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Language and identity in the school adjustment of immigrant students in Israel

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Migration, Identität, Sprache und Bildungserfolg

Herausgegeben von

Cristina Allemann-Ghionda, Petra Stanat, Kerstin Göbel
und Charlotte Röhner

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Gabriel Horenczyk

Language and Identity in the School Adjustment of Immigrant Students in Israel

1. Introduction

During the last decades, numerous studies within the various branches of psychology, sociology, and education have focused on factors that may contribute to the adaptation of immigrants and members of minority groups. In the areas of social and cross-cultural psychology, Ward (1996; Ward/Kennedy 1993) proposed a useful distinction between psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. Broadly speaking, psychological adaptation refers to emotional well-being and a sense of satisfaction, while socio-cultural adaptation is concerned with the acquisition of the culturally appropriate skills needed to negotiate or fit into a specific social or cultural milieu.

For most children and adolescents, the major setting for socio-cultural adaptation is that of the school, and school adjustment is undoubtedly their central acculturative task. Newcomers tend to see schools as major entry gates to the new society (Gibson 1991). In addition, the school setting generally introduces the immigrant to the norms, values, and expectations of the host society (Vedder/Horenczyk 2006). The school is also the main arena of intergroup contact – a space for mutual acquaintance, for establishment of friendships, but also quite often for intergroup friction (Horenczyk/Tatar 1998). The prominence of school in the lives of immigrant youngsters calls thus for an examination of the factors promoting school adaptation and those hindering it. Our study will focus primarily on two of these factors: language skills (in both majority and ethnic languages) and cultural identity (national and ethnic).

Skills in the new majority language are relevant to the performance of daily tasks and are important in creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships across cultures. Majority language fluency has been found to be positively related to socio-cultural adjustment (see: Masgoret/Ward 2006). Minority language is also likely to serve valuable communicational and educational functions; good ethnic language proficiency, for example, may allow parents or siblings to better support a child's school learning (Extra/Yağmur 2006). Minority language maintenance can also contribute to the student's social adjustment via its effect on his or her ethnic identity. Therefore, it seems important to optimally capitalize on the cognitive, linguistic and emotional resources that come with the students' proficiency in their first or ethnic language (Vedder/Horenczyk/Liebkind 2006).

Cultural identity refers to an individual's sense of self in terms of membership in a cultural group (Horenczyk 2008; Liebkind 2001). The term is used in a rather generic way to include the two group identities relevant to the immigrant individual – namely the „former“ identity, often transformed into an „ethnic“ identity, and the new „natio-

nal“ identity. The relationship between the two cultural identities among immigrants has been debated for decades, and the uni-dimensional view according to which the two identities are necessarily negatively correlated has been largely replaced by a bi-dimensional model suggesting that they are conceptually independent and may be positively or negatively correlated or uncorrelated (Phinney/Ong 2007). Numerous studies have examined the separate and joint contribution of the two cultural identities to psychological and socio-cultural adjustment among immigrants (for a review, see: Liebkind 2006).

Another acculturative factor that has been found to play an important role in the adaptation of immigrant students is the level of discrimination toward them and toward their ethnic group (see, for example, Liebkind/Jasinskaja Lahti/Solheim 2004). Research has shown that perceptions of discrimination vary across acculturating groups and individuals, and that they are related to positive ethnic – and negative national – identity (Ward/Leong 2006). Perceived discrimination has been associated with a variety of negative outcomes, such as low self-esteem, increased stress, and antisocial behavior (Ward/Bochner/Furnham 2001).

Our investigation is grounded in a contextual approach to immigrant acculturation and adaptation (Phinney et al. 2001). This perspective places emphasis on the systematic analysis of the contextual factors affecting the adjustment of immigrants and members of minority groups, and moderating the effects of various types of predictors on psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. These contextual factors are assumed to be perceived, experienced, and interpreted differently by distinct acculturating subgroups within the larger society. One major contextual factor likely to be relevant to the acculturation and adaptation of young immigrants is the acculturative policy implemented in a society in general, and in its educational system in particular (Bourhis/Dayan 2004; Bourhis et al. 1997). In this study, we wish to apply the contextual approach to the examination of a specific acculturative context, that of the Israeli society and its educational system, and to explore commonalities and differences among two distinct immigrant sub-groups – newcomers from the former Soviet Union and from Ethiopia – in their language and identity patterns and in the relationship between these factors and school adjustment.

