

# Race, racism, and policing: Responses of Ethiopian Jews in Israel to stigmatization by the police

Ethnicities

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## Abstract

Immigrants who believe they suffer from stigmatization and discrimination may still demonstrate positive attitudes toward government authorities. We explore this trust–discrimination paradox by examining perceptions about police and policing among Ethiopian Jews in Israel, an immigrant racial minority. Drawing on data collected from focus groups and survey results, we find that levels of trust in the police among Israelis of Ethiopian descent are equal to or higher than among veteran Jewish Israelis. Nevertheless, Ethiopian Israelis also report negative perceptions of the police that are rooted in strong feelings of stigmatization by these government agents. While trust in the police may reflect Ethiopian Jews' desire for integration, participation, and inclusion as legitimate and equal members of nation and state, we demonstrate that they use various de-stigmatization strategies whose aim is to downplay the importance and depth of their discrimination by the police. These strategies, we argue, allow Ethiopian Israelis to maintain positive attitudes toward the police.

## Keywords

Trust in police, immigrant minorities, minority integration, racism and discrimination, de-stigmatization strategies, Ethiopian Jews in Israel

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## Introduction

Policing is an essential function of the state that has a direct and immediate bearing on citizens' everyday life and, therefore, is a cornerstone of political, social and economic life. While policing is especially significant for minority immigrant integration and equality (Brunson and Miller, 2006; Howell et al., 2004), studies of public confidence and trust in the police in established democracies find a gap between levels of trust among immigrant minorities and the majority population—a gap explained by, among other things, police discrimination that sets them apart from the veteran society (Wortley and Owusu-Bempah, 2009). While low trust seems an inevitable reaction to discrimination, it is not the only possibility. Trust in police, as well as in other state institutions, may at times remain high among immigrants in spite of perceived and reported discrimination (see Maxwell, 2009, 2010).

Immigrant minorities that aspire to be accepted as legitimate members of the host society may face discrimination and stigmatization that lead to alienation and resentment and cast doubts over their potential to integrate. Trust in state institutions can be part of immigrants' psychological integration, defined as feelings of identification, belonging, and commitment in the host society (De Vroome et al., 2013). Trust in government can be thus interpreted as a strategy employed by immigrant minorities to express their desire to integrate within the host society, even in the face of discrimination that sets them apart from mainstream society. The significance of this paradox is not merely theoretical as it suggests that studies and surveys that demonstrate immigrants' trust in the police should not be taken at face value and that a deeper probe into perceptions and expectations is required. As argued elsewhere (De Vroome et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2010), probing the relations between minorities and government authorities may provide important insights about the process of minority integration in diverse societies.

As a case study, we focus on the relations between Ethiopian Jews in Israel and the police. Israelis of Ethiopian descent are part of the Jewish nation and have a strong desire for inclusion in Israeli society, namely participation and recognition as equal members of nation and state (Mizrachi and Zawdu, 2012). At the same time, Ethiopian Israelis suffer from racism, marginalization, and exclusion from the Israeli mainstream society (Ben-Eliezer, 2008). Socially, economically, and politically powerless, but also a visible minority due to their dark skin color, they are often targets of discrimination which has a direct bearing on their relations with police. This issue captured much public attention in May–June of 2015 when thousands of Ethiopian Israelis took to the streets to protest police brutality directed against members of their community. Beyond several incidents that captured public attention, it is difficult to prove systemic discrimination by police. Yet, whether or not these incidents indicate a problematic police culture, this perception is common among Ethiopian Jews, even if they have not personally experienced discrimination. As will be shown later in the paper, Israelis of Ethiopian descent strongly believe they suffer from police mistreatment and discrimination while, at the same time, they express levels of trust in the police that are similar or even higher than

those of the general population group (veteran Jewish Israelis). Since we do not have data on actual levels of discrimination, the paradox examined here is rooted in perceptions, discrimination and trust, and as such requires interpretation.

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the strategies by which Ethiopian Israelis deal with the paradoxical nature of their attitudes toward police and policing, namely, on the one hand, perceptions of discrimination and mistreatment, but, on the other, trust in police. We assume these strategies stem from a cultural repertoire (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012) that is available to Ethiopian Jews and enables them to maintain trust in the police despite perceptions of discrimination and mistreatment by them. Note that we do not claim that Ethiopian Israelis use different discursive strategies to deny the reality of police discrimination and stigmatization toward them, but rather that these strategies are utilized to resolve the paradox in their perceptions toward the police.

