

**Unity and Invisible Identities:
Toward an Intersectional Analysis of Israeli Society¹**

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Abstract

Most approaches to the study of Israeli society focus singly on gender, ethnicity, or class with a focus only on external relationships with Arab neighbors instead of on internal processes within Israel that operate on multiple levels. This paper challenges a lack of intersectional approaches to the study of Israeli society and the U.S. domination of the intersectionality literature. I demonstrate the ways in which institutions such as military, family, and education in Israel are gendered, classed, and racialized, and then make recommendations for overcoming limitations to an intersectional analysis.

Keywords: Race, gender, class, intersectionality, Israel, social theory

Studies of Israel generally fail to take into account intersectionality (see Dahan-Kalev 2003 for a unique exception). Instead they tend to singly look at individual or sometimes dual factors such as gender, nation, religion, class, or ethnicity with a focus only on relationships with Arab neighbors instead of on internal processes within Israel that operate on multiple levels. Intersectionality is an approach that acknowledges that categorical identities are mutually constituted and intersect in a matrix of domination whereby oppressions are organized in intersecting ways (Collins 1998, 2000). Instead of adding sexism to racism or taking the experience of women and adding it to the experience of people of color, we must look at how these systems interact with each other and recognize that categories such as gender are shaped by different locations within the matrix of domination according to other categories such as race and class. According to Israeli sociologist Sammy Smooha, “true multiculturalism in the wider Israeli context would mean a social and ideological revolution (71).” In order to achieve the revolution presented by Smooha requires a better understanding of how difference operates in Israel. An intersectional understanding of difference in Israel aids two groups: 1) those studying Israel to have a more complex and whole picture, and 2) those who study intersectionality more broadly since the field is dominated by studies of the United States. I build from the work of Israeli scholar Henriette Dahan-Kalev, who recognizes that “understanding the matrix of oppression is an indispensable precondition for the process of liberation (2001, 678).” Still, there are many constraints on an intersectional approach to the study of Israeli society.

Discussing intersecting systems of domination challenges Israeli nationalist discourses in dangerous ways. My understanding of these constraints is drawn from my experiences doing fieldwork in Israel during the summer of 2005 and as a student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem studying gender from 1997-2000. My fieldwork was focused inside a feminist

organization in Jerusalem. I describe my struggles in attempting to bring an intersectional approach into practice.

In this paper, I challenge the possibility of studying Israelis as an amalgamated group and argue for taking an intersectional approach to the study of Israelis society. Since “Israeli” is a highly contested identity (both in terms of citizenship and inclusion within society), I begin by defining who is included in my analysis and who is not. I then examine gender, race, and class as significant categories of difference within Israeli society. While this is a difficult task, since each category of race, class and gender intersects, I want to stress the importance of all three for the purpose of advocating the inclusion of each into any analysis of Israeli society in a manner that recognizes “intersecting, overlapping, and mutually affecting fields of experience (Spikard 2008, 1)”. I discuss each category separately following the style of discourse from the current literature, and in each section of this paper, I note discuss the problems with analyzing women, Mizrahim, and Jews as a unified group. I conclude by offering an intersectional approach to studies of Israeli society, noting the constraints of such an approach.

Israeli: Contested Identity

“Israeli” is a highly contested identity connected to nation, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. In sociological research, “Israeli” is often synonymous with a heterosexual, middle class, Ashkenazi² man (see Cohen and Haberfeld 2004, 28; Goldthorpe, Yaish, and Kraus 2004, 138). When divisions in Israel are described, they tend to be done so through dualities –

² Ashkenazi refers to Jewish ethnic roots from Central and Eastern Europe. Sephardic, meaning literally from Spain, refers to Jewish roots from Spain and (one time) Spanish colonies including North Africa, Greece, and Turkey. Mizrahi, a newer term literally meaning Eastern, has largely replaced Sephardic in terms of identity. Mizrahi generally denotes Jews with historical roots in the Middle East, but is also inclusive of a small number of Jews from other Asian countries such as India. Jews who immigrated from Ethiopian are a separate category. Recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union are excluded from some Ashkenazi privileges. See the ADL’s website: http://www.adl.org/Israel/Record/immigration_since_30.asp for a list of individual countries and how they are conflated into these three categories of Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, and Ethiopian.

