JEWISH CHILDREN FROM ETHIOPIA IN ISRAEL: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THEIR ADAPTATION PATTERNS

TAMAR DOTHAN

Youth Aliya Counseling Services for Immigrant Youth, Beersheva

This paper presents an analysis of the verbal expressions of Ethiopian-born Israeli children who participated in two support groups. Six categories of the children's response to the immigration experience were identified. Four of these resemble patterns reported in the literature: assimilation, pluralism, group self-hatred, and militancy. Two additional responses were observed: an attempt to legitimize differences between immigrants and veterans, and attempts to minimize this difference.

Jews from Ethiopia differ from the emerging Israeli cultural pattern more than most other immigrant groups. Their adaptation to Israeli society is consequently a more complex process. This paper is an attempt to reflect on the adaptation patterns of Israeli children of Ethiopian origin. The analysis is based on the author's experiences as a psychologist who has initiated and led several support groups for immigrant children, including those from Ethiopia.

In these support groups, immigrant children are encouraged to talk about problems and issues that bother them and to express their feelings openly. They are also encouraged to talk about their lives in their country of origin. Individual differences between them are pointed out. The goal is to help them face their difficulties, many of which stem from their being different from the surrounding society, but not to interject the idea that different is necessarily negative.

I shall first discuss some of the relevant literature dealing with the responses of minority groups to their situation. Following that I shall introduce the various verbal expressions of children in two of these support groups. These expressions will be discussed in light of the categories suggested by the literature.

MINORITY GROUP RESPONSES

A number of categories have been formulated to characterize the reactions of minority groups to their situation. In describing the responses many writers refer to some combination of emotions, cognitions, and behavior which express what Rinder (1970) calls "The identificatory decision" (see Berry, 1958; Hunt and Walker, 1979; Kurokawa, 1970; Rinder, 1970; Rose, 1970; Schermerhorn, 1970; Wirth, 1970). The factors determining the response are usually looked for in two main areas. One is the minority group's internal environment: morale, cultural heritage, economic power. These are factors which influence how much the minority group wants to keep or lose its distinct identity. The other area is the minority's external environment: the degree of racial and cultural similarity to the dominant group, power relations between the groups, degree of acceptance by the dominant group, and other factors which determine how much the dominant group want the minority to adopt their identity (Rinder, 1970).

Despite specific variations, there is some agreement as to how to categorize minority group members' reactions. Five such categories are often used.

Assimilation, also referred to as integration or conformism, is one category. This is the process by which groups with diverse beliefs and behavior patterns become absorbed into another culture. The end product is the elimination of the group as a distinct cultural entity. Assimilation is a minority response occurring only when both the dominant and the minority group want it.

Most writers see assimilation as a complex process. The minority group members often want it only up to a point. The dominant group often pushes for accelerated assimilation on the one hand, but on the other hand erects obstacles to assimilation. Also, assimilation may be slow and proceed at different rates in different spheres. Some cited examples are Mexico, Brazil, and Whites in the US (Berry, 1985; Hunt and walker, 1979; Kurokawa, 1970; Rinder, 1970; Rose, 1970; Schermerhorn, 1970; Wirth, 1970).

Pluralism is a second category, also labelled accommodation, cultural pluralism, accommodated pluralism, or voluntary segregation. This occurs when the minority group desires equality with, but separation from, the dominant group and the dominant group concurs.

Pluralism is often the result of minority defense against discrimination. Tolerance for differences requires that the dominant group feel sufficiently secure in its position. Rarely is there a stable state of pluralism, and there is often a movement into other response orientations. Examples are Switzerland; Yugoslavia; Jews, Chinese, and Japanese in the US (Hunt and walker, 1979; Kurokawa, 1970; Reisman, 1970; Rinder, 1970; Rosenthal, 1970; Wirth, 1970; Yuan, 1970).

Submission is described as another response pattern. It is also referred to as group self-hatred, acceptance, segregation, or forced segregation. This is the minority members' response when they adopt an orientation of assimilation but the dominant group rejects them. Because of the dependence of the self-image on transactions with others, the rejection by a highly valued reference group leads to a loss of self-respect and to self-hatred. A commonly cited example are the Blacks of the US (Berry, 1958; Hunt and Walker, 1979; Kurokawa, 1970; Rinder, 1970; Rose, 1970).