The Israeli assimilationist policies toward its Jewish immigrants have been widely documented (e.g., Horowitz/Leshem 1998). This is explicit in the very name given to the Ministry in charge of immigration („Ministry of Immigration Absorption“). However, assimilationist pressures and rhetoric are gradually weakening and giving way to more multiculturalist norms and policies. This process of „pluralization“ seems, however, to be much slower and complex within the educational system. Horenczyk and Tatar (2002) found that Israeli teachers endorsed pluralistic attitudes when referring to the integration of FSU immigrants into the general society, but assimilationist attitudes were more predominant when related to the approach toward immigrants in educational contexts. The teachers seem to view education as the primary means for transforming the immigrant into an „Israeli“, and they see the school as the most appropriate setting for attaining this goal. In a study conducted among Israeli educational counselors, Tatar (1998) classified three quarters of his respondents as „assimilationist“ and the remaining one-quarter as

„cultural pluralist“. Eisikovitz (2008) has documented the clash between the national-building orientation of the Israeli teacher and the largely transnational attitude of the immigrant student.

Horowitz (1999) argued that the educational policies toward immigrants from the former Soviet Union are guided, although not explicitly, by the principle that “new immigrants should be absorbed according to the assimilationist model, on one hand, and the ethnic additive model, on the other” (p. 35). In other words, education should strive to “absorb” the new immigrants into the mainstream of Israeli society, while allowing for the expression of traditions brought with them from their countries of origin. This ideological position clearly departs from the previous pure assimilationist approach by incorporating elements of cultural recognition into the educational discourse.

In this study we seek to show how this acculturative context is differentially reflected in the patterns of language and cultural identity – and in the prediction of socio-cultural adjustment – among newcomers from the former Soviet Union and from Ethiopia. The two immigrant groups are markedly different in terms of size and acculturation patterns. Immigrants who arrived from the former Soviet Union (FSU) since 1989 constitute approximately 15% of the Israeli population. The acculturative orientation of this group is a hotly debated issue, both in the academic and public spheres. It has been suggested (Horowitz/Leshem 1998) that this group is neither assimilating into the host society nor distancing itself from it. Rather, these newcomers seem to fit an „integration“ model (Berry 1990): They are engaged in the creation of a new community within a changing Israeli society, strengthening its pluralization processes.

Almost the entire Jewish Ethiopian population emigrated to Israel in two waves: „Operation Moses“ (1984–5) and „Operation Solomon“ (1991). Relative to the total Israeli population, the Ethiopian newcomers and their offspring constitute a small immigrant group: less than 75,000 people, they make up 5% of the total number of immigrants who settled in the country during the 1980s and 1990s. Ethiopian immigrants, however, exhibit unique patterns of acculturation due to their traumatic geographical and cultural transition as well as to their distinctive characteristics (Horenczyk/Ben-Shalom 2006).

The current study examines questions of language, identity, and adaptation within a specific educational acculturative context – the Israeli school setting – seen as combining assimilationist and pluralistic features. It addresses the following questions:

- What are the commonalities and differences among the two immigrant groups in their patterns of language skills (proficiency and use in both their majority and ethnic languages) and cultural identities (ethnic and national)?
- How do language skills and cultural identities predict socio-cultural adjustment (in terms of school adaptation and behavioral problems) among students from these two immigrants groups? It is expected that the minor pluralistic features of the Israeli acculturative context will provide some adaptational value to ethnic identity and language skills, but that within the predominantly assimilative context characterizing Israeli society and its educational system, national identity and language skills will emerge as strong predictors of adaptation.

To what extent does discrimination (as perceived by the immigrant student) contribute to the prediction of socio-cultural adjustment, beyond the contribution of the cultural identities? We propose that the negative effects of perceived discrimination on adaptation can not be attributed solely to the relationship between perceived discrimination and the cultural identities, and we thus expect a unique contribution of perceived discrimination to the prediction of immigrant adaptation.