### **Stigma, discrimination, and trust**

Trust in government denotes how citizens relate to the central body that is in control of the state apparatus and which possesses the authority to initiate and implement state policies. In order to be effective, governments need to gain and maintain the trust of citizens and the associated legitimacy allows governments to implement policies and encourages people to comply with laws and legal regulations. A multicultural reality presents challenges for many contemporary democracies (Banting and Kymlicka, 2006; Wiewiorka, 1998), where minorities' trust in government and its institutions are often lower than that of mainstream society. Lower trust is attributed to minorities' refusal to identify with a single set of legal and political values held by the dominant group, which may lead to alienation from the state, government, and its institutions (Michelson, 2003). Alternatively, low trust can be explained by discrimination and stigmas directed against minorities, especially visible minorities (Lenard, 2012; Schildkraut, 2005). Stigma applies when 'elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold' (Link and Phelan, 2001: 367). Stigmatized groups are disadvantaged in different ways that affect their life chances and well-being (Lamont, 2009; Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012). As a result, stigmatized groups may either accept their lower status and/or rebel against it, in both cases losing trust in state, government, and institutions.

Low trust, however, is not the only possible reaction to stigma and discrimination. Rather, minorities may demonstrate surprising levels of trust toward the state, government, and its institutions. This paradox can be explained, first, by the desire of minorities to belong and, second, by how minorities respond to their stigmatization. Michele Lamont and her colleagues conceptualize responses to stigmatization as 'the rhetorical and strategic tools deployed by individual members of stigmatized groups in reaction to perceived stigmatization (including exclusion, misrecognition, racism and discrimination)' (Fleming et al., 2012: 401). According to Lamont (2009), de-stigmatization strategies range from efforts to

assimilate into the dominant group while downplaying one's low-status identity to efforts to differentiate one's identity by affirming and celebrating diversity. Members of stigmatized groups may choose to distance themselves from the negative characteristics associated with their group to demonstrate that negative views of their group are baseless, and to draw attention to the many qualities owned by their group. The frames members of stigmatized groups use may also emphasize equivalence with members of the dominant group, including shared religious and/or national affiliation, common physical characteristics, citizenship, or beliefs about human nature (Lamont, 2009: 159). Responses to stigmatization may also include adherence to state or national ideologies as a way to express identification and belonging to one's society (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012: 369).

De-stigmatization strategies can help us illustrate how immigrants who suffer from stigmatization and discrimination may demonstrate positive attitudes toward the government and state institutions. According to Maxwell (2010), Muslim immigrants who seek acceptance as legitimate members of British society tend to express trust in government that is either equal to or even higher than that of natives. However, under conditions of strong affinity between the dominant national group and the state (as in Israel), immigrants who view themselves as part of the dominant group and aspire to be included, may feel even more encouraged than native citizens to express trust in the state, government, and institutions. As a result, these immigrants may use de-stigmatization strategies whose aim is to minimize the psychological effects of stigmatization and discrimination on them, in attempts to maintain positive attitudes toward government and state authorities.

In the context of the relations between the Ethiopian community and the police, we set out to explore the specific strategies that allow members of stigmatized groups to 'claim inclusion, affirm their distinctiveness, contest and denounce stereotyping and claim their rights in the face of discriminatory behavior and other more subtle slights to their sense of dignity' (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012: 366–367). We argue that these de-stigmatization strategies are used not only as a way for Ethiopian Israelis to claim membership within the dominant group (what Mizrachi and Herzog (2012) call 'participatory de-stigmatization strategies'), but also as a way to maintain trust in the state, government, and its institutions.

### **Police, minorities, and (dis)trust**

The police, as the government institution in charge of maintaining public order, are often the target of complaints and concerns of citizens in general and ethnic minorities in particular. Questions about police–minority relations are embedded in the broader context of diversity and the challenges it presents for many contemporary democracies (Gagnon and Tully, 2001) where trust in government is far from inevitable, especially when minorities suffer from stigmatization and marginalization. Trust in the police, a central state institution and part of the state's monopoly on violence, may be seen as a case of trust in government.

The notion of citizens' support for the police is a 'fuzzy' concept because the varying concerns, interests, and experiences of different groups may lead to different perceptions of what 'good policing' means. For some groups, the police will be measured by their 'efficacy', their ability to 'serve and protect', while for other groups what is important is the 'image' of the police, the way it treats citizens and its commitment to equality (Worrall, 1999). Consequently, studies find a wide gap between minority and majority perceptions of, and trust in, the police in different countries. In the United States, for example, levels of trust in the police have been consistently lower among African-American and Hispanic citizens than among white citizens (Weitzer and Tuch, 2004: 320). Differences in perceptions about the police between the mainstream society and minority groups (immigrant or ethnic) have also been documented in Britain (Bowling and Phillips, 2003; Jefferson and Walker, 1993), Germany (Albrecht, 1997), Canada (O'Connor, 2008; Wortley, 1996), Finland (Egharevba, 2006) as well as in Israel (Ben-Porat and Yuval, 2012; Hasisi and Weitzer, 2007).