Jews/Arabs (Mazawi 2004), Ashkenazim/Mizrahim³ (Cohen and Haberfeld 2004, Dar and Resh 2004), men/women (Izraeli 2004, Alon and Steir 2004). These approaches ignore the contradictions within the multiplicity of identities (Anzaldúa 1999).

Here I look at all those who live within the geographical boundaries of the State of Israel. This includes approximately 7.5 million peopleⁱ, 80% of whom are Jewish (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein 2004, 1). Additionally, there are more than 300,000 foreign workers, often from “lesser developed” countries, half of whom are undocumented (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein 2004, 1). There are Christian pilgrims, religious personnel, and tourists from around the world who permanently reside in Israel. The latter often do not speak Hebrew and are largely unconnected from Israeli culture.

Palestinian Arabs residing within the contested borders of Israel are a diverse group. Some hold citizenship and some do not. Some live in otherwise Jewish areas, some in separate Arab neighborhoods in Jewish towns, others in Arab cities like Nazareth or small Palestinian villages. Palestinian Arabs are Muslim, Christian, and Druze (sect offshoot of Islam). Arab Israelis often have relatives in Palestinian-controlled areas, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere around the world. Palestinians who reside outside of the geo-political boundaries of Israel may work within Israel and have daily contact with Israelis, often through the military. In this article, I exclude Palestinians living in Gaza and outside the green line in the West Bank from my analysis because they reside beyond Israel’s borders.

Jewish Israelis are a highly diverse group as well. Some trace ancestors to Israel over hundreds of years. Others are recent immigrants or the children of immigrants. Israelis largely

³ Note: the spelling of ethnic groups in Israel listed here reflects the gender and number of those spoken of according to the Hebrew language. Ashkenazi/Mizrahi refer to an individual man. Ashkenazit/Mizrahit refer to an individual woman. Ashkenazim/Mizrahim refer to a group of people either of both genders or comprised of men only. Ashkenaziot/Mizrahiot refer to a group of women.

define themselves in terms of religion as either “religious” (Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox) or secular⁴ in part due to the state power of “religious” authorities. Some have immigrated under the law of return⁵ as Jews but are not considered to be Jews by the religious authorities (largely the case of some immigrants from the former Soviet Union and in some cases the immigrants from Ethiopia).

Despite the diversity of Israelis across categories such as ethnic, nation, religion/religiosity, sexuality, and class, identities are held onto very seriously and intensely. I consider all of the above mentioned groups in my analysis, looking at how race, class, and gender create a matrix of domination in Israel. I demonstrate how many categories of identity are conflated. Pulling apart these identities and demonstrating the oppressions that lie within them must be done in a sensitive and careful manner. In Israel, identity can be the basis of violence and war. Identities are so foundational that people literally wear them: a single item of clothing, like the size and fabric of a keepah, can denote gender, religion/religiosity, nation, ethnicity, and politics. Participants in my study often responded quite negatively when, at the end of an interview, I asked a series of demographic questions. In the rest of this paper, I demonstrate why and how identity in Israel is constructed and demonstrate how responses to demographic questions highlight this construction.

Conflating Gender and Sexuality in Military and Family

⁴ There are relatively few Conservative and Reform Jews in Israel. Judaism in Israel is dominated by Orthodox and ultra- Orthodox sects. Those who do not adhere to halacha (religious law) as defined by these sects tend to identify as secular, even if they practice Jewish holidays and follow Jewish dietary laws.

⁵ The law of return is an Israeli policy which provides citizenship to any Jewish person, as defined by the state. Religious authorities, who control lifecycle events such as marriage and burial, have different definitions of who is a Jew.

Military and family are foundational institutions in Israeli society. In this section, I will describe how gender and sexuality are conflated in Israel by focusing on military and family as central locations in Israel where gender and hegemonic heterosexuality are “done.” I do this by relating the “new Jew” as a masculine soldier dependent upon performances of femininity through motherhood. The “new Jew” is a challenge to previous hegemony of the idealized Jew who studied religious texts and was victimized by anti-Semitic violence including the Holocaust. As Tennenbaum and Silver (1998) describe: “The prevailing image of a Jew was that of a weak, helpless victim; a person resigned to his or her fate....During the war [of Independence], a new Jew had emerged: one who was proud, confident, defiant, and willing to fight. Yet, simultaneously, Jewish values and morality had emerged as an important part of this new Jewish Army (“1948”).⁶ Not all Israelis can fit the hegemonic norms of the “new Jew”, built on an assumption of being both masculine and Ashkenazi. In this section, I demonstrate the need for an intersectional approach by noting the ways in which scholars acknowledge the ways in which military and family are gendered in Israel, and then describe how these are further complicated by citizenship and ethnicity. An intersectional approach to studying military and family in Israel would take into account how gender, citizenship, and ethnicity are mutually constitutive in these institutions.