A fourth response category is militancy, also referred to as aggression or contention, which is characterized by the rejection of the dominant group's negative attitude. This is often the response adopted as more and more individuals become aware of the group self-hatred caused by acceptance of an unfavorable evaluation of the self by others. Cited cases are the Black protest movements in the US and the Jewish Anti-Defamation League (Berry, 1958; Kurokawa, 1970; Reisman, 1970; Rinder, 1970; Wirth, 1970).

A final possible response pattern of minority groups is secession. Also called avoidance or revitalization, this response is adopted when the minority is not satisfied with or cannot achieve the above mentioned solutions. It then demands both political and cultural independence. Secession involves total rejection of the existing social order. Examples mentioned are Black nationalism in the US and Zionism (Berry, 1958; Kurokawa, 1970; Rinder, 1970; Wirth, 1970).

Members of a specific minority group do not all adopt the same response orientation and different responses can co-exist. But some response trends can be more salient at a given time than others. For example, various periods in Jewish history can

be characterized by the dominant response patterns of Jews in the Diaspora, alternating between assimilation (the "Enlightenment" period in Europe) and secession (political Zionism).

I have found it useful to analyze the verbal responses of young adolescent new immigrants from Ethiopia in categories resembling those mentioned above.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN ETHIOPIAN JEWS AND ISRAELI SOCIETY

Before discussing the verbal responses of young immigrants from Ethiopia, it seems useful to review factors that may affect that response.

Two background characteristics of the Ethiopian Jewish population are relevant here. Ethiopian Jews have a strong Jewish and Zionist identity; and their family structure has suffered partial destruction because of the generally unstable conditions in Ethiopia and the conditions of immigration.

These two factors would presumably operate in making the new immigrants from Ethiopia expect to be accepted by the dominant group and less able to receive support from their own group. The predicted preferred response orientation would probably be assimilation.

The meeting-point between the immigrants and the dominant group can be characterized by great differences between these two groups in the degree of their exposure to Western values and technology, in their level of schooling, their ways of practicing Judaism, skin color, and language. In all but the language area the Ethiopian new immigrants seem to differ from veteran Israelis more than any other immigrant group before them. This would tend to make for difficult and slow assimilation.

It must be stressed that Israeli society has a strong ideology of assimilation of incoming Jewish groups. This is expressed in the goal of "kibbutz galuyot" [ingathering of exiles] and "mizug galuyot" [merging of exiles] (Eisenstadt, 1967). In comparison to Western countries there is a stronger pressure on the individual to conform, concomitant with a stronger readiness to help and care for others (Heb: "Kol yisrael arevin ze lazeh" [all Israel are responsible for one another]). The combined result of the pressure and the help is an orientation that "we are willing to help you but you must be like us." The experiences of the Jewish people as a minority group throughout much of their history and the lack of the feeling of existential security in Israel have probably not allowed for pluralism or accommodation. Only in the past few years has there been somewhat more acceptance of cultural pluralism, as a result of minority groups' militant responses following group self-hatred (Smooha, 1978).

The combined effect of the characteristics of Ethiopian immigrants, Israeli society, and their meeting point would probably be a strong push and pull toward assimilation, at a rate and on terms which are impossible to achieve. Ethiopian Jews wish to assimilate rapidly, but find the process a difficult one. As a consequence, there is a risk that they may be drawn to submission or to group self-hatred.

THE PARTICIPANTS

As a partial means of defending against group self-hatred, two support groups were established for young adolescent immigrants from Ethiopia. One group was composed of four girls, aged eleven and twelve, who had been in Israel for about three and a half

years at the inception of the group. They were beginning their third year in a regular school class with veteran Israelis.

The second group was made up of five boys, aged nine to eleven, who had been in Israel for about a year and a half. At the time of the group's inception they were beginning their first year in a regular class.

Each of the boys and girls had studied for one year in a special class for Ethiopian immigrants. The girls were placed in regular classes after the special class for immigrants had been cancelled. The boys had been selected from their special class after having been assessed as capable of attending regular classes. The participants of both groups were the only Ethiopian children of their age or older to attend regular classes at their school. Members of both groups were facing school problems, the girls more than the boys.

Each group met at school once every two weeks for about five months during the 1983-84 school year. The sessions were conducted in Hebrew. The psychologist conducting the sessions was not a member of the Ethiopian community.