Negative perceptions of the police are reinforced by marginalization and discrimination against minorities, real or perceived, as well as by direct mistreatment by the police. Two central problems in police–minority relations can be described as 'under-policing', the neglect of minority neighborhoods, and 'over-policing', an aggressive approach that singles out minorities (Ben-Porat, 2008). Minorities who suffer from over-policing and/or under-policing are likely to have lower levels of trust in the police. This mistrust may lead to a vicious cycle in which the police are unable (or unwilling) to provide services for minorities and, as a result, become even less trusted. While citizens of various backgrounds may feel their communities are under-policed when police services fall short of needs and expectations, for minorities, the perception of under-policing is regarded, rightly or wrongly, as a form of discrimination. Under-policing can also mean the police's neglect of complaints about racial harassment and the overlooking of domestic violence characterized by the police as 'cultural' or 'normative' in these communities (Brunson and Miller, 2006). Under-policing, therefore, involves stigmas that influence police services and, consequently, feelings of discrimination.

Over-policing implies mistreatment of minorities by the police, either by excessive use of force towards minorities or by discriminatory practices against them (Findlay, 2004: 101). Visible minorities who suffer from stigmatization are prone to be over-policed. 'Racial profiling', the use of generalizations based on race, ethnicity, religion or national affiliation as the basis for suspicion in directing law enforcement actions, creates tensions between police and minorities (Smith, 2006; Wortley and Tanner, 2003). Consequently, racial and ethnic minorities are often more likely than others to be stopped, questioned, searched, and arrested by the police (Walker et al., 2000; Weitzer and Tuch, 1999).

It is thus clear that both over- and under-policing of minorities are underpinned by stigma and discrimination. Indeed, minorities, especially 'visible minorities', may suffer from a combination of the two (Perry, 2009). Nevertheless, while immigrant minorities are more likely to be stigmatized and discriminated against by the

police, some may still maintain positive perceptions about the police. This, as suggested before, can be explained by the immigrants' desire to integrate and their use of de-stigmatization strategies to downplay the importance and depth of discrimination.

## **Ethiopian Jews in Israel**

Emigration from Ethiopia was part of a relatively recent immigration wave to Israel. Historically, about 6,000 Ethiopian Jews arrived sporadically and in trickles between 1977 and 1984 (Kimmerling, 2004). The majority of Ethiopian Jews now residing in Israel arrived mainly in two large-scale operations: around 8,000 Ethiopian Jews arrived in 'Operation Moses' in 1984, while 14,000 arrived in 'Operation Solomon' in 1991 (<http://www.jewishagency.org/historical-aliyah/content/28831>). Since then, smaller numbers have periodically entered. Overall, approximately 136,000 Ethiopian Jews currently live in Israel, constituting 1.6% of its population. Most Ethiopian Israelis and their families live in the urban centers of the country, in cities such as Netanya, Hadera, Rehovot, Beer-Sheva, and Ashdod. Others live in the outskirts of small towns in the country's periphery.

Israeli society is significantly divided and stratified along ethnic lines. Spatial segregation and socio-economic disparities exist not only between Jews and non-Jews, but also within the Jewish population itself (Shafir and Peled, 2002). The Ethiopian community constitutes one of the most disadvantaged segments of Israeli society. Since their arrival, Ethiopian immigrants have occupied the lower strata of the socioeconomic ladder in Israeli society (Offer, 2004). Many Ethiopian Israeli families live below the poverty line, use public assistance as their main source of income, and reside in poor and segregated neighborhoods (Kaplan and Salamon, 2004). In addition, until recently, the Jewish identity of the Ethiopian immigrants was still contested by some rabbinical institutions in Israel. Traditionally, Ethiopian Jews did not perceive themselves as black; it is only in their encounter with Israeli society that they 'became' black (Kaplan, 2002). Their encounters with Israeli society and institutions (Ben-Eliezer, 2008) have made an impact on various aspects of Ethiopian life in Israel, including lifestyle, identity (Shabtay, 1999, 2001), and acculturation (Kaplan, 1999; Kaplan and Rosen, 1993).