Scholars such as Enloe (1998, 1990) argue that the military is a force of influence over gender ideologies across states. Zahal, the Hebrew acronym for the Israeli Defense Forces, holds special importance in Israel, as one of its most important and influential institutions. Zahal is involved in every sector of Israeli society and holds a privileged position in the national ethos (Izraeli 2004, 283). The military “sanctions and sanctifies” gender ideologies (Izraeli 2004,

⁶ Pages are marked not in order from 1 onward, but in years of Israeli history.

285). Two frameworks are useful in understanding the operation of gender ideologies in Israel: West and Zimmerman’s framework of “doing gender” and West and Fenstermaker’s framework of “doing difference”. To do gender is to act at the risk of gender assessment (West and Zimmerman 2002, 13). “...A person engaged in virtually any activity may be held accountable for performance of that activity as a *woman* or a *man*⁷, and their incumbency in one or the other sex category can be used to legitimate or discredit their other activities (West and Zimmerman 2002, 13).” Society holds individual men and women accountable for a successful performance of heterosexual masculinity or femininity, depending upon sex category. Conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity are multiple, heteronormative, and vary by ethnicity, nation, socioeconomic class, and other factors.

The military is central for the performance of hegemonic Israeli masculinity. From birth, an Israeli boy is “treated as a future soldier who may be called upon to die for his country” (Izraeli 2004, 286). At the age of 17-18, all citizens of Israel (with the exception of ultra-Orthodox Jews and most Arabs⁸), men and women, are drafted for service in the military. Length of service is determined by gender – men serve three years while women serve less than two (Izraeli 2004, 288). Generally, only men do reserve service following their regular service of up to three months per year until the age of 55 (Waintrater 1993, 117).

Gender is the most fundamental category of difference in the military. Izraeli (2004) explains how Zahal constructs and reinforces gender inequality:

With few exceptions, recently introduced, they [men and women] are classified, sorted, and assigned by different organizational units using different criteria;

⁷ Italics are the authors’.

⁸ Ultra-Orthodox Jews are given the option of doing “national service,” a form of volunteer work and/or studying in Yeshiva instead of serving in the military. Arab Israelis are generally not expected to do military service due to their complicated national identity. Druze are an exception to this, as they tend to serve in the military.

undergo separate and different military training; and serve in different positions and for different lengths of time. They are governed by different allowed behaviors, and until 2000, were subject to different systems of command. There are gender divisions of authority, with men monopolizing the highest positions of power (286).”

Military service is fundamentally different for men and women, and service is based on gender difference including different time lengths of service and different roles within the military. While Israel was one of the first countries to draft women, military service does not challenge gender inequality, but reinforces it.

Hegemonic masculinity in Israel is achieved through serving as a soldier in combat (Izraeli 2004, 293; Sasson Levy 2003, 323). Since citizenship is highly tied with military service, Sasson-Levy claims that this leaves women as second-class citizens (2003, 322). Successful performances of hegemonic masculinity create “protectzia,” a Hebrew word for favoritism, influence, and pull (Levy 1995). Protectzia influences job opportunities, political clout, as well as the ability to maneuver through bureaucracy. Groups failing to achieve this hegemonic masculinity, including women, lack the social capital of those successfully achieving it.

Being drafted into Zahal serves an initiation rite for men into adulthood; women achieve similar status through marriage (Izraeli 2004, 285). Marriage, pregnancy and motherhood are grounds for exemption from military service (Amzon and Izraeli 1993, 12). While the military is the avenue designated for men to perform citizenship, for women that avenue is through family. Israeli women are accountable to the achievement of a hegemonic Israeli femininity through the act of marriage, bearing and raising children.

