The Role of Social Systems in Absorption of Immigrants in Israel

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Abstract: Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) are the largest ethnic unit to have arrived in Israel and, as such, have had a major impact on Israeli society in cultural, social and demographic terms. The manner in which the immigrants were absorbed in social institutions influenced the adaptation strategies they adopted, which changed over time.

The research is aimed at examining the extent to which the immigrants have, according to their perception, adapted to the social frameworks, based on their experiences in connecting with the local population through the educational system and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The research is a qualitative one, in the framework of which interviews were conducted with 28 immigrants who had immigrated to Israel as children and adolescents.

The immigrants developed adaptation strategies which changed as they transitioned from the educational system to the military framework, and subsequently settled into civilian life.

Keywords: Young immigrants, adaptation strategies, identity, social frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

Like several other countries in various parts of the world, the State of Israel is considered to be a nation of immigrants. As such, Israeli society is perceived as one that embodies a mosaic of multiple cultures (Fishman & Mesch, 2005; Mesch, 2002, Caspi, 2017), with an unending stream of immigration (Caspi, 2017; Gold, 1989).

Absorption policy in the State of Israel is based on the Law of Return (1950), which enables any Jew living in the Diaspora to immigrate to the country and obtain full citizenship. The term "aliya" is used to refer to the territorial transfer of Jews from other countries to Israel, the move signifying a choice on the part of the individuals to build a home there.

The present research makes reference to immigrant parents, natives to the Former Soviet Union (FSU), as the first generation of immigrants. They arrived in Israel as adults based on a decision necessitated by circumstances. Their offspring, native to the FSU as well, who arrived in the country as children or adolescents with their parents, being thus subjected to forced migration, are defined as belonging to the 1.5 generation.

Immigration from the FSU during the 1990s constitutes one of the most significant waves to arrive in Israel in recent years. It was a major event, in the course of which some one million immigrants reached Israel's shores, 35% of whom were children and adolescents aged 0 to 19 (Chachashvili-Bolotin, Shavit & Eilon, 2011). Its proportion in the country's population today stands at 12.1% (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Many of the immigrants from the FSU settled in northern Israel, following in the footsteps of relatives who had arrived in the country earlier, a phenomenon that resulted in the formation of an ethnic ghetto.

Immigrants' Adaptation and Formation of an Identity

The sense of belonging to the absorbing society is of major importance in the social context, with considerable implications with respect to adaptation on the part of the immigrants. Establishment of contacts with the native population, social involvement with the locals and a commitment towards them constitute an important index in determining adjustment (Rubinstein, Mirsky, Shraga & Slonim-Nevo, 2011).

The development of a social identity may be viewed as a collaborative project between the individual and his social and cultural context (Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones, 2006). The social identity of immigrants takes shape through a process of acculturation that they undergo in the host society.

Cultural identity in the case of immigrants could include affiliation with other ethnic groups from other nations (Schwarts *et al*., 2006), e.g. identification as Israeli and Russian at the same time. Changes in cultural identity are associated principally with experiences undergone in the process of absorption. At times immigrants are faced with opposition and rejection on the part of the absorbing society, reflecting a lack of willingness to accept them in light of their

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different cultural identity (Tartakovsky, 2009) and possibly creating a rift between the immigrants and the local population.

Bacon, Cohen-Wolf and Amzalag-Bahad (2006) and Goltzman and Frug (2010) found that most of the immigrants from the FSU view themselves as distinctly more Russian than Israeli, irrespective of the length of time they have been in the country.

Adolescent and young adult immigrants who succeed in creating their own social identity can stand firm in the face of adverse influences, especially from their peers (Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones, 2006). Nevertheless, an intercultural encounter could be fraught with risks, with negative consequences in the way of a sense of alienation, helplessness, anger, and a loss of motivation to invest efforts in integrating successfully into the absorbing society (Goltzman & Frug, 2010).

The immigrant's identity develops on two levels: preservation of the ethnic identity of the immigrant group's country of origin, and adoption of the identity of the group in the absorbing society. Casey & Dustmann (2010) found that in several instances the children of immigrants (the 1.5 generation) or second generation can have two strong identities at one and the same time – one associated with the country of origin and the other with the absorbing country. Each of the identities can be either firmly developed and strong, or undeveloped and weak.

An examination of the interactional patterns between native-born students and immigrant students from the FSU shows that contacts between them are fairly rare, and that there is a clear separation between their social groups. By and large, the immigrant students do not have dyed-in-the-wool Israeli friends while disputes between the two groups are widespread (Goltzman & Frug, 2010).

Remennick & Prashizky (2019) found that young Israeli adults of Russian origin (the 1.5 generation), have established several communities, with a view to consolidating their group identity.

According to Berry *et al*. (2006) and Berry & Sam (1997), adolescent immigrants could choose one of four possible strategies for adaptation: 1) assimilation: renunciation of the culture of their origins and adoption of the new culture; 2) separation: preservation of the culture of their origins and rejection of the new culture; 3) integration: acceptance and adoption of the local culture while maintaining the culture of their origins; 4) marginalization: renunciation of both cultures.