The relationship between race, racism, and policing in the Israeli context became evident for the first time in the mid-1990s. A newspaper report in 1996 revealed that the Israeli blood bank has been routinely and secretly destroying blood donations made by Ethiopian Israelis, explained by concerns over high rates of infectious disease among them. Enraged Ethiopian Israelis demonstrated in front of the Prime Minister's office in Jerusalem and clashed with police. The police, surprised by the violent reaction, claimed that they were not prepared because they 'knew the Ethiopians to be a quiet and retiring community' (Seeman, 1999: 162). Ethiopians did not place the blame on police, regretting the fact that police officers were wounded during the demonstrations and explaining that protestors' violence was a result of anger with government policy. Nevertheless, they did resent the excessive

force police used against them, comparing it to measures used against Palestinians (Seeman, 1999). The events of 1996 that quickly subsided for most Israelis were indicative of future developments and dilemmas of Israelis of Ethiopian descent.

## Methodology

Our findings in this paper are based on two complementary stages of research. To obtain a general and reliable picture of the relations between the police and the Ethiopian minority in Israel, focus groups were selected in order to gain access to the group, allow respondents to raise issues openly that might not come up in a structured survey and bring up important topics for the research through an interactive discussion. Six focus groups conducted consisted of 6–8 Ethiopian immigrants between the ages of 25 and 40. The groups were led by moderators familiar with the group's language and culture, trained and familiarized with the research and its concepts and provided with a semi-structured design to lead the discussion that also allow participants to bring up other relevant issues. Focus groups provide an initial overview of police–minority relations—a sensitive subject that requires an intimate and trustful sphere on the one hand and a sympathetic understanding and supportive social environment on the other in which members share the same personal experiences and concerns, empowering and providing each other with shared coping strategies.

In addition, we conducted a survey among a random sample of 140 adults of Ethiopian origin (18 years old and above) and a control group of 487 veteran Jewish-Israeli citizens (the general population group) to help us identify the attitudes toward the police among Ethiopian immigrants as well as the mainstream of Israeli society. Women accounted for 52.9% of the Ethiopian respondents and 52% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents.<sup>1</sup> The average age among the Ethiopian respondents was much lower than the average age among the control group, 30 and 48.7, respectively. The vast majority of our Ethiopian respondents (78.4%) were in the age group of 20–40 (more than half of them (52.5%) in the youngest age group, 20–30). We also found a correlation between age and trust in the police: the older the respondent was, the higher his/her trust in the police was ( $R^2 = .203$ ,  $p = .017$ ). It is noteworthy that all of our Ethiopian respondents were Israeli native.

Based on findings from focus groups and questions asked elsewhere about police–minority relations, the surveys were carried out in August 2013 by Uniseker, a university-based public opinion research institute, and were conducted by Ethiopian (Amharic) speaking interviewers. We used a descriptive statistical analysis to draw some conclusions about the general tendencies of the data set. Taken together, the data from the focus groups and the survey results enable us to analyze, not only the actual perceptions that Ethiopian immigrants have toward the Israeli police, but also the strategies they use to deal with their stigmatization by the police. We will discuss these strategies in detail later in the paper, but first we

will present how the trust–discrimination paradox is manifested in the perceptions of Ethiopian immigrants toward police and policing in Israel (see Table 1).

### **Perceptions of police and policing among Ethiopian Jews in Israel: The trust–discrimination paradox**

In general, Ethiopian Israelis have strong feelings of discrimination and mistreatment by the police. When asked in the survey about whether the police treat Israeli citizens fairly or unfairly, 41.5% of the Ethiopian respondents thought the treatment of the police was unfair, whereas only 27.7% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents thought the same. While 37.3% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents believe the police make fair decisions and use discretion in their actions, only a third of the Ethiopian respondents (33.6%) share the same belief.

In the focus groups, participants also expressed perceptions of discrimination and mistreatment by the police. One respondent said, ‘There is too much discrimination and racism [toward Ethiopian immigrants]. For the police, all Ethiopians are criminals.’ There was consensus among the participants that the police treated Ethiopian-Israelis differently than other Israeli citizens. Most participants agreed that racial stigma was at the root of the police’s attitude toward the Ethiopian community: ‘The police treat people according to their skin color,’ one respondent explained. Another participant said, ‘For the police, black people are criminals, period.’ When asked why the police perceived Ethiopian Israelis in this way, one respondent replied, ‘You see, the police look at us as less civilized, even barbaric [people].’ Participants in the focus groups also attributed their discrimination and stigmatization by the police to the fact that the Ethiopian community constituted one of the most disadvantaged segments of Israeli society. As one respondent said, ‘[t]hey prey on the weak. This is how police work.’