2. Method

2.1 Respondents

This study is based on the Israeli data collected within the framework of the ICSEY international project¹. The Israeli sample consisted of 327 adolescents between the ages of 14 and 20 (median age: 16 years); 40% of them boys and 60% girls. Respondents were sampled from two immigrant groups: 65% (N = 215) were newcomers from the Former Soviet Union and 35% (N = 112) were immigrants from Ethiopia. All of them were high-school students attending schools from various geographical areas. Length of stay in Israel ranged from a few months to 18 years (median: 6 years); no marked differences were found between the two immigrant groups in their length of stay in the new country (FSU immigrants: Mean = 5.67; SD = 2.88; Ethiopian immigrants: Mean = 6.42; SD = 3.14).

2.2 Questionnaires

The participants completed an anonymous questionnaire, in Hebrew, consisting of various sections, of which four are relevant to the questions examined in this paper.

Language skills

We assessed self-reported language use and proficiency in both ethnic and majority languages. Language use was measured by means of two items for each language: „I speak [ethnic/majority language] with my parents“ and „I speak [ethnic/majority language] with my brothers and sisters“. Response scales ranged from 1 („not at all“) to 5 („all the time“). Language proficiency was measured using four items for each language: „How well do you understand [ethnic/majority language]; speak [ethnic/majority language];

1 The International Comparative Study of Ethno cultural Youth (the ICSEY Project) was carried out in a number of immigrant-receiving countries. Members of the project, in alphabetical order by country, are C. Fan, R. Pe-Pua, & D. Sang (Australia), J. Berry & K. Kwak (Canada), K. Liebkind (Finland), C. Sabatier (France), P. Schmitz (Germany), G. Horenczyk (Israel), P. Vedder & F. van de Vijver (Netherlands), David L. Sam (Norway), F. Neto (Portugal), E. Virta & C. Westin (Sweden), J. Phinney (USA). The Israeli study was conducted with the support of the NCJW Research Institute for Innovation in Education.

read [ethnic/majority language]; write [ethnic/majority language]“. Response scales ranged from 1 („not at all“) to 5 („very well“). Scores for each of the two language skills (use and proficiency) in the two languages (ethnic and majority) were computed as the means of the responses to the items included in the respective scales.

Cultural identities

Ethnic identity was measured with four items assessing ethnic affirmation (e.g., sense of belonging, positive feelings) based on the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney 1992; Phinney/Ong 2007); for example, „I am happy to be of Russian origin.“ National (Israeli) identity was measured with four parallel items (based on Phinney/Devich-Navarro 1997), worded with reference to majority identity (e.g., „I am happy that I am Israeli.“). Respondents were asked to indicate their extent of agreement with each statement on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (“totally disagree”) to 5 (“definitively agree”). Scores for each of the two identities were computed as the means of the responses to the items included in the respective scales. Internal consistencies of the two measures were satisfactory (ethnic identity: $\alpha = 0.65$; majority identity: $\alpha = 0.76$).

Socio-cultural adjustment

Socio-cultural adjustment was measured using scales for school adaptation and behavioral problems. School adaptation was assessed by means seven items, each on a 5-point agreement response scale; a sample item: „I feel uneasy about going to school in the morning.“ The ten-item scale of behavioral problems is an adaptation of the anti-social behavior scale developed by Olweus (1994; Bendixen/Olweus 1999). A five-point response category ranging from „never“ to „several times in the course of a 12 month period“ was used. Two sample items: „cursed at a teacher“, and „purposely destroyed seats in a bus or a movie theatre.“ Internal consistencies of the two scales were high (School adaptation: $\alpha = 0.69$; Behavior problems: $\alpha = 0.80$).

Perceived discrimination

This section consisted of nine items. Four of them assessed the respondents' perceived frequency of being recently treated unfairly or negatively because of their immigrant background by their peers at school, teachers and other adults, and by children or adolescents outside school; response options ranged from 1 („never“) to 5 („very often“). The other five items assessed their experiences of being teased, threatened or made to feel unaccepted because of their immigrant background (e.g., I feel that veteran Israelis don't like me“); this was done on Likert-type scales, with response options ranging from 1 („strongly disagree“) to 5 („strongly agree“). Scores of perceived discrimination were computed as means of the responses to the items included in this section. Internal consistency of the scale was high ($\alpha = 0.81$).

2.3 Procedure

Questionnaires were administered in class to the students by research assistants, with the teacher present. The assistants helped clarify language issues when needed. Participants were told that the study deals with the lives of new immigrants, and that participation is voluntary. 23 respondents failed to answer to central questions and were excluded from the study. Confidentiality was assured. Completion of the questionnaire lasted for about 30 minutes.