The adaptation pattern chosen would be determined by two factors: 1) the attitude towards the target culture – the extent to which the immigrant is interested in assimilating into the culture of the majority; and 2) the attitude towards the culture of their origins – the extent to which the immigrant identifies with the culture of origin and wishes to preserve it (Berry & Sam, 1997; Phonney *et al*., 2001).

The multidimensional model of acculturation, which is an extension of the model presented by Berry (1997), compares perceptions on the part of the absorbing group, i.e. the majority group, and the perceptions of the immigrants, i.e. the minority group. Native-born group members prefer the immigrants to choose the strategy of integration and/or assimilation in the absorbing society. In contrast, immigrants opt for a process of adoption and preservation, taking place according to varying degrees of intensity depending on the immigrant's vocation. In vocations that are unrelated to the family unit, the immigrants are more open to adopting the new culture, namely, utilizing the strategies of integration or assimilation. On the other hand, in vocations involving the family, social connections, religion or beliefs, the culture of origin is preserved through the strategy of separation (Navas, Rohas, Marcia & Pumares, 2007).

Attitude of the Educational System Towards Immigrants and its Impact on Adaptation to the Receiving Society

Despite the fact that Israel is a country of immigrants, the state's Ministry of Education has for years lacked a clear-cut, organized policy for optimal immigrant management, including assistance to them in their process of absorption. The educational system absorbed immigrant children in large numbers, from kindergarten to the final year of high school, with the teachers in each case being required to cope with the situation based on their own particular social perceptions and personalities and resorting to trial-and-error strategies (Sever, 2004).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s a discourse began to be held over the need for policy, allocation of resources and research in order to bring about a change on the ground. In 2001 a Director General's Circular was issued that addressed the absorption and integration of immigrant students. The document emphasized the role of the educational system in

serving as a meeting place to bring immigrant students and their families in contact with Israeli society, and the fact that proper gearing up in schools for their cause would improve their absorption and integration, both scholastically and socially, while developing their Jewish-Israeli identity. The Circular presented guidelines and tools for preparing schools for immigrant absorption; these included directives to class teachers on ways to monitor integration of immigrant students as well as pedagogic recommendations for working with them, alongside the allocation of additional hours for instruction in Hebrew as a second language and in learning skills (Ministry of Education, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2020).

Baines (2019) found that the majority of teachers were not familiar with the policy documents, did not participate in professional improvement courses, and did not receive any training prior to embarking on the task of teaching immigrant students. Moreover, the teachers claimed that integration of immigrant students in their regular classes required them to deal with challenges arising from the cultural heterogeneity, for which they lacked the proper tools (Baines, 2019).

Geiger (2012) claims that schoolteachers have a key role to play in providing adolescent immigrants with tools for developing their ethnic and cultural identity. Teachers symbolize expectations regarding the dominant culture and represent the ruling ideology. The more reinforcement and support the immigrants receive from the teachers and the more the teachers respect the immigrants' ethnic identity, the stronger is the immigrants' sense of belonging. Inversely, where the teacher forces assimilation on immigrant students against their will, compelling them to forsake the culture of their origins, an element of tension is introduced and with it a sense of discrimination, alienation and marginalization.

In her research, Geiger (2012) found that immigrant students in Israeli schools expressed harsh feelings towards Israeli teachers. It appeared that the teachers attacked the immigrant students over their communicating with each other in their mother tongue, imitating their accent mockingly, and commenting on the slow progress they were making in Hebrew.

Sever & Epstein (2002) claim that schools do not do enough to ease conditions for the adolescent immigrants and create a temporary marginalization that typifies immigration, only to acquire a status that is permanent and irrational.

The Role of Military Service in Adaptation by Immigrants to Israeli Society

On reaching the age of 18, the majority of young adults in the country are recruited into the army for a period of 2-3 years. Military service functions as an important socialization agent (Colonimus & Bartal, 2011). It has a significant impact on social identity and is perceived as a vital instrument in transforming recruits into a part of the nation's collective (Shabtai, 1999; Ben Shalom & Horenczyk, 2004).

Military service offers an entry ticket into Israeli society (Azarya & Kimmerling, 1990), representing an important step in the process of integration and absorption of young immigrants in the country (Amsalam & Israelashvili, 2001; Ben Shalom & Horenczyk, 2004). It serves as a melting pot, aligning the individual with diverse elements in Israeli society, with its different ethnicities, groups, sects and sub-sects. Thanks to army service youngsters can acquire a sense of belonging to the country despite differences in background, origin and subculture (Meisels, 1993; Dar & Kimhi, 2001).

Successful integration into the military unit or difficulties in adaptation by the immigrant recruits are critically important factors in determining the nature of the experience in the service in terms of its level and style. Among immigrants from the FSU it was found that military service offered opportunities for connecting with native-born Israelis and for enriching their civic knowledge of the country. As to integration of the immigrants into the mainstream culture through military service, it was found that the connections they made were short-lived and did not serve as a firm basis for blending in (Eisikovits, 2006).