In the survey, more specific questions were asked. For example, among the respondents who reported they had been arrested, detained or stopped by the police in the past three years, nearly half of the Ethiopians (48.3%), as opposed to only a third of the veteran Jewish Israelis (34.3%), characterized their treatment by the police as unfair. Similarly, 41.2% of the Ethiopian respondents believed the police too often arrest, detain, or stop people in their surroundings without probable cause (only 17.3% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents shared this belief). It is not surprising then that 18.8% of Ethiopian respondents said they felt scared when coming across a police officer, as opposed to 14.3% of their veteran Jewish-Israeli counterparts. For Ethiopian immigrants, then, the police are associated with negative, rather than positive, experiences.

Perceptions of discrimination by the police among Israelis of Ethiopian descent are not necessarily rooted in personal experience. Less than a quarter of the Ethiopian respondents (22.3%) reported they personally felt discriminated against by a police officer.<sup>2</sup> Beyond direct experiences with the police, perceptions of discrimination depend on how citizens perceive their treatment by the police compared to their perceptions of how other citizens are treated. In the survey,

**Table 1.** Perceptions of police and policing among Ethiopian Jews in Israel, compared to the control group (veteran Jewish-Israelis).

Questions	Ethiopian Jews (n = 140)		Veteran Jewish-Israelis (n = 487)	
	Disagree (1-2)	Agree (4-5)	Disagree (1-2)	Agree (4-5)
I have complete trust in the police	31.4%	44.3%	24.9%	40.7%
I have deep respect for the police and police officers	15.3%	70.8%	15.1%	62.1%
In your opinion, what is the level of security provided by the police?	Inadequate (1-2) 40.4%	Adequate (4-5) 38.2%	Inadequate (1-2) 37%	Adequate (4-5) 30.5%
Do you feel the police generally treat citizens fairly or unfairly?	Unfairly (1-2)	Fairly (4-5)	Unfairly (1-2)	Fairly (4-5)
In your opinion, is police service in your town/neighborhood better or worse than other towns/neighborhoods?	41.5% Worse (1-2)	23.7% Better (4-5)	27.7% Worse (1-2)	29% Better (4-5)
Had you filed a complaint about a crime committed against you, how do you think the police would treat you compared to other citizens?	28.6% Worse (1-2)	38.9% Better (4-5)	18.1% Worse (1-2)	36.9% Better (4-5)
	35.3% Very slow (1-2)	17.6% Very fast (4-5)	10.8% Very slow (1-2)	24.8% Very fast (4-5)

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Questions	Ethiopian Jews (n = 140)		Veteran Jewish-Israelis (n = 487)	
	Disagree (1-2)	Agree (4-5)	Disagree (1-2)	Agree (4-5)
Attitudes toward the police				
Had there been a criminal event in your neighborhood, how fast do you think the police would arrive to the site?	32.1% Never (1-2)	38.2% Very often (4-5)	22.4% Never (1-2)	38.1% Very often (4-5)
How often do you think police officers arrest or detain people in your surrounding without probable cause?	34.9% Not at all (1-2)	41.2% Very much so (4-5)	64.1% Not at all (1-2)	17.3% Very much so (4-5)
In your opinion, to what extent are police officers willing to explain their actions and decisions when asked to by citizens?	49.6% Less than necessary (1-2)	25.9% More than necessary (4-5)	46.3% Less than necessary (1-2)	17.7% More than necessary (4-5)
How would you describe police presence in your neighborhood?	41.7% Less than required (1-2)	33.3% More than required (4-5)	49.7% Less than required (1-2)	19.9% More than required (4-5)
How would you describe how the police deal with crime in your town?	26.1%	50.4%	31.9%	34.8%

respondents were asked about the treatment they would receive from the police, compared to other citizens, had they filed a complaint on a crime committed against them: 35.3% of the Ethiopian respondents, as opposed to only 10.8% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents, thought that the police would treat them worse than other citizens. When asked if they think that police service in their town/neighborhood was worse than in other towns/neighborhoods, 28.6% of the Ethiopian respondents agreed, as opposed to only 18.1% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents. At the same time, a third of the Ethiopian respondents (33.3%), as opposed to only a fifth of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents (19.9%), said that police presence in their neighborhoods was more than necessary. These data underscore the perceptions of over-policing among Israelis of Ethiopian descent.

