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## **CULTURAL DISTANCE FROM THE INTERNAL OTHER: EDUCATION AND RELATIONS WITH THE OTHER AS DISCUSSED IN LIFE STORIES**

### **1. Introduction: life stories within multicultural societies**

Life stories enable one to trace the manner in which identity construction takes place, especially amongst members of multicultural and multiethnic societies. In this paper, the life-stories of six women belonging to three different groups, all residents of the Beer Sheba area in Israel, were analyzed by applying and extending Bar-On's (2008) theory of identity construction which focuses upon the relations with the "internal other" and the "external other." Specifically, the intersection between education and relations with others as shaping identity during the women's various life courses were investigated.

But let me first explain Bar-On's theory in the context of Jewish Israeli identity.

### **2. Bar-On's theory of identity construction**

Bar-On (2008) suggested to understand the changes in Jewish-Israeli identity by inspecting the relations between the various groups within the Jewish-Israeli community (identified as internal others), and groups outside the collective (identified as external others). Bar-On identified several stages or views in the construction of Jewish-Israeli identity, each reflecting a differing mode of approaching both internal and external others. The monolithic stage or view points to the existence of a dichotomy. Acceptance of this view suggests that the collective self is perceived as totally good while the "other" is treated as absolutely bad. Thus, for example, during this monolithic stage, the Arab and Palestinian others were perceived as a real danger to the existence of the Jewish-Israeli collective and were dehumanized. Movement to the second stage, identified as the disintegration of the monolithic view, meant a development of a more complex perception of both internal and external others, leading for example, to the integration of previously marginalized internal groups (Jews of Middle eastern and African origin - Mizrahi Jews) into the economic and political elites, and perception of Arab Palestinians (external other) as a potential partner by some Jewish-Israelis, while others continued to relate to them as a threat. Bar-On postulated that this disintegration suggests, but does not guaranty, the possibility for the emergence of the next stage, that of dialogue, both with the internal and the external "others," leading to mutual acceptance and tolerance.

This paper suggests that the conceptualization offered by Bar-On (2008) could serve to study the relations between members of divergent groups in multicultural societies, and demonstrate this by looking into the life stories as related to educational experiences of members of three divergent group within Israeli society, all women: Second generation Mizrahi Jews, immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU), and Bedouins. Through the prism of education, the women's identity and how they relate to "others", educated or no educated, were explored.

### **3. Results and conclusions**

Education served the women as a mapping tool which places the "self" and the "other" as either close or distant in terms of identity construction, during their various life stages. While there are changes in the construction of identity and the perception of "others" during life phases, the perception of education is constant and stable. Education is perceived by all women as an important tool in the process of integration into Israeli

society, achieving power, social status and money. For the Mizrahi Jews, education marks their social status and as a mean for social mobility, for the FSU immigrants education it signifies accumulating power and being integrated successfully, and for the Bedouin women, a community facing major changes, education is a sign of high status, empowering both self and society, as well as a way to earn money.

Looking at each individual story, it is apparent that the parents, and especially the fathers in the case of Mizrahi and Bedouin women, played a crucial role in encouraging their daughters to gain access to education, regardless of their actual success. Aiming at higher education meant attempting and/or succeeding to fulfill their own expectations, and those of their families and especially their fathers.

Based on our interviews, we suggest that in line with the theoretical framework suggested by Bar-On (2008) the perception of the "other" both internal (FSU and Mizrahi Jews) and external (Bedouin) is following mainly the monolithic stage and rarely by the disintegration stage. We found no signs for the dialogic stage which allows for more complexity of perception and tolerance towards the others in the current Israeli society.

We would like to demonstrate our findings using few quotes from the interviews.

Nati, a young Mizrahi woman echoed a deep sense of disappointment and of missed opportunities as a result of not gaining access to higher education, despite her own wishes and those of her parents.

Nati judged members of FSU (internal other) and Bedouin (external other) communities harshly for different reasons. She appraised the FSU women negatively, because she view them as "stealing men". She said: "you cannot trust those women, they steal men". Bedouin men for Nati are a source of physical threat - "As a child I used to be very afraid of them... I was afraid that they would try to break into our home... to this day I am still very afraid of them."

Eva, who was born in Ukraine explained that her decision to immigrate to Israel as originating from the sense that as a young and clever woman she could find her place in a new country, and indeed she managed to do so, rapidly attaining higher degrees in economics. In Bar-On's (2008) terms, Eva's mode of relating to others could be classified as marked by a mixture of monolithic and disintegration attitudes, leading her to develop a more complex perception of both internal and external others. This is most apparent when examining her statement that "to me what is important is whether people are cultured and educated, regardless of their origin."

In the case of Bedouin Samira, her academic and social achievements, led her to experience a substantial change in her personal and social identity, as she participated in the establishment of an NGO aimed at encouraging Bedouin women to obtain higher education among, and as facilitating a bridge between herself and her community. Yet, after gaining her Ph.D. Samira's relations with her educated Bedouin women friends turned sour, leaving her to strengthen her relations with her Jewish educated women colleagues. She claimed that her Jewish colleagues: "With no reference to my degrees accept me as an individual, as a working women and a mother, while the Bedouin women finds it hard to accept me because I am too educated."

Demonstrating the interrelations between education and the perception of others as part of identity construction by using BAR-ON's theory, the findings call for an elaboration of Bar-On's model by suggesting the concept of "cultural distance from the internal other" (CDIO) as shaped by educational aspirations and achievements. The concept is illustrated by the following example.

Rachel's life-story, a daughter of parents born in Morocco who settled in Israel during the 1950's, is dotted with references to education as a yardstick that she uses to evaluate both internal and external others. She noted that she grew up in a poor neighborhood populated by Mizrahi families, which she distinguishes as being either "criminals and bad influences," or as holding to good values, as was the case with her parents, who did their best to ensure their children good education. Rachel herself did not gain higher education since she married very young and had four children. However, as a mother, Rachel followed her parents' model, by uprooting her family from their close social networks and residing in a neighborhood known for housing the best schools in the city, populated mainly by educated Ashkenazi Jews (internal others). While recognizing that their current residence could contribute to her children's future, Rachel does not feel there "at home". Concerning her attitude towards FSU immigrants (internal others), Rachel noted that "they put high priority on education", a stance she certainly appreciates. She recalled some instances in which she assisted FSU women who were newcomers to her neighborhood to find work or supplied them with used clothes and furniture. She said: "I was very happy to help and they were happy to receive help." However, she noted that she does not have a close relationship with them since "I feel very different from them [the FSU immigrants] in terms of language and culture." This demonstrates the concept of CDIO as shaped by educational aspirations and achievements.

The study is limited in generalizability due to the small number of participants and the specific locality, yet offers interesting venues of future research applying the concepts discussed here, which provide can to gain further insights regarding the complex relations existing in multicultural societies.

## References

BAR-ON, Dan (2008). *The Others Within Us: Constructing Jewish-Israeli identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.