3. Results

We will first examine patterns of ethnic and majority language proficiency and use, and differences between the two cultural groups in these patterns. Language skills will be then used to predict socio-cultural adjustment among the adolescent immigrants. Analyses related to ethnic and majority identities will follow a similar sequence: We will first examine group differences in the cultural identity patterns and then evaluate the extent to which ethnic and national identities contribute to the prediction of socio-cultural adjustment. Finally, the unique contribution of perceived discrimination to the prediction of adaptation will be examined.

3.1 Language

Table 1 depicts the means and standard deviations of the reported usage and proficiency of ethnic and majority language in the two immigrant groups. A 2 (language: ethnic vs. majority) X 2 (linguistic skill: use vs. proficiency) X 2 (cultural group: FSU vs. Ethiopian immigrants) mixed-design MANOVA was performed; the first two variables are within-subjects factors and the third is a between-subjects variable. The three-way interaction was found significant ($F[1,249] = 11.166, p = .001$) suggesting that the patterns of ethnic and majority language skills are different for the Ethiopian and FSU immigrants. We therefore proceeded to examine these patterns for each cultural group separately.

Within-subjects MANOVAs revealed significant main effects for language (ethnic vs. majority) and for linguistic skills (proficiency vs. use) in each of the two cultural groups (FSU immigrants, language: $F[1,153] = 198.05, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.56$; FSU immigrants, linguistic skills: $F[1,153] = 708.98, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.62$; Ethiopian immigrants, language: $F[1,96] = 194.48, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.67$; Ethiopian immigrants, linguistic skills: $F[1,96] = 214.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.69$). The interaction between the two factors was also found significant in the two groups (FSU immigrants: $F[1,153] = 130.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.46$; Ethiopian immigrants: $F[1,96] = 130.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .0.30$). However, a close look at the group patterns of language proficiency and use in the two languages showed that they differ markedly. In order to interpret the significant interactions in each group, we computed two difference scores comparing the competences in the two languages – one for proficiency and one for use.

Group	Ethnic Language		Majority Language	
	Use	Proficiency	Use	Proficiency
FSU immigrants	4.21 (0.92)	4.65 (0.56)	2.11 (0.92)	3.97 (0.94)
N =	161	208	157	209
Ethiopian immigrants	2.68 (0.87)	2.99 (0.96)	3.71 (0.78)	4.84 (0.30)
N =	106	112	99	112

Tab. 1: Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) of ethnic and majority language use and proficiency by immigrant group

As to the Russian-speaking adolescents, results show that they score higher on ethnic as compared to national language with regards to language proficiency ($t[206] = 8.15, p < .001$) as well as language use ($t[154] = 15.62, p < .001$). The differences between the two languages, however, were significantly larger with regards to language use as compared to language proficiency (paired samples *t*-test between the use and proficiency language difference scores: $t[153] = 11.43, p < .001$). The pattern emerging from the findings obtained among the Ethiopian immigrants is almost the opposite one: They score lower on ethnic as compared to national language with regards both to language proficiency ($t[111] = -19.49, p < .001$) and to language use ($t[96] = -7.27, p < .001$). The differences in competency between the two languages among the Ethiopian immigrants were significantly lower with regards to language use as compared to language competency (paired samples *t*-test between the difference scores: $t[153] = 96, p < .001$).

To what extent do ethnic and majority language skills predict socio-cultural adjustment? Due to the marked differences between the groups in their language patterns, we conducted regression analyses for each immigrant group separately. Since we included two measures for socio-cultural adjustment in this study, two analyses were performed for each group – one predicting school adaptation and the other predicting behavioral problems. Following the formulation of our research questions, in each of the hierarchical regression analyses the two language skills in ethnic language were entered in the first block, and the two majority language skills were added in the second step.