THE IMMIGRANT CHILDREN'S RESPONSES

The response patterns described above refer to some combination of emotions, cognitions, and actions. Group sessions provided opportunities for the expression of emotions and cognitions, without actual actions. However, since these three elements are linked, it is felt that emotion and cognition could be analysed using the same basic concepts. It is important to note that this paper does not try to describe the actual reality of everyday life, but rather the emotional reality of the members of these groups.

The members of the groups discussed a wide variety of subjects during the sessions. These included matters relating to their personal conditions as immigrants and as children. There were memories from Ethiopia, the issue of being black in a largely white society, lack of money, first encounters with the new reality, relationships with classmates, teachers' attitudes, and school achievement. The response patterns were derived from these discussions, and will be demonstrated through examples from the childrens' expressions in these sessions.

Cultural pluralism on the individual level was expressed by statements that reflected on differences without assigning them any negative value. This was expressed when the boys spoke very enthusiastically about their new experiences when they first came to Israel, stressing the discovery of the unknown without shame about not knowing: trying an apple, not knowing how to climb stairs, using electricity, looking out of a high window. It was also expressed when talking about their families, as when some of the girls talked painfully but openly about violent incidents in their homes, or discussed wedding and birth customs in Ethiopia, noting that Ethiopian Jews are purer than Israeli Jews as menstruating Ethiopian women sequester themselves from the rest of the community.

"I am different" was also expressed when the group members talked painfully about not having enough money, without denying the fact as they had done on other occasions. This category of expression was most common when bringing up memories from Ethiopia such as helping their parents to herd sheep or grind corn.

The submission or self-hate category was often expressed indirectly by hiding differences or wishing for a change. The distinction between "You are bad" and "I am bad" does not always exist, since what is expressed is often: "I am angry at you for mentioning that I am different, because we both agree that being different is bad." Responses in this category were very common in the group sessions. They occurred when talking about being Black, through expressing pain at being called "kushi" (i.e. Negro, Black). Shame about one's mother coming to school because she was Black, and hope of becoming White (when the Messiah comes) were also expressed. Negative self-images were often expressed when family matters were discussed, as when the girls accused one another of having been married in Ethiopia, each one denying it about herself, or when a boy was ashamed of living with his grandmother because his parents were separated. It was also expressed when trying to deny that they had less pocket money than their school-mates, and when some insisted that they had gone to school and had celebrated Hanukka (a festival unknown in Ethiopian Judaism) in Ethiopia just as they do in Israel.

The militancy verbal response category involves expression of negative views of the majority group. This category was represented by responses which criticized non-Ethiopians, or otherwise implied outward-directed anger and aggression. The rational or irrational idea expressed by this kind of response is: "You are bad because you point out my differences, or because you treat me badly for being different."

Responses falling in this category were expressed, for example, when some girls criticized their teacher for giving them low marks or when both boys and girls talked angrily about being called "kushi", or being treated in what they considered a negative fashion because of their skin color.

Almost all the children reacted angrily to the label "kushi". Some boys reported having hit those who had so called them. It was impossible to determine whether these were factual accounts or were expressions of an unfulfilled desire for action. In any case, the anger was genuine.

There were very few expressions that could be related to the assimilation or secession categories. It should be borne in mind that these two modes of response are extreme: the former denoting complete renunciation of group boundaries, the latter insisting on definite boundaries between the minority and the dominant group.

One example of the rare instances of responses that could be categorized as assimilative was the report by one boy about his good test marks. Children sometimes related events in school in a manner that implied they were already taking them for granted: "Our teacher was sick today", "I was late for school", etc. One explanation for the scarcity of assimilation responses could be that the groups were perceived by the participants as meant for dealing with conflictual subjects, so that non-problematic areas were not raised. In everyday life there may have been more assimilation than was reflected in the group sessions. Nonetheless, there was probably less assimilation than we sometimes wishfully tend to believe.

Secession responses were probably not in evidence because the conditions for such an extreme response do not exist. And, the absence of responses that could fall into the secession category may be a result of the relatively short experience of the Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. The absence of the secession response can also be attributed to the specific experiences of the group members, since all of them, particularly the boys, had experienced some degree of success or acceptance at school or elsewhere.

Many of the verbal responses recorded do not seem to fit into any of the response behavior categories discussed. It would probably be useful to add two additional response pattern categories to those cited from the literature. Both patterns constitute attempts to deny personal negative images.