Motherhood is central to the performance of hegemonic Israeli femininity. This performance is highly tied to militarized performances of masculinity due to the continual military conflict. Amzon and Izraeli (1993) argue that the Arab-Israeli conflict heightens the centrality of motherhood: “The continued state of hostility between Israel and its Arab neighbors also puts pressure on women to sustain the traditional family, whether as refuge from insecurity or as homage to men for their sacrifice and protection (2).” While the Arab-Israeli conflict does not directly lead to a traditional family, the conflict does shape masculine and feminine gender expectations. For Israeli women, in particular those whose husbands and sons are not exempt from military service, motherhood becomes a response to the role of soldiering for men. As opposed to mothers in other countries, Israeli mothers’ family commitments remain demanding as they send their children to the army (Amzon and Izraeli 1993, 3). The option for performing hegemonic femininity tends to be singularly based around supporting and reproducing soldiers.

Since sex category, gender, and sexuality are inextricably linked, all those who are assigned at birth to belong to the category of male are held accountable to perform hegemonic Israeli masculinity. All those performing masculinity are assumed to be attracted to females performing femininity. Thus, performing masculinity is tied to soldiering (active, aggression) and performing femininity is tied to mothering (passive caring for others’ needs over your own).

The conflation of sex category, gender, and sexuality were apparent during my study. At the end of one of my first interviews in Israel, I asked a series of demographic questions. The interviewee told me that these questions made her feel uncomfortable, and she did not see why they were relevant. When I asked her sexual orientation, she answered “normalit” - normal, not deviant - in an angry tone which made it clear that she was offended by my question. To question sexual orientation was an insult to this interviewee – it *should* have been obvious that

she is heterosexual. Her homophobia demonstrated why others told me that they do not share their lesbian or queer identity at organization. There is only space for heterosexual Israeli women and therefore no room for any identity that challenges the unity of Israeli women.

The heteronormativity and homophobia mirrored what I saw throughout Jerusalem. The only gay bar in town is located in a secret, unmarked location, but still been victimized by arson. A stabbing occurred during the gay pride parade. But, outside queer circles, these things were rarely discussed. When I mentioned to Jerusalemites that as a scholar I was interested in what happened at the gay pride parade, I often heard homophobic comments. One secular friend explained to me that it is not appropriate to hold a gay pride parade in Jerusalem because the city is a holy space; queers should move to Tel Aviv. I imagine that my experiences with homophobia would have been different if I had been in another part of Israel, such as Tel Aviv.

Those who fail to perform hegemonic femininity and masculinity are held accountable in ways too numerous to fully address here but include homophobic hate crimes, hatred and anger expressed at Women in Black demonstrators whose politics challenge their roles as supportive mothers, and the closing opportunities for men who fail to achieve during their military service. Those who fail to provide successful performances of masculinity or femininity are often erased from studies of Israeli society. Since, to consider a unified experience of “women” would erase important differences between women in Israel, the next sections complicate the performance of hegemonic Israeli femininity and masculinity for particular groups.

Classism within Classless Zionist Ideology

In this section, I explore how class operates in Israel, noting how class and ethnicity are intertwined. Zionist ideology has strong roots in socialism, leading to an ideology that Jewish

Israel is a classless society. The idea of a classless society is also rooted in pre-state and early state economic conditions, which were quite poor for most (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein 2004, 1).

Since the founding of the state in 1948, Israel underwent many waves of socioeconomic change. As described above, pre and early statehood were periods of general poverty. In the first 20 years after Independence, the Jewish population of 650,000 absorbed approximately one million immigrants (Eban 1984, 326). Immigration continued steadily. Pre and early state immigrants were largely Ashkenazim from Europe. Later, during the mid 1950s and 1960s, Mizrahim immigrated from the Middle East (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein 2004, 4). While Ashkenazi immigrants benefited from favoritism based on cultural affinity, Mizrahim suffered discrimination (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein 2004, 4). Ashkenazi immigrants assimilated and had equal class standing to their sabra (native Israeli) peers by 1975 (Cohen and Haberfeld 2004, 18). However, Mizrahim have yet to do so (Cohen and Haberfeld 2004, 18). While educational and occupational gaps between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi women have been closing, this has been attributed to the sexual division of labor (Cohen and Haberfeld 2004, 27).