The results were similar for the two groups. As to school adaptation (see Table 2), ethnic language skills did not contribute to its prediction (FSU immigrants: $R = .143, R^2 = 0.20, F[2,149] = 1.55, n.s.$; Ethiopian immigrants: $R = .208, R^2 = 0.43, F[2,94] = 2.13, n.s.$), but majority language skills did add a unique significant positive contribution to the prediction of school adaptation (FSU immigrants: $\Delta R^2 = 0.13, \Delta F [2,147] = 10.92, p < .001$; Ethiopian immigrants: $\Delta R^2 = 0.11, \Delta F [2,92] = 3.22, p = 0.045$). The prediction of behavior problems on the basis of language skills is considerably weaker. Ethnic language skills did not contribute to their prediction in neither of the two groups (FSU immigrants: $R = .070, R^2 = 0.005, F[2,149] = 0.37, n.s.$; Ethiopian immigrants: $R = .128, R^2 = 0.016, F[2,91] = 0.762, n.s.$); majority language skills added a significant, positive

but weak, contribution to the prediction of behavior patterns among the immigrants from the FSU ($\Delta R^2 = 0.048$, $\Delta F [2,147] = 3.74$, $p = 0.026$), but not among the Ethiopian immigrants ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01$, $\Delta F [2,89] = 0.436$, n.s.).

Variable	B	Beta	R ²	Adj. R ²	ΔR^2	ΔF
School Adaptation: FSU Immigrants						
Step 1: Ethnic language skills			.020	.007	.020	1.55
Language use	-.013	-.022				
Language proficiency	.153	.148				
Step 2: Majority language skills			.147	.124	.127	10.92**
Language use	.254	.407**				
Language proficiency	.097	.150				
School Adaptation: Ethiopian Immigrants						
Step 1: Ethnic language skills			.043	.023	.043	2.13
Language use	.134	.208				
Language proficiency	.085	.140				
Step 2: Majority language skills			.106	.067	.063	3.22*
Language use	.095	.135				
Language proficiency	.372	.204				
Behavior problems: FSU Immigrants						
Step 1: Ethnic language skills			.005	.000	.005	.370
Language use	-.117	-.161				
Language proficiency	-.088	-.073				
Step 2: Majority language skills			.053	.027	.048	3.74*
Language use	-.071	-.098				
Language proficiency	-.153	-.203*				
Behavior Problems: Ethiopian Immigrants						
Step 1: Ethnic language skills			.016	.000	.016	.76
Language use	-.168	-.226				
Language proficiency	.044	.064				
Step 2: Majority language skills			.026	.000	.010	.436
Language use	-.108	-.137				
Language proficiency	-.086	.042				

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Tab. 2: Hierarchical Regression for School Adaptation and Behavior Problems predicted by Language Skills, by Group

3.2 Identity and Perceived Discrimination

A 2 (identity: ethnic vs. national) X 2 (group: FSU vs. Ethiopian immigrants) mixed-design MANOVA showed significant main effects of identity ($F[1,306] = 87.045, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.221$) and immigrant group ($F[1,306] = 117.992, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.278$), but no interaction between the two factors ($F[1,306] = 0.362, n.s.$). As shown in Table 3, ethnic identity emerged stronger as compared to national identity in both immigrant groups, and scores on both identities were higher among the Ethiopian immigrants than among the newcomers from the FSU. As to perceived discrimination, similar levels were reported by respondents from both cultural groups (among newcomers from the FSU, Mean = 2.477, SD = 0.673, and among Ethiopian immigrants, Mean = 2.618, SD = .678).

Group	Identity	
	Ethnic	National
FSU immigrants	3.92 (0.77)	3.23 (1.11)
N =	201	202
Ethiopian immigrants	4.68 (0.43)	3.88 (0.79)
N =	111	108

Tab. 3: Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) of ethnic and majority identities by immigrant group

Two hierarchical regression analyses were first conducted in order to examine the extent to which the two identities contribute to the prediction of socio-cultural adjustment (see Table 4). School adaptation was predicted by ethnic identity ($R = .123, R^2 = 0.15, F[1,295] = 4.528, p = .034$); majority national identity made an additional – and stronger – contribution to the prediction ($\Delta R^2 = 0.09, \Delta F [1,294] = 28.71, p < .001$). Both identities were positively correlated with school adaptation. But the Beta coefficient for national identity was markedly higher ($\beta = .296, t = 5.358, p < .001$) than the one for ethnic identity ($\beta = .132, t = 2.392, p = .017$). Behavioral problems were not significantly predicted by ethnic identity ($R = .055, R^2 = 0.003, F[1,293] = 0.894, n.s.$), but national identity made a unique positive – although marginal – contribution to their prediction ($\Delta R^2 = 0.016, \Delta F [1,292] = 4.744, p = 0.030$).