Contacts Between the Populations: Interpersonal Relations

The natural tendency is to connect with similar people, a condition that is convenient for both parties sharing a common language, culture and ethnic background. The phenomenon is known as the homophily principle or ethnic homophily, and it assumes a deeper significance in the case of immigrants (Titzman, Serwata, Silbereisen & Davidov, 2016). Inter-ethnic friendships are relatively less common, less stable over time and less intimate in comparison with intra-ethnic, homophilic friendships. On the one hand, a homophilic friendship between immigrants appears to be natural and taken for granted since they understand each other and are able to

provide mutual support based on a sense of affiliation. On the other hand, it can alienate them from native-born Israelis and retard their adjustment to the local society (Schachner *et al*., 2016).

The aim of the present research is to examine the degree of adaptation to Israeli society on the part of immigrants from the FSU belonging to the 1.5 generation, as perceived by them. These immigrants arrived in Israel as children, experienced Israeli social frameworks starting from elementary school, middle school and high school, through service in the military, and finally as adult citizens of the country. The study examines their present sense of belonging, or alternatively, their feeling of marginality as a result of the significant events they have experienced in the process of adapting to life in Israel.

METHOD

The present research is qualitative in nature, aimed at hearing firsthand the accounts related by immigrants from the FSU of their absorption in Israel, based on their personal experiences. The qualitative method allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the phenomenon based on the life stories of the participants in the research (Patton, 2002).

Research Tools

Use was made in the present research of the semi-structured interview. According to this technique, the interview opens with introductory questions and an explanation of the subject of the research. Thereafter the researcher uses predetermined questions and questions that arise as the interview progresses (see Appendix) and in the wake of statements made by the interviewee himself. The session with the interviewee creates a unique interviewee-interviewer dynamic based on the dialogue that develops between the two, the one posing questions and the other responding. The result is the establishment of a bond of trust, facilitating the transfer of information between the two individuals (Spradley, 1978; Bar-Onm 2007).

Research Population

A total of 28 interviewees participated in the research, 18 men and 10 women, former residents of the FSU who immigrated to Israel as children and youths aged 5 to 18. At the time of the interview the ages of the interviewees ranged from 26 to 37. They reside in various cities in the northern part of the country, some in community settlements. All of them studied in schools in Israel, some for 12 years and others for one to two years. All of them served in the army.

The participants' characteristics are as follows, their names having been changed for the purposes of the research:

	Name	Gender	Age	Age at the time of immigration	Country of birth	Education	Marital status
1	Luba	F	30	5	Birobidzhan	B.A.	Married
2	Maria	F	29	13	Russia	2 B.A. degrees	Single
3	Igor	M	34	17	Lithuania	B.A.	Married
4	Vlad	M	31	8	Ukraine	High school	Single
5	Boris	M	31	14	Uzbekistan	B.A.	Married
6	Lev	M	29	14	Kirgizstan	B.A.	Married
7	Irena	F	26	15	Uzbekistan	2 B.A. degrees	Married
8	Viktor	M	27	11	Russia	B.A.	Single
9	Katia	F	27	10	Russia	B.A.	Married
10	Michael	M	30	13	Russia	High school	Single
11	Pasha	M	29	11	Russia	B.A.	Married
12	Sasha	M	29	10	Russia	B.A.	Single
13	Ivgeny	M	30	11	Ukraine	B.A.	Married
14	Vova	M	28	10	Russia	B.A.	Single
15	Svetlava	F	28	11	Ukraine	Medical Studies	Married
16	Kiril	M	26	7	Ukraine	High school	Single
17	Vladimir	M	31	12	Russia	B.A.	Married
18	Sergey	M	33	13	Ukraine	B.A.	Married
19	Nikita	M	29	13	Russia	High school	Single
20	Oleg	M	19	13	Ukraine	B.A.	Married
21	Stass	M	30	13	Ukraine	B.A.	Single
22	Andrey	M	31	13	Russia	B.A.	Single
23	Anastasia	F	29	13	Lithuania	B.A.	Single
24	Marina	F	37	9	Ukraine	High school	Married
25	Ira	F	36	11	Ukraine	B.A.	Married
26	Dima	M	34	9	Ukraine	M.A.	Single
27	Yana	F	27	5	Moldova	M.A.	Single
28	Yelena	F	34	5	Azerbaijan	B.A.	Married

The participants were located in two ways: based on personal familiarization with the participant or with members of their family; and using snowball sampling (Bar-On, 2007), according to which one participant led to another, with their names being forwarded to the researcher by the participants themselves.

Research Procedure

The interviews were held in the form of face-to-face meetings. They were conducted in the course of a single session lasting in the range of one to three hours. The interviewees were assured of full confidentiality.

The interviews were analyzed according to the categorial method (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998), based on the categorial-content model, which focuses on analyses that divide the complete text into content categories. The categories in these analyses are chosen by the researchers at their discretion in accordance with the research question, while also making reference to the interviewees' statements. A search is also conducted for categorial references to subject matter – even if these are not all predefined – in order to classify them according to subject or frequency of appearance in the text. The model serves for the analysis of narrative content (Lieblich *et al*., 1998).