Education is highlighted by sociologists of Israel (Cohen and Haberfeld 2004, Shavit 2004, Mazawi 2004) as central to the production of inequality in Israel. Shavit (2004, 39) notes that most Arabs live in separate villages or small towns from Israelis and attend separate schools. Christian Arabs are more likely to attend private, church-affiliated schools with superior reputations (Shavit 2004, 39). However, Arabs are claimed to have fared better educationally than Mizrahi Jews, since they attend separate schools than the Ashkenazi Jews (Shavit 2004).

High school drop-out rates were high for Mizrahi Jewish in the 1950s and 60s (Shavit 2004, 40). In response, vocational tracks were created in schools for Mizrahim in order to

increase retention rates (Shavit 2004, 40). These tracks increased school retention rates, but have not resulted in increased rates of receiving higher education among Mizrahim (Shavit 2004, 40-41). On the other hand, since Israeli Arabs have been in separate schools and no effort was made there to create vocational tracks, Israeli Arabs have a higher rate of receiving college degrees than Mizrahim (Shavit 2004). Shavit explains that “Unlike the Oriental Jews [Mizrahim], Arabs did not threaten academic standards in the Jewish schools because they attended a separate system. In addition, there was less official concern with the Arab dropout rate than with that of Oriental Jews (Shavit 2004, 49).” Without directly discussing the racial relationship between Mizrahim and Arabs, Shavit equates the two groups. Since Mizrahim and Arabs share ethnic backgrounds, dynamics of race and nation are also at play; this will be further explored in the next section.

Another factor in social inequality in Israel is time in the country since immigration. It is widely argued that economic and social disparities are related to time since immigration. However, since there are correlations between ethnicity, nation, and class worth exploring. The feminist organization where I conducted fieldwork in Israel assumed a unity of women’s experience; they claim to serve all women and that all women can be served in the same way. The staff of the organization was composed almost exclusively of Ashkenazi women. While the organization has a project to serve the needs of recent Russian immigrants, the needs of Ethiopians and Mizrahim are largely ignored.

Race: Why They Say It Doesn’t Exist in Israel

Race, ethnicity, and nation are concepts that are often conflated in the sociology of Israel. Race is a seemingly taboo topic, rarely mentioned in sociological literature on Israel.

This is in part due to the conflation of race, ethnicity, and nation. Due to the history of Nazis considering Jews to be a separate race as a part of their ideology of anti-Semitism, the mere word “race” brings connotations of the Holocaust. Generally, race is seen as something irrelevant to modern Israel, both to scholars and to Israelis themselves. In this section, I will look at nation and ethnicity as frames of analysis as well as examine race as a fundamental axis of social organization in Israel.

Not all citizens of Israel are Jewish. However, the state was founded as a Jewish national state and “Jewish interests” are primary, even above a conceptualization of Israeli interests. As Shavit (2004) explains: “The political system is aimed at the realization of Jewish national interests and aspirations, and is much more responsive to claims made by Jews than by Arabs. Jews enjoy a greater relative and absolute share of the resources allocated by the state and enjoy more favorable occupational and educational opportunities (38-9).” The ideology of this Jewish nation was to serve as a bastion to Jews living in states across the globe in countries not welcoming to Jews. While citizenship has been offered to groups of Arab residents of Israel at different times, limited Arab citizenship has not changed the concept of the state of Israel as a Jewish state.

Citizenship is varied for different groups of people. In order to be considered an ideal citizen, one must serve in the military: “In Israel, military service as ‘a key citizenship-certification process’ is equated with service to the Jewish collective and, as such, is constructed to be the basis for entitlement to full citizenship in the Jewish state and in a sense, even for consideration as a normal human being (Izraeli 2004, 284).” Izraeli describes how women are excluded from full citizenship in Israel due to the “lesser” military service they do/perform.

Sasson-Levy confirms the conflation of citizenship with military service. “In this Republican discourse of citizenship, the ‘good citizen’ is the Jewish male who has served in a combat role and has thus proved his willingness to risk his life for the good of the country (2003, 322).” She argues that soldiers who come from lower socio-economic classes do not achieve this good citizen label, stating that the majority of these soldiers are Mizrahim or recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who were tracked in school in a vocational track. She further argues that the army reproduces ethnic and class stratification (2003, 324). Weiss (2001) argues that nationalism in Israel, in part through military service, is an embodied discourse. Identity – gender, national, religious, and ethnic becomes inscribed on the body.