Lastly, we examined the contribution of perceived discrimination to the prediction of socio-cultural adaptation (see Table 5). Since perceived discrimination was found to be related to ethnic and national identity (e.g., Alvarez/Juang/Liang 2006)², it was entered

2 In this study, perceived discrimination was positively correlated with ethnic identity ($R = 0.143, p = 0.11$) and negatively with national identity ($R = -0.208, p < 0.001$)

in the hierarchical regression analyses in the third step – after ethnic identity and national identity – so as to assess its unique contribution to the prediction of adjustment. Our findings show a significant contribution of perceived discrimination to the prediction of school adaptation ($\Delta R^2 = 0.049$, $\Delta F [1,293] = 16.934$, $p < .001$), in the expected negative direction, but not to the prediction of behavioral problems ($\Delta R^2 = 0.002$, $\Delta F [1,291] = 0.494$, n.s.).

Variable	B	Beta	R ²	Adj. R ²	ΔR^2	ΔF
Predicted: School Adaptation						
Step 1: Ethnic identity	.122	.162*	.015	.012	.015	4.53*
Step 2: Majority identity	.137	.250**	.103	.097	.088	28.71**
Step 3: Perceived discrimination	-.193	-.228**	.152	.143	.049	16.93**
Predicted: Behavior Problems						
Step 1: Ethnic identity	-.057	-.065	.003	.000	.003	.894
Step 2: Majority identity	-.074	-.117*	.019	.012	.016	4.74*
Step 3: Perceived discrimination	.042	.042	.021	.011	.002	.494

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Tab. 4: Hierarchical Regression for School Adaptation and Behavior Problems predicted by Ethnic and National Identities and Perceived Discrimination

4. Discussion

In this study we examined patterns of language skills, cultural identity, perceived discrimination and their role in the prediction of socio-cultural adaptation among immigrant students in Israel. Grounded in a contextual approach, this research can be seen as a „case study“ – an investigation of differential patterns among members of two markedly different cultural groups (newcomers from the FSU and from Ethiopia) within a specific acculturative context characterized by an assimilative orientation with some increasing pluralistic trends. Findings from the study show a considerable „fit“ between this acculturative context and the patterns observed among the immigrant students; they also reveal interesting commonalities and differences among the two immigrant groups.

4.1 Language

Marked differences emerged in the language patterns of the two immigrant groups. Russian-speaking immigrants reported higher skills in their ethnic language as compared to the majority language, and the opposite trend was obtained among the Ethiopian immi-

grants. This pattern can be attributed to differences in the ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles/Bourhis/Taylor 1977; Liebkind/ Henning-Lindblom/Solheim 2008) of the two groups. Ethnolinguistic vitality has been defined as the sum of all the resources that will make a group more likely to maintain its language and survive collectively as a distinct linguistic community (e.g., Barker/Giles 2004). In contemporary Israeli society, the vitality of the Russian-speaking immigrant groups has a clear advantage over the vitality of the Ethiopian community on almost every parameter. Moreover, FSU immigrants are one of the cultural groups placing the highest emphasis on (Russian) culture and language as a source of value and pride (Remennick 2004). Other factors might also contribute to the group differences observed. The somewhat shorter length of stay in the new country among the Russian-speaking immigrants can explain the diminished erosion of the ethnic language use among these newcomers as compared to the Ethiopian immigrants. The larger size of the Russian-speaking community in Israel may also provide its members with more opportunities for in-group communication.

It is important to note, however, that this pattern of preference for the ethnic language among the Russian-speaking immigrants is less pronounced when it comes to proficiency in the majority language. Our results show both groups reporting relatively high levels of proficiency in the Hebrew language, which is likely to be seen as a major means for social and cultural learning in the new society (Masgoret/Ward 2006). The claim regarding the adaptational advantage of skills in the majority language finds clear support in the findings of our study: For both groups, skills in majority, but not ethnic, language emerged as an important predictor of school adaptation and – although to a lesser degree – of behavioral problems.