FINDINGS

Based on the interviews conducted for the purpose of the research, stories were obtained from the 28 young men and women who had immigrated to Israel from the FSU. A reading of the transcribed version of the interviews revealed both similarities and dissimilarities between the interviewees with respect to the way they perceived adaptation to Israeli society as youngsters.

a. Initial Adaptation

Altogether 12 of the 28 interviewees told about their initial process of adaptation in Israel. According to them, their adaptation was twofold: on the one hand it was comforting to know that they were part of a large wave of immigration and that there were many people of Russian origin in the initial absorption centers; on the other hand, there were the Sabras – native-born Israelis – who did not receive them with open arms, while even making life difficult for them.

The following statements were made by the interviewees:

Luba: We were a very large group from the FSU, it was more or less half and half, the Russians and all the rest Israelis, it was truly 50-50.

Pasha: As an immigrant, let's put it this way, the beginning was difficult.

Sasha: The first three months from the time I arrived I did not leave the house at all; I was in a depression.

Sergey: We were not accepted here.

Anastasia: The start of adolescence, the age at which you want friendly love, you want to be accepted and are unsuccessful.

Dima: there was a kind of mutual hatred or group brotherhood [on the part of the Russians].

Yelena: It was very difficult to adjust… they made me feel I was different.

b. Attitude of Israeli Society Towards the Immigrants during their Affiliation with the Educational System

Most of the interviewees had the feeling that Israeli society was making their absorption difficult. The difficulties stemmed from the attitude of both the teachers and the native-born students towards the immigrant students.

b1. Attitude of the Teachers in the Educational System

Eleven interviewees referred to the attitude of the teachers towards them. The general feeling was of disregard and lack of concern on the part of the teachers towards the young immigrants. The interviewees stated with regret that they felt no containment or support from the teachers. They obtained the impression that the teachers made no effort to help them integrate, either socially or scholastically.

The following statements were made by the interviewees:

Sasha: The teachers ignored me…did not really see me… many of them ruined the education I came with.

Voba: The teachers in general were a nightmare, I did not understand what they were saying, they made no effort.

Oleg: The teacher, did not show any enthusiasm for the Russians, and this was felt very strongly… I felt sort of a kind of vindictiveness.

Marina: On the part of the teachers, an attitude, not warm, don't envelop you, don't give you the business of like coming to a new and strange country… there was no real support or help… the teachers never protected me.

Ira: The teachers did not feel, what did they care, ignored us, nobody was interested in what was happening to us.

b2. Attitude of the Students in School

Twenty interviewees referred to the attitude of the students towards them and to the bond formed with their peers on the basis of similar ethnicity. They spoke about division into groups according to country of origin and ethnic affiliation, Israelis vs. immigrants, and former residents of Morocco vs. "the Russians". An issue raised by many of the interviewees was the violence in the school– both the men and the women referred to several incidents involving blows and harassment.

The following statements were made by the interviewees:

Luba: We were a group of Israelis and a group of immigrants. We were in gangs, ours and theirs.

Maria: I had a lot of friends, all Russian of course.

Igor: My friends were mostly Russian.

Vlad: It was like taken for granted that I would be ostracized, and I was harassed during the recesses and after school.

Boris: All the Russian crowd roamed about together.

Lev: My first friends were from school and the ulpan. All of them were immigrants.

Sasha: In elementary school I fought a lot, blows, in high school and middle school too.

Svetlana: The social aspect was terrible, everyone, all my friends, were Russian-speaking and we were a gang that roamed around together.

Nikita: Throughout school, up to 12th grade, I was alone. Only alone… and all the time coming to blows, upheaval all the time.

Anastasia: From 7th grade I began to sense the issue of "Russian" and "Moroccan"… there was a real separation.

Ira: There was a very clear separation. There were the immigrants from the FSU and there were all the rest. As though if you are from the FSU, then you are Russian and, like, a reject.

Dima: I was with Russians… we spoke Russian, we laughed in Russian, we sang songs with the guitar in Russian.

Yana: In high school we were a group of Russians and a group of Israelis, so it was simply a separation.

c. Military Service

Twenty interviewees referred to their service in the military, stating that it constituted a significant or corrective experience for them. For many, military service provided a bond with the State of Israel and Israeli society. The sense of patriotism was experienced for the first time during their service in the IDF, when they established ties with native-born Israelis.

The following statements were made by the interviewees:

Luba, Maria, Igor: The army was a significant event.

Lev: For me it was entirely a melting pot. Military service is a significant event because this service really has an impact on my identity.

Ivgeny: In the army I discovered that people were more friendly than what I had thought before… boundaries are a bit blurred.

Vladimir: Up until the army I felt myself not quite belonging, the army fairly improved the situation.

Sergey: In high school I did not learn the language, in the army I began to learn the language… finally there was someone to talk to.

Nikita: I felt good in the army.

Ira: In the army I began to really love this country.

