if so, in which ways?

The findings revealed ambivalence among young immigrants in their perceptions of their original culture's social values. They highly appreciate these values but perceive these codes as no longer useful for them in their new social context. Although the major message that emerged from the findings was to act actively and assertively towards members of the host society, doing this in real-life situations is quite complicated.

In practice, the young immigrants tended to exhibit a variety of social behavior patterns in their interactions with their hosts: emphasizing commonalities, emphasizing differences, or switching among patterns of social behavior according to the cultural or social context of the interaction. Another strategy discussed—and adopted by some respondents—is the articulation of the unique positive aspects of their original cultural values in the course of their interaction with nonimmigrant peers. To sum up, the wide spectrum of social behaviors that emerged from the two components of this research suggested that young Ethiopian immigrants engage in dynamic processes of trial and error. The study also showed the unique complexity of the socio-cultural adaptation of this immigrant group.

Practical implications can be derived from the methodology and the findings of our research. First, the results reveal a variety of social behavior patterns as described by the young immigrants themselves. Sharing them with other young immigrants (including some from other cultural backgrounds) may enrich their repertoire of social strategies. In addition, most respondents described their participation in the focus groups as a highly valuable experience because it helped them to organize their thoughts and feelings about their social adaptation. If similar discussion groups are established for other young immigrants, they, too, may become more aware

of their socio-cultural perceptions and actions. If immigrants can choose more deliberately among a variety of coping strategies, they may make less use of defensive strategies of cultural isolation by preserving elements of their original culture. A more conscious choice may also reduce immigrants' tendency to assimilate into the majority culture by relinquishing all their traditional socio-cultural characteristics.