This latter finding would seem to fit best an assimilative acculturative context. But the fact that ethnic language proficiency and use did not contribute *negatively* to the prediction of school adaptation seems to suggest that in Israeli school settings there is no antagonism against – or „punishment“ for – ethnic language proficiency and use. A truly pluralistic (multicultural and multilingual) acculturative context would perhaps also allow for positive adaptive value to the ethnic language, but our findings seem to better fit the specific character of the Israeli educational approach towards immigrants – a primarily assimilative but increasingly pluralistic one.

4.2 Identity

Immigrant adolescents from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia appear to be resisting the assimilative acculturative pressures of Israeli society in general and of their school acculturative contexts in particular: In both groups, ethnic identity was found to be stronger than national identity. The relative strength of ethnic identity can be explained in terms of world-wide processes of reaction against homogenizing pressures (Castells 1997), but also more contextually-specific factors can be seen as responsible for this pattern. Russian-speaking immigrants often report on a sense of cultural superiority over the local culture in Israel (Leshem/Sicron 2004; Lissitza/ Peres 1999). As to the im-

migrants from Ethiopia, recent studies have started documenting the gradual development of a distinctive racial identity within the young members of the community, primarily in reaction to perceived racism and discrimination by Israeli society (Ben-Eliezer 2004; Goldblatt/Rosenblum 2007).

Whereas the identity patterns may reflect reluctance to yield to assimilative societal and school pressures, our findings from the regression analyses show a considerable degree of fit between the Israeli school acculturative context (largely assimilationist, but with some pluralistic features) and the adaptive value of the cultural identities. National identity predicts positively school adaptation, and to some extent also behavioral problems. The contribution of ethnic minority identity to school adaptation is much weaker. Similar findings were obtained in a study examining acculturation and adaptation of Israeli immigrant soldiers (Ben-Shalom/Horenczyk 2004).

4.3 *Perceived discrimination*

A growing number of studies consistently show the negative impact of perceived discrimination on the psychological and socio-cultural adjustment of young immigrants (e.g. Gil/Vega 1996; Liebkind/Jasinskaja Lahti 2000; Liebkind/Jasinskaja Lahti/Solheim 2004; Vega et al. 1995). In light of the evidence on the correlation between cultural identities and perceived discrimination, we included in this study an additional step in the regression analyses aimed at examining the extent to which perceived discrimination provides a unique additional contribution to the prediction of socio-cultural adaptation.

The analyses confirmed such a unique negative contribution to the prediction of school adaptation, but not to that of behavioral problems. This finding urges us to develop policies and strategies to minimize the negative attitudes and behaviours of members of the host society toward immigrants. It can be argued that perceived discrimination is not necessarily real discrimination (Ward/Leong 2006). But, as suggested by Dion and Kawakami (1996), perceptions of discrimination represent a salient psychological reality for immigrants, regardless of their adequacy as indicators of „actual“ discrimination or intolerance. Moreover, as the saying goes, where there's smoke, there's fire; and this conflagration, one that any immigrant society can ill afford, can be extinguished – and better, avoided – by educational means.

5. **Conclusions and limitations**

Some important conclusions can be derived from our study. Clearly, our findings call for continuing and increasing efforts to design and implement high-level educational programs aimed at improving the majority language skills of immigrants. Educational and social interventions need also to foster the development of a healthy national identity among the newcomers, which was found to constitute an important adaptive asset. But ethnic language and identity should also not be ignored. Although their contribution to

adaptation is somewhat minor, they clearly do not hamper school adaptation, and they deserve legitimization and even encouragement.

But some words of caution are needed. First, we need to bear in mind that all the major variables in this study were measured using self-report questionnaires, and the accuracy of the information – particularly related to language skills – provided by these research instruments is at times questionable. The validity of the findings could be enhanced in future research by the inclusion of language tests, objective measures of language proficiency, and direct observations of school academic and social behavior.

We should also be very prudent when inferring causal relationships based on the results from our regression analyses. Alternative – or complementary – causal explanations can be plausible: Successful adaptation to the new society may help to enhance majority identity; it may also affect the immigrant's perceptions of discrimination by host peers and teachers. As to perceived discrimination, negative adaptation could be a result (and not a cause, or not only a cause) of poor socio-cultural adjustment. Therefore, we need not only to direct efforts and resources to promoting language learning, to strengthening identities, and to improve intergroup relations; we should also devote resources to the facilitation of the socio-cultural adaptation of immigrants into their new societies.

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