Yana: In the army, there is more acceptance… the army is a significant part of life as compared to school.

d. Adaptation – Sense of Belonging / Marginalization

A number of factors influence adaptation on the part of immigrants in the receiving country. A sense of belonging, or inversely, a sense of marginalization, constitutes a key parameter in integration into the new culture.

d1. Sense of Marginalization in School (Elementary, Middle and High)

Fourteen interviewees referred to the feeling of marginalization during the period in elementary, middle and high school. Many of them shared the difficulties they experienced and their inability to integrate into the host society. The dichotomous division and exclusion of the immigrants from the FSU by labelling them "Russians" affected their sense of affiliation badly, making their integration extremely difficult. With the exception of a few isolated cases, they were made to feel marginalized and alien by the native-born Israelis.

The following statements were made by the interviewees:

Luba: we were generally groups of Israelis and groups of immigrants. There was a separation in the school.

Maria: I had a lot of friends, all Russian, of course. I connected less with the Israelis.

Vlad: I found it difficult to integrate almost throughout my schooling up to 8th grade.

Pasha: As a Russian, society did not react well to me in the beginning.

Vladimir: We were quite separate, not with everyone… with the local crowd being used to one thing and we didn't acclimatize this way.

Nikita: Throughout my schooling, I had no company, I was closed.

d2. Sense of Belonging during Military Service

Nineteen interviewees referred to the period of military service as one that contributed to their sense of belonging to the State of Israel and to Israeli society. The sense of affiliation was manifested in consolidation of an Israeli and Jewish identity as well as in the acquisition of native-born Israeli friends – a feeling that did not exist earlier during schooling.

The following statements were made by the interviewees:

Igor: Army service connected me to my Israeli identity.

Katia: Yes, I began to communicate with the Israeli crowd only in the army.

Svetlana: I really began to love this country in the army.

Vladimir: I remember that during that period I delighted in singing Hatikva, like it set off a switch in my head. Think that before the army, like, there was nothing, I did not even know how to start the anthem, … there I felt myself a Zionist for the first time… [the army] gave me the feeling of belonging to Israeli society, to the State of Israel.

Marina: It was actually in the army that I had more Israeli friends.

Yana: I did the army and I feel an affiliation with the country.

Ira: It is really a melting pot.

d3. Present Time – National / Ethnic Identity

Nineteen interviewees referred to the extent to which they viewed themselves as Israelis or Russians. Ten interviewees perceived themselves at the present time as Israeli to all intents and purposes, while nine emphasized their Russian identity first and foremost.

Following are the statements of the interviewees who perceived themselves as Israeli:

>   *Maria: It's a sense of Israeli identity.*

>   *Nikita: Israeli identity. I am very pleased I immigrated to Israel.*

>   *Oleg: Israeli identity. I am very pleased with my immigration to Israel…. Yes, yes, absolutely, my future is in Israel.*

>   *Andrey: Israeli. I am very pleased with my immigration to Israel.*

In contrast, following are the statements of those who perceived themselves as Russian:

>   *Irena: I still cannot come to terms with the Israeli mentality.*

>   *Yana: I don't really consider myself Israeli… Russian-Israeli.*

>   *Dima: Also my mentality – there is still the mentality of the FSU in one way or another, some things have still remained.*

>   *Yelena: I am Russian. I live in Israel.*

Some (Pasha, Vladimir, Sasha, Svetlana and Kiril) stated that they view themselves as Russian, with no additional comments or explanations.

e. Interpersonal Relations

Immigrants, like all humans, are social creatures, and as such the ability to form interpersonal relationships is a key element in determining their mental health, quality of life and adaptation to a new society. The interviewees were asked about the ethnic background of their best friends and that of their life partners.

Eighteen interviewees referred to the ethnic background of their best friend, with 17 of them stating that most of their friends, if not all, were of Russian background, immigrants like themselves. Only one interviewee stated that his best friend was a native-born Israeli.

As an example, the following statement was found to recur: "*My best friend is Russian, most have been Russian. I had a native-born Israeli friend but I have for some time distanced myself from him*".

The situation is similar in the case of the interviewees' life partners. Seventeen interviewees referred to this question, and it was found that 16 of them were married or were dating partners who are immigrants like themselves. Only one interviewee stated that she was married to a native-born Israeli. Following is a typical statement that was found to recur: "*Most of the time my partners have been immigrants from the FSU, when all is said and done… most of them have been Russian*".

DISCUSSION

The present research is based on interviews with 28 immigrants from the FSU who arrived in Israel at ages ranging from 5 to 18. At the time of the interviews all of them were aged 26 to 37. The ages at which the interviewees entered the educational system varied, with the youngest remaining in the system for the full 12 years, and the older ones remaining for a shorter period of two years at most. No difference in adaptation to and absorption in Israel society was found between the two. All the interviewees live in northern Israel, some in towns and others in communal settlements. The aim of the research was to examine the extent of their adaptation based on the experiences they had encountered during their stay in the country, in terms of social frameworks – from elementary school, middle school and high school to military service and up to the present time, as adult citizens of Israel. The findings point to difficulties encountered by the immigrants at the start of their absorption in the country, both from the attitude of the schoolteachers towards them and from that of their peer groups. The general feeling obtained from the statements of the interviewees was that Israeli society made absorption difficult for them.