Most Arab Israelis do not serve in the military, receiving an exemption based on nationality. The exemption prevents forcing Arab Israelis from fighting other non-Israeli Arabs. Because they do not serve in the military, however, they are seen as not contributing to the state in the way as those who do serve. The conflation of nation and ethnicity can be seen by the trend of particular ethnic groups being considered lesser citizens.

Since those from Middle Eastern backgrounds are at the lower ends of society, it leaves open the question of race. Is there something about Middle Eastern (or Eastern altogether) that is related to the social inequalities in Israel? Omi and Winant (1986) present a paradigm of social inequality called racial formation, which “refers to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings (Omi and Winant 1986, 61).” Racial formation is both a micro, focused on interactions between people, and a macro/structural theory of racial meanings. Does racial formation occur in Israel?

This is a question concerning whether national, class, and ethnic inequalities will/can be eradicated in Israel. In terms of nation and class, it is unlikely that inequalities will dissipate between Arabs and Jews. One could argue that this is in part exacerbated by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which places Israeli Arabs in conflictual roles of Israeli and Palestinian Arab, both citizen and enemy. Inequalities between Israeli Jews, however, should not persist over time, according to the present national and socialist ideologies. Zionism was meant to create “melting pot,” bringing all Jews back to their national homeland to create a unified, socially-oriented society whereby Diaspora cultures would be given up as a new Israeli culture is created (Smootha 2004). While some scholars of Israel tend to see ethnicity as merely symbolic for differences between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Israelis, connections between ethnicity and class are real (Smootha 2004, Schwartz et al 1991). Clearly, inequalities between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim will not disappear anytime soon.

Critiques of the feminist movement in Israel are beginning to raise the issue of domination of the movement by Ashkenazi women. Dahan-Kalev (2003) critiques the Israeli feminist movement for ignoring the issues of Mizrahi women. Tokenized as the only Mizrahi in *Jewish Feminism in Israel*, issues of Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and new Russian immigrants are generally otherwise ignored. Similarly, in another book on this topic, a few pages at the end are offered for “Multiple Voices,” however these voices are not integrated into the analysis in the rest of the book (Halperin-Kaddari 2004). The *Israeli Women Studies Reader* theorizes that differences between women are “factionalism and divisiveness” (Fuchs 2005, 23). This is not an intersectional approach, which would value recognizing differences. The hegemony of Ashkenazi women is so strong within some feminist circles, that when Mizrahi women attempted to raise their issues at a feminist conference in 1984, one Ashkenazi feminist responded: “We

wanted them to start behaving like Israelis, for God’s sake – that is to behave like an Ashkenazi!” (as cited in Dahan-Kalev 2001, 676).

Ethiopian Jews who immigrated to Israel starting in the 1980s are another racialized ethnic group in Israel who suffer major discrimination in Israel. As the only racially Black group in Israel, they warrant investigation. However, there has been little sociological literature written about this group, and due to space constraints here, I have largely left them out of the analysis. The link between being a non-European and encountering discrimination requires further analysis.

In my own experiences in Israel, race is a taboo topic of discussion and seen as irrelevant to Israel. Even mentioning ethnic discrimination challenges nationalist ideologies of equality and unity. In my demographic questions, I asked respondents about their race. Several explained to me how the word “race” has nasty, Nazi connotations. One person told me that if I wasn’t Jewish, she would have considered my asking that question to be anti-Semitic. Many described their race as “Jewish.” After I met with Henriette Dahan-Kalev, I interviewed one of two Mizrahi staff at the feminist organization. When I repeated to her some of Henriette’s analysis of Ashkenazi dominance, my interviewee noted that she saw some of those dynamics at the organization. Other Ashkenazim that I spoke with rarely saw any relevance to discussion of discrimination based on ethnicity in Israel. While scholars must note the historical connotations left on the word “race,” we must explore if racial formation occurs in Israel in ways leading to discrimination by racially identified ethnic groups.