Beyond perceptions of over-policing, Ethiopian-Israelis also have perceptions of under-policing. Some of our Ethiopian respondents complained about police neglect. As one participant in the focus groups told us, 'the police simply do not care about what is happening in our neighborhoods.' In the survey, 32.1% of the Ethiopian respondents (as opposed to only 22.4% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents), said the police would arrive very slowly when called to deal with crime in their neighborhood. As mentioned above, minorities, especially visible minorities such as Israelis of Ethiopian descent, may suffer from a combination of both over- and under-policing. One participant explained to us why Ethiopian-Israelis limit their interactions with the police to the necessary minimum: 'When the police are called to break up a brawl in our neighborhood...[when they arrive] they only end up worsening the situation. They tend to arrest people on false pretenses or be even more aggressive than the brawlers themselves.' It seems that Ethiopian Israelis prefer under-policing out of fear of over-policing.

In light of these negative perceptions, one would expect Ethiopian Israelis to have lower levels of trust and confidence in the police than do veteran Jewish Israelis. However, this is not the case. For example, 44.3% of the Ethiopian respondents say they have complete trust in the Israeli police, as opposed to only 40.7% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents. A majority of Ethiopian respondents (70.8%) say they have general respect for police officers and the police, whereas only 62.1% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli counterparts share the same sentiment. In addition, 39% of the Ethiopian respondents believe that police work determinedly for values that are important to them, while only 35.2% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents expressed the same belief.

In addition, Ethiopian immigrants are less critical of the police than the mainstream Israeli public. Almost half of the Ethiopian respondents (44.4%), as opposed to 39.3% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents, think that Israel does not have a serious problem with police and policing but, rather, that Israeli citizens have very little respect for the law and that stricter enforcement is necessary. The proportion of respondents who think that police officers are willing to explain their actions and decisions when asked to by citizens was higher among Ethiopians (25.9%) than among veteran Jewish-Israelis (17.8%). Similarly, 67.6%

of the Ethiopian respondents said they would obey a police officer's orders even if they disagreed with them, as opposed to 62.6% of the veteran Jewish-Israeli respondents who said they would do the same. These data demonstrate that levels of confidence in the police are higher among Ethiopian Israelis than among the general population group.

So far, we have presented the trust–discrimination paradox as manifested in the perceptions toward police and policing among Ethiopian Jews in Israel. On the one hand, levels of trust and confidence in the police among Ethiopian Israelis are similar or even higher than among veteran Jewish-Israelis.<sup>3</sup> Following previous studies that have discussed Ethiopian Israelis' desire for integration, participation, and inclusion as equal and legitimate members within the dominant Jewish-Israeli group (Ben-Eliezer, 2008; Mizrachi and Zawdu, 2012), we suggest that trust in the police among Israelis of Ethiopian descent may be interpreted as a strategy to express identification, belonging, and commitment to Israeli society. Evidently, a vast majority of our Ethiopian respondents (86.3%) said they were proud to be citizens of the state of Israel. On the other hand, Israelis of Ethiopian descent express negative perceptions of the police that are rooted in strong feelings of discrimination that sets them apart from the mainstream of Israeli society. Socially, economically, and politically powerless, but also distinct due to their dark skin color, Ethiopian immigrants report heightened perceptions of over- and under-policing.

In an attempt to disentangle the paradox of how they maintain relatively high levels of trust in the police while believing that they suffer from police discrimination and mistreatment, we suggest exploring how Israelis of Ethiopian descent approach this paradox. Taking the statements made by respondents quoted below at face value, the support for police may reflect an attempt to come to terms with problems within the community that underscore the tense relations with police, or a more general attitude of trust in state institutions. Yet, we claim that the paradox between perceptions of police discrimination and trust in police requires a cautious interpretation of the statements made by the respondents. To this task, we now turn.

## **Responses of Ethiopian Jews in Israel to stigmatization by the police**

### *Blaming the victim*

Blaming the victim is a well-known strategy to deal with claims of racism. It occurs when the victim of any wrongful act is held entirely or partially responsible for the harm that befell them. Research has shown that denial of racism and discrimination may create a climate that fosters victim blame attributions about racial or ethnic disparities (Bobo and Kluegel, 1997). However, while 'victim blaming' is a common defensive strategy in race talk by white majority group members in different parts of the world (see Van Dijk, 1992), it is not unusual for members of racial/ethnic minorities to engage in victim blaming as

well (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2014: 205–206). In the context of majority–minority relations in Israel, the perceptions of marginalization and discrimination among members of Jewish ethno-cultural minority groups (especially Mizrahi Jews and Ethiopian immigrants) have been consistently denied, or at least minimized, by Zionist and Israeli elites (Shafir and Peled, 2002). According to these elites, Jewish minorities’ discontent with, and alienation from, the state are not because of its policies and practices, but because of minorities’ failure to integrate into the mainstream society.