The present section sums up the research by referring to four principal themes that derived from an analysis of the interviewees' statements. They describe social phenomena and their outcomes during adolescence and as adults, comprising: the initial period of adjustment; the attitude of the educational system, as representing Israeli society, towards the immigrants; the impact of military service on their adaptation; and their interpersonal relationships. These themes constitute content that depicts the process the immigrants underwent from the time of their immigration to Israel as adolescents, including challenges they had to cope with during the initial years, subsequently as young adults, and at the present time. The content serves as a focal point from

which it is possible to expand knowledge about the way the immigrants adapted.

The first theme addresses the initial period of adaptation on the part of the immigrants from the time they arrived in Israel. Analysis of the findings illustrates the difficulty the immigrants faced, alongside an understanding of the massive nature of the immigration wave and its implications. The statements of the interviewees shows that the knowledge that immigration from the FSU was of such overwhelming proportions – in the 1990s the wave numbered about one million souls, some 35% of whom were children and youths aged 0 to 19 (Chechashvili-Bolton, Shavit & Eilon, 2011) – eased their initial adjustment. For example, according to Luba: *"We were a very large group from the FSU, it was fairly 50-50 – the Russians and all the rest Israelis"*.

According to Baines (2019), policy regarding immigrant absorption in Israel combines concepts relating to both multiculturism and the melting pot. The interviewees' statements refer to the fact that a separation took place between the Russian group and the Israeli group, as described by Dima: *"There was a kind of mutual hatred or group brotherhood on the part of the Russians"* or by Yelena: *"They made me feel I was different"*. The above statements reinforce the claims made in this context by Tartakovsky (2009) that at times the immigrants encountered opposition and rejection by the new culture, a situation that could have caused a division between them and native-born Israelis.

An intercultural encounter is fraught with risks, possibly leading to negative outcomes, such as feelings of alienation, helplessness, anger and a lack of motivation to invest efforts to achieve normal integration in the host society (Goltzman & Frug, 2010). Sasha describes his initial period in Israel: "*The first three months from the time I arrived I did not leave the house at all; I was in a depression"*.

The second theme addresses the role of the educational system as representing Israeli society in the matter of immigrant absorption. The formation of social contacts with native-born Israelis constitutes an important index with respect to adjustment by immigrants to the new society (Rubinstein, Mirsky, Shraga & Slonim-Nevo, 2011). Analysis of the interviews found that the immigrants were subjected to harsh experiences, principally in the way of negative interaction with native-born Israelis in the educational

system, whether in elementary, middle or high school. As stated by Vlad: *"it was like taken for granted that I would be ostracized, and I was harassed during the recesses and after school"*. Sasha too states: *"In elementary school I fought a lot, blows, in high school and middle school too… ".* The issue of blows was a recurring one with many interviewees, both boys and girls. Voba, Svetlana, Vladimir, Sergey, Sasha, Nikita, Andrey and Dima refer to several incidents when they came to blows in school: *"There was a lot of exchange of blows…"*

The negative social experiences the immigrants underwent in school led more than once to social segregation and to the formation of peer groups based on ethnic affiliation: the Russian gang and the Israeli gang. Anastasia presents a description of the above relationships: "*From 7th grade I began to sense the issue of 'Russian' and 'Moroccan'… there was a real separation"*. Ira too offers a description: "*There was a very clear separation. There were the immigrants from the FSU and there were all the rest"*, Yana states: "*In high school we were a group of Russians and a group of Israelis, it was simply a separation"*. According to Dima's description: "*I was with Russians… we spoke Russian, we laughed in Russian, we sang songs with the guitar in Russian"*. The description of the dichotomous division is a recurrent one, to the extent that the interviewees define themselves during the interview as belonging to the "gang" of immigrants. According to Luba: "*We were a group of Israelis and a group of immigrants… we were in gangs, ours and theirs"*. And according to Svetlana: "*The social aspect was terrible… everyone, all my friends, were Russian-speaking and we were a gang that roamed around together"*.

Wengrover (2006) explains the formation of ties between discrete groups on the basis of ethnicity and claims that a closeness between veteran immigrants and recent immigrants does not derive only from their common language and culture, but also from the fact that they lie together on the margins of society. As described by Maria: *"I had a lot of friends, all Russian of course"*. According to Igor: *"My friends were mostly Russian"*. Boris: *"All the Russian crowd roamed about together"*. Ira: "*As though if you are from the FSU, then you are Russian and, like, a reject"***.**

The immigrants had negative experiences not only as a result of interaction with peer groups consisting of native-born Israelis, but also with the teachers – educators who would be expected to help in absorption

into Israeli society, instead of which they exacerbated the immigrants' condition, causing them to think in more extreme terms towards the receiving society. As described by Voba: "*The teachers in general were a nightmare, I did not understand what they were saying, they made no effort*". Oleg: "*The teacher did not show any enthusiasm for the Russians, and this was felt very strongly… I felt sort of a kind of vindictiveness*". Marina too felt the icy attitude of the teachers: "*On the part of the teachers, an attitude, not warm, don't envelop you, don't give you the business of like coming to a new and strange country… there was no real support or help…the teachers never protected me*". These findings are in line with what Wengrover (2006) calls the "procedure of disregard" as typifying the conduct of the teachers in school. It is disregard that stems from a lack of recognition or understanding on the part of the teachers regarding the culture from which the immigrants have arrived and the distress they feel in general, and in school in particular. Although the Ministry of Education set up a department for absorption of immigrant students and allocated resources tor advancing and improving their absorption (Ministry of Education, Pedagogic Administration), these resources were not utilized.