Taking an intersectional approach is often more difficult for a researcher, but this is especially true for researchers in Israel when any discussion of oppression goes against nationalist discourses. I could get away with bringing up certain issues by playing on my

outsider status; sometimes directly stating that I was an American sociologist and thus only know that perspective before asking respondents to explain to me how identity works in Israel. But, all scholars must find a way to recognize how the interlocking systems of oppression work in any society, including Israel.

Conclusion: Intersectionality in Israel

Race, class and gender are systems of oppression in an Israeli matrix of domination. While oppression goes against the Israeli national ethos as providing a safe haven for all Jews encountering oppression globally, systems of oppression still occur within Israel. Likely encouraged by the small population of Israel, categories of difference are often conflated and/or ignored. Israeli sociologists tend to look at women, Mizrahim, Arabs, and/or Jews as unified categories, ignoring the way in which categories intersect, and ultimately reinforcing the matrix of domination.

I continue to struggle with how to bring theories of intersectionality into practice in the study of Israeli society. Before entering the field, I was naïve of how difficult it would be to bring the theories into practice. I began with a decision that at the very least, I had to ask about identity and to hear diverse perspectives. I struggled with how to ask questions that would seem accusatory or insulting. So I decided to ask broader questions within my interview, to bring up issues during other times of my field work as well, keep good field notes. I also asked demographic questions which included categorical identities which appear to the average Israeli to be obvious and/or irrelevant with the purpose of bringing their importance to light. After asking demographic questions out loud became extremely controversial, I altered my approach and used a written sheet to have the questions, which I handed out to participants at the end of

interviews. I reminded interviewees that they didn't have to answer questions if they didn't want to. Most left the question of “race” [*geza*] blank, and eventually, I re-wrote the demographic questions to combine “race/ethnicity” and account for the Holocaust connotations imbedded in Hebrew word for race [*edah/motzah*].

More difficult than deciding what and how to ask was deciding what to write in my analysis. This was amplified by the fact that I was looking at a feminist organization that does important work and struggles for funding and public support. Systems of domination interlock in ways not unique to that feminist organization. At the same time, ignoring these systems of domination would be a contribution to silencing. I struggled to find a balance of challenging discourses which failed to acknowledge intersectionality while not overshadowing the story of the organization. I tried to balance demonstrating the many important things that the organization does while maintaining a critical eye. I do not argue that I did these things perfectly, nor argue that other scholars should follow exactly what I have done. Instead, I want to encourage other scholars to ask questions about intersectionality and to challenge discourses of unified gender, ethnic/racial, class, and national categories. I offer my experiences as an example of how to approach bringing theories of intersectionality into practice while conducting research on Israeli society.

Discussing systems of oppression in Israel is dangerous business. Those who consider themselves supporters of Israel may be wary of any discourse deemed critical of Israel. Those who consider themselves supporters of Palestinians may look down upon any discussion of Israel which does not center itself upon the Israeli conflict and the situation of Palestinians. Nonetheless, I believe that it is important to analyze Israel the way that any country is subject to analysis. Academic scholarship can allow opportunities for progress and growth that a silencing

destroys. Smooha (2004) argues that recognition of differences and efforts to end domination are vital to a multicultural democracy.

I certainly do not have all of the answers for scholars open to taking an intersectional approach to studying Israeli society. The feminist organization where I conducted fieldwork was extremely unhappy with any mention of homophobia or Ashkenazi domination, and I may have lost future access to the organization by writing about it. The more that scholars take risks by shedding light on how intersectionality operates, the more that we open space for future scholars to be able to have freedom to do so as well and for Israelis to challenge these systems of domination. I know that some who read this paper will critique me for being not a friend of the state of Israel, while others will critique me for being too much a friend of Israel. Israel is so controversial on its own, that to bring in analyses which note its imperfections are likely to offend many.

It is my hope that this paper can become a part of a dialogue between two groups of scholars. The first are (more U.S. based) scholars of race, class, and gender; theorizing across countries is necessary to see the complexities of how systems of oppression operate and to complicate analyses which see the American case as the only case. Secondly, I want to be a part of a dialogue with scholars of Israel; this paper challenges taking race, class, and gender into account. While I have noted the constraints of taking an intersectional approach, current approaches which understand difference through singular lenses only reinforce systems of inequality. Future studies must find ways to take the risk of recognizing how intersectionality operates in Israel.

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ⁱ http://www.cbs.gov.il/publications/isr_in_n09e.pdf.