Some of the Ethiopian respondents engaged in victim blaming by singling out members of their own community as responsible for the negative stigma that the police have of Ethiopian-Israelis. As one participant in the focus groups said, ‘I think that, as a group, we contribute to the negative image Ethiopian-Israelis have in the eyes of the police . . . We are not very nice to police officers . . . Some of us are very rude; we talk back [to police], etc.’ Another participant was more specific about those who contribute to the stigma associated with Israelis of Ethiopian descent: ‘The fact that Ethiopian youngsters are hanging out in public spaces, drinking alcohol after 11 pm although the law prohibits such behavior, just shows how little respect they have for the law.’ Another participant concluded, ‘If we treat police with respect, they will reciprocate.’ For these respondents, then, the cause for the tense relations between the Ethiopian community and the police is not the police’s racial prejudice, but the behavior of (some) members of the community. The logic behind this de-stigmatization strategy demonstrates that the negative characteristics associated with one’s group may be valid, but that they are confined to a fraction of the community, certainly not with the community as a whole.

### *Cultural difference*

The notion of cultural difference was another de-stigmatization strategy used by Ethiopian respondents. As any other modernist-nationalizing project (Brubaker, 1996), Zionism required intra-Jewish ethnic minorities to abandon the particular cultural traits and customs they brought with them from their home countries and instead embrace the cultural codes held by the dominant Ashkenazi group (Shafir and Peled, 2002). According to this view, Jewish ethnic minority groups are facing difficulties in their efforts to integrate into Israeli society due to the gap between the mainstream culture and their homeland cultures.

This framing of intra-Jewish ethnic relations was used by some of our respondents to rationalize their perceptions of discrimination and stigmatization by the police. For these respondents, what may explain the tense relations between the Ethiopian community and the police is the latter’s lack of knowledge with regard to the particular traits and customs of Ethiopian culture. As one participant in the focus groups explained:

The Ethiopian community has some unique cultural codes . . . with which Israeli society is not yet familiar . . . [for example] in our culture, adolescents do not look

straight in adults' eyes, they look down, but police officers often view this behavior as disrespectful. This contributes to unnecessary tensions that sometimes get out of hand... I believe that if there was a minimal familiarity with where we came from, such incidents could have been avoided.

Another participant said, 'It is true that they treat us unfairly because of our skin color, but had they better known our customs and origins, maybe their attitude towards us would have changed.' According to these respondents, there are some unfounded negative views about the Ethiopian community that give rise to unnecessary tensions and frictions between Ethiopian Israelis and the police. We argue that this rhetoric allows these respondents to de-politicize the situation by making cultural difference, rather than stigma, part of the interaction with the police, thus detaching stigma from group identity.

### *Deflecting racism*

Deflecting racism is another de-stigmatization strategy used by the Ethiopian respondents. First, many of them believe that police discrimination against Israelis of Ethiopian descent is not an institutionalized phenomenon. As one respondent told us, 'There may be some racist police officers, but the police as an organization are certainly not racist.' In addition, for some respondents, the police's treatment of Ethiopian Israelis is not about racial stigma, but about human nature and power disparities. As one participant said, 'in the end, police officers are simply humans; maybe he was aggressive [with me] because he had a fight with his wife that night... he is just being human. Ultimately, police officers take advantage of their status [and] their uniforms.' We argue that these respondents respond to their racialization by fragmenting the experience of stigmatization into an individual experience.

Second, some respondents deflected police racism to its internal and external constraints. As one participant told us:

I think that many police officers just burn out as time passes by because their work is very demanding, they are underpaid, and their image is mostly negative... If being a police officer would mean to earn a good living and work in a prestigious profession, then I am sure police would do much better work than they are doing now.

With this rhetoric, these respondents draw equivalence between Ethiopian Israelis and other Israeli citizens in terms of police treatment. All Israeli citizens receive substandard service from the police due to budget constraints, limited manpower, burnout, negative image, etc. Therefore, the cause for the police's treatment of Israelis of Ethiopian descent is not racial stigma, but rather the constraints within which police work takes place. We argue that this strategy allows respondents to de-politicize the stigma that is associated with the relations between the Ethiopian community and the police by maintaining that the police provide poor service to all Israeli citizens, regardless of their skin color.

Third, our respondents also deflected the racism of the police onto the media. According to this view, the media constantly portray Israelis of Ethiopian descent in negative terms, thereby creating bad images of them, which then contribute to their stigmatization by the police. As one participant explained:

The media incite against us. They always mention the origin of the suspects when they are from Ethiopian origin. They make the connection between the origin of the suspects and the criminal activity of which they are accused by saying ‘this man of Ethiopian origin murdered his wife’ or ‘these Ethiopian youngsters were arrested for robbery’ as if these things never happen among *white* people (emphasis added).