The third theme addresses the impact of military service on the immigrants' adaptation to Israeli society. Military service acts as a socialization agent and as such has a significant effect on consolidation of social identity in the young recruits. Military service is viewed as a tool for transforming soldiers into part of the Israeli collective, and for strengthening the feeling of affiliation with the country (Almog, 2006; Colonimus & Bartal, 2011; Shabtai, 1999; Ben Shalom & Horenczyk, 2004). Analysis of the findings shows that they are in line with the references in the literature, as evident from the statement made by Lev: "*For me it was entirely a melting pot… military service is a significant event because this service really has an impact on my identity*". Ira, who served in Caracal (a combat unit), states: "*In the army I began to really love this country*". A statement that recurs a number of times, reinforcing the above, is: "*The army is a significant event*" (Igor, Luba, Maria).

Ivgeny states: "*In the army I discovered that people were more friendly than what I had thought before… boundaries are a bit blurred*". Vladimir too shares the following: "*Up until the army I felt myself not quite belonging, the army fairly improved the situation*". Azarya & Kimmerling (1990) emphasize that military service offers an entry ticket to Israeli society. Meisels

(1992) too is of this opinion, claiming that the IDF acts as a melting pot, being responsible for "aligning" all ethnic elements and groups with Israeli society.

Barot (2002) describes the importance of using the Hebrew language in the army as part of the process of cultural transfer. Sergey, who immigrated at the age of 15, being admitted straightaway to 9th grade, states: "*In high school I did not learn the language, in the army I began to learn the language… finally there was someone to talk to*".

The fourth theme relates to the interpersonal relationships that the immigrants developed in Israeli society with immigrants like themselves or with native-born Israelis. This theme examines if the immigrants integrated or isolated themselves according to their success in forming interpersonal ties. The homophily principle is manifested clearly in the present research. Most of the interviewees stated that their friends were mostly of Russian background, immigrants like themselves. This is also evident from the findings regarding their life partners. Statements such as "*My best friend is Russian*" or "*My life partner is Russian*" were commonly heard among most of the interviewees. This is a clear example of ethnic homophily, according to which inter-ethnic friendships are less common, less stable over time, and less intimate in comparison with intra-ethnic friendships (Titzman, Serwata, Silbereisen & Davidov, 2016).

Adaptation: Sense of Belonging or Marginalization?

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Berry (Berry *et al.*, 2006; Berry & Sam, 1997) was engaged in studying adaptation strategies adopted by immigrants in a host society. The present research clearly reflects a process of adaptation on the part of the immigrants to Israeli society, amid changes in adaptation strategies during different periods depending on their location, their affiliation with various social institutions, the extent of their acceptance as perceived by them, and their social experiences.

The strategy of isolation typified their period of studies in the framework of the educational system. This system was the first social institution encountered by the immigrants as children or youths, where they experienced mainly frustration, non-acceptance, ostracism and violence. The immigrants described a clear division into an immigrant group and a native Israeli group, as exemplified by a statement made by

Luba: "*We were in gangs, ours and theirs… we were a group of Israelis and a group of immigrants. There was a separation in the school*". As a result, a process of isolation took place in which the immigrants maintained the culture of the old country while rejecting the culture of the new country (Berry & Sam, 1997). Vladimir states: "*We were quite separate, not with everyone… with the local crowd being used to one thing and we didn't acclimatize this way*". Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind & Vedder (2001) referred to someone with a strong ethnic identity who does not identify with the new culture as having a separate identity.

A strategy of partial assimilation characterized the period of military service by the immigrants. It was only after joining the IDF that they began to sense an affiliation with Israeli society and the State of Israel. In this context Igor states: "*Army service connected me to my Israeli identity*". A similar statement is made by Katia: "*I began to communicate with the Israeli crowd only in the army*". Vladimir asserts: "*I remember that during that period I delighted in singing Hatikva, like it set off a switch in my head… before the army… I did not even know how to start the anthem…I felt myself a Zionist for the first time… [the army] gave me the feeling of belonging to Israeli society, to the State of Israel*". The immigrants do not entirely relinquish their birth culture but do adopt the culture of the receiving country (Berry & Sam, 1997).

At present the immigrants from the FSU are characterized by a strategy of limited integration. They have accepted, indeed, adopted the local culture while preserving the culture of their former homeland (Berry & Sam, 1997). Most of them express satisfaction with the fact of their immigration and in parallel perceive themselves as having a dual identity, belonging at one and the same time to ethnic groups from different nationalities (Schwarts *et al*., 2006), e.g. Russian-

Israeli or Israeli-Russian, depending on their perception. Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind & Vedder (2001) call such an identity a bicultural or integrated identity.