One such response was the attempt by the children to convince themselves that difference is not negative. In one instance, while talking about being black, one of the girls unconvincingly declared she was satisfied with her skin color. Her response had been triggered by another girl who had expressed frustration about her color. This "satisfied" verbal response was definitely incompatible with her angry tone of voice and aggressive movements, indicating considerable ambivalence about the statement.

The second category of additional responses consisted of attempts to fight the totality of the difference. One way of doing so was by making statements that implied that "underneath it all we are not different". This kind of response could be seen in the interest girls showed in my own biography. They were satisfied only when they found my own parents had immigrated from abroad, just as they themselves had done. By this they were perhaps emphasizing basic similarities. A second way of fighting the totality of the difference was by suggesting "there are some groups [among the majority] from whom we do not differ". This was implied when some girls remarked that the Yemenite and Indian Jews are dark too. A third way of reducing the difference was by suggesting that "there are some groups we are better than..." To support this contention the children stated that "the Sudanese in the refugee camps were darker than us".

In summary, being Black and lack of money seemed to be the most difficult themes. The responses during discussions of these subjects fell mainly in the categories of militancy and self-hatred. Memories from Ethiopia were the least difficult, that is, they mainly fell into the pluralist category. One reason could be that that theme included no conflict about differences. For the participants they also represented evidence of their ability to cope.

CONCLUSION

This paper has dealt with children's responses to the cultural transition situation of an immigrant minority group. An analysis of the childrens' responses has yielded responses that fall into four of the five response patterns which have been reported in the literature of minority group responses: assimilation, pluralism, group self-hatred, and militancy.

Two additional response patterns have been noted: an attempt to legitimize differences and an attempt to minimize them. Israeli children who had immigrated from Ethiopia attempted to combat negative self-images by rejecting the equation of differences and badness and by trying to reduce the totality of the difference.

The evidence does not indicate conclusively the extent to which their attempts are successful. A year after the study, their teachers have reported that most of the groups' participants had progressed both socially and academically. This indirect evidence seems to indicate that time and the accumulation of experience have increased the feelings of assimilation and pluralism.

The response patterns described in this paper reflect only two small samples of immigrant children. Nonetheless, the findings may shed light on the issues and the challenges facing other immigrants from Ethiopia in Israel.

REFERENCES

Berry, Brewton
1958 Race and ethnic relations. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Eisenstadt, Shmuel
1967 Israeli society. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Hunt, Chester and Lewis Walker
1979 Ethnic dynamics: Patterns of intergroup relations in various societies (2nd edition). Homes Beach, Florida: Learning Publications.

Kurokawa, Minako
1970 Minority responses: Comparative views of reaction to subordination. N.Y.: Random House.

Reisman, David
1970 "The 'militant fight' against Anti-Semitism." Pp. 15-21 in Kurokawa, M. (ed) Minority responses: Comparative views of reaction to subordination. N.Y.: Random House.

Rinder, I.D.
1970 "Minority orientations: An approach to intergroup relations theory through social psychology." Pp. 43-54 in Kurokawa, M. (ed) Minority responses: Comparative views of reaction to subordination. N.Y.: Random House.

Rose, Peter
1970 "They and we: Racial and ethnic relations in the US." Pp. 60-67 in Kurokawa, M. (ed) Minority responses: Comparative views of reaction to subordination. N.Y.: Random House.

Rosenthal, Erich
1970 "Acculturation without assimilation: The Jewish community of Chicago, Illinois." in Kurokawa, M. (ed) Minority responses: Comparative views of reaction to subordination. N.Y.: Random House.

Schermerhorn, R.A.
1970 "Polarity in the approach to comparative research in ethnic relations." Pp. 55-59 in Kurokawa, M. (ed) Minority responses: Comparative views of reaction to subordination. N.Y.: Random House.

Smooha, Sammy
1978 Israel: Pluralism and conflict. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Wirth, Louis
1970 "The problem of minority groups." Pp. 34-42 in Kurokawa, M. (ed) Minority responses: Comparative views of reaction to subordination. N.Y.: Random House.

Yuan, D.Y.
1978 "Voluntary segregation: A study of New York Chinatown." in Kurokawa, M. (ed) Minority responses: Comparative views of reacstion to subordination. N.Y.: Random House.