Considering the media’s mass impact, stereotypes against Ethiopian Israelis are not ‘the police’s fault,’ as one respondent told us. While acknowledging that racial stigma is indeed associated with Ethiopian identity in Israel, these respondents do not hold the police responsible for creating and fostering such stigmas. This rhetoric, we argue, allows these respondents not only to downplay the importance and depth of the police’s discrimination and mistreatment, but also to view the police as an unbiased state institution, thereby maintaining a positive image of the police. This may explain why Israelis of Ethiopian descent have relatively high levels of trust in the police.

## Summary and conclusions

In this paper, we have demonstrated the paradox in the perceptions of Ethiopian Israelis toward police and policing. Ethiopian Jews in Israel express trust and confidence in the police at levels that are equal to, or even higher than, the general population group (veteran Jewish-Israelis), while, at the same time, they have negative perceptions of the police that are rooted in strong feelings of discrimination and mistreatment. We have suggested that the positive attitudes toward the police among Ethiopian-Israelis reflect their strong desire for integration, participation, and recognition as legitimate and equal members of mainstream society, in spite of the frustration and disappointment they feel with their stigmatization by the police. As with the experience of Mizrahi Jews in Israel (see Peled, 1998), Israelis of Ethiopian descent also seem to embrace the integrative aspects of the dominant Zionist ideology while negating its (intra-Jewish) discriminatory elements. It is noteworthy that the research for this study was carried out before the mass demonstrations of Ethiopian-Israelis took place in May–June 2015, and might now yield different results from what has been presented here (see Note 3).

In an attempt to probe the paradox in the attitudes of Ethiopian-Israelis toward the police, we focused on the strategies they use in order to deal with their perceptions of police stigmatization. We have identified several such strategies: some of our respondents engaged in victim blaming, thereby confining the stigma to only a fraction of their own community, but not to the community as a whole. Some referred to stigmatization as an individual experience, thus rejecting the idea that

the police as an institution are racially biased against Israelis of Ethiopian descent, while others depoliticized the experience of stigmatization by making cultural difference/institutional constraints, rather than stigma, part of the interaction with the police, thus detaching stigma from group identity. All of these strategies, we argue, allow Ethiopian Israelis to downplay the importance and depth of the discrimination they believe they suffer from the police, and by doing so, are thus able to maintain relatively high levels of trust in the police.

This study makes several contributions. First, it provides a more nuanced interpretation of the differences between majority and minority populations in relation to trust in government institutions. While many studies and surveys take immigrants' trust in the police at face value, we show in this paper that taking into account the specific circumstances under which minority incorporation into the mainstream society has taken place is needed in order to fully understand the perceptions of minorities (immigrant or ethnic) toward government institutions. Second, utilizing the analytical concept of de-stigmatization strategies has enabled us to explore the different ways with which Israelis of Ethiopian descent deal with their perceptions of stigmatization and discrimination by the police. Using these strategies, we claim, allows Ethiopian-Israelis to address the gap between their desire to integrate within the dominant group and the strong feelings of marginalization that sets them apart from mainstream society. Finally, but related to the previous point, we have used de-stigmatization strategies in order to explain how individual members of stigmatized groups maintain trust in the state, government and its institutions, thereby introducing this analytical tool into the study of public attitudes toward government authorities.

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### **Notes**

1. No significant relationship between gender and trust in the police was found among our Ethiopian respondents ( $X^2 = 7.56$ ,  $N = 140$ , ns).
2. According to Weitzer and Tuch (2006: 53), 34% of their African-American respondents said the police stopped them without good reason, compared to only 13% of whites.

In addition, close to a fifth of their African-American respondents (18%) said they were verbally abused by police, while only 7% of white respondents said the same.

3. According to a survey ordered by the Israel Police and conducted among Israelis of Ethiopian descent in late June 2015 (after the bulk of the mass demonstrations of Ethiopian Israelis in May–June 2015 had already taken place), only 18% of the respondents said they had complete trust in the police (in our survey, 44% of the Ethiopian respondents said they had complete trust in the police). With the statement that the police treat Israeli citizens unfairly, two-thirds of the respondents agreed (in our survey, only 41.5% of the Ethiopian respondents agreed with such a statement). These new data suggest that the level of trust in the police among Ethiopian Israelis is in decline (Israel Police, 2015). Though the effect of the May–June 2015 demonstrations may only be temporary, it may have changed the attitude of Ethiopian Israelis toward the police. However, when we conducted our research and analyzed the data, the paradox between trust and discrimination was there and that was what we tried to explore in this paper.

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