Rather than being full-blown, the integrated strategy is somewhat restricted in scope since the immigrants' closest friends and life partners are still immigrants, with the culture of their origins. Thus, the primary social network that is most significant to them is intra-group in nature. In the core domains of family, social contacts, religion or beliefs they maintain the culture of their origins through adoption of the strategy of isolation (Navas, Rohas, Marcia & Pumares, 2007). After so many years in Israel the immigrants still feel more comfortable with the culture of their former homeland than with the local culture, which they encountered as children. Nonetheless, they are happy to have immigrated to Israel and have no intention of leaving the country (Figure **1**).

The differing absorption policies observed by social institutions in Israel have influenced the feeling of adaptation on the part of the immigrants. On the one hand, there is the Ministry of Education, which supposedly recognizes and advocates multiculturalism and social diversity, but at the same time employs veteran teachers in schools who are not sufficiently aware of the meaning of racism and ethnocentrism and the impact they have on the immigrant students (Carignan, Sanders & Pourdavood, 2005). On the other hand, there is the IDF, which advocates a policy of assimilation that is cross-cultural, including minority groups, and makes full adoption of the organization's norms and rules obligatory (Berry & Kalin, 1998, in Ben Shalom & Horenczyk, 2006). The IDF's attitude to all is uniformly egalitarian, a fact that obliges the immigrants to learn the Hebrew language and enables them to feel solidarity, which was denied them before, leading to
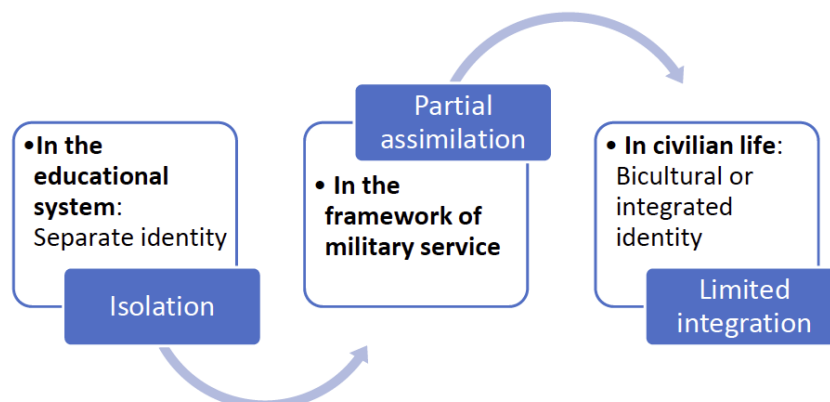

Figure 1: Adaptation strategies adopted by immigrants from the FSU in various social frameworks.

their feelings of isolation and marginalization. The schoolteachers, albeit infused with multicultural principles, belong to an older generation, whereas officers in the army are of the same generation as the immigrants and practice assimilation as part of the social norms in the IDF.

CONCLUSIONS

It is evident from the findings of the present research that the young immigrants experienced severe absorption pains in the educational system, in contrast to the recognition they received in the military establishment. As such they developed adaptation strategies that changed as they transitioned from the educational system to the military framework, and subsequently settled into civilian life.

The military establishment advocates the granting of individual autonomy, facilitating assimilation in the absorbing society whose makeup is oriented to collective success as its principal driving force. This stands in contrast to the school system, which is geared to personal success and does not place an emphasis on social integration. It thus follows that the educational system has lacked the discernment to promote more effective absorption of the young immigrants. In light of these conclusions, the researchers recommend drawing up an updated Director General's Circular that states that the welfare of immigrant students stands as its topmost item in its list of priorities.

A possible avenue for further research could focus on the expression of racism in native Israeli youths towards the immigrants as a factor in impeding their adaptation to Israeli society.

RESEARCH LIMITATION

A limitation in the current research is the interviewees' place of residence, which was in every case northern Israel. It is possible that adaptation on the part of immigrants from the FSU who had settled in central Israel would have been different, although the vast majority of these immigrants had indeed made their home in the northern part of the country.

APPENDIX

Interview Guide

General

• Tell me about yourself and about your past.

• At what age did your family immigrate?

• Significant events (positive & negative) throughout your life.

• Elaborate on the transition to Israel.

School period

• Acculturation process during the first few days/months.

• Adaptation experience in Israel, mainly difficulties with whom you integrated with

• Adaptation in elementary school and/or high school, did you feel as part of the group? Do you remember significant events during that time?

• Association patterns - with whom did you spent most of your time with? How did the groups reactions to you, their expectations from you, etc.

• How were your feelings of belonging?

• Did it strengthen the sensation as an outsider, or did you feel excepted?

Military Service

• Tell me about your military service, what was your position, did you have special/different experiences during your service? What did you take as a life experience from that period?

• How significant was the service for you? Was it positive?

• Did the military service help you to get more connected to your Israeli identity? Influence your feelings of belonging?

Involvement in the Community

• Whom did you have more social interaction with immigrants from FSU or with Israelis native born?

• Was your group belonging based on ethnicity?

Summary

• To sum things up, is there anything you would like to say, share, are there any thoughts running in your head right now, anything that you can think of regarding the things we talked about? Anything important that we need to know about immigration and absorption?

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