Ethnic origin, educational gaps and identification in the Jewish population of Israel ¹,²

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Introduction

Israel is a deeply divided society along ethno-national lines, separating the Jewish and the Arab (Palestinian) populations, and distinguishing sub-groups within each population. The ethnic-national cleavage separating Jews and Arabs is at the heart of repeated conflicts spanning more than a century. While the Jewish-Arab rift is generally taken for granted in light of the unresolved national conflict, the ethnic cleavage within the Jewish population is typically viewed as a failure of the Jewish State to diminish cultural markers and socioeconomic features that distinguished Jewish communities from one another. Almost 70 years after the establishment of the state of Israel the ethnic cleavage within the Jewish population is still salient. One reason for this is the persistent socioeconomic inequality between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim even among those whose socioeconomic inequality between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim even among those whose parents were born in Israel.

Most studies on ethnicity of the Jewish population in Israel, as well as official statistics, use a broad continent-based dichotomy to denote ethnic origin. The common distinction is between “Ashkenazim,” whose origin is in Europe and the Americas (as well as Oceania); and “Mizrahim,” who emigrated primarily from Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Hence, in official statistics, immigrant Jews are typically assigned an ethnic origin based on their continent of birth. For native-born Jews ethnic affiliation is ascertained on the bases of father's country of birth. With the passage of time, however, growing numbers of Jews living in Israel are 3rd and even 4th generation natives who are classified as having an “Israeli” origin for whom it is impossible to determine Mizrahi or Ashkenazi origin on the bases of parental place of birth.

² We wish to thank Ms. Rotem Rabinovitz for her superb assistance in data preparation and analysis.
Aside from the “technical” difficulty of determining ethnic affiliation of the third generation, two processes are at work eroding the ethnic distinction within the Jewish population. First, the Zionist nation-building project aims to highlight the similarities among the various Jewish groups – the common historic origin as well as the shared present and future challenges – and to downplay the difference; in other words to create a common Jewish-Israeli identity. Second, among younger generations an increasing proportion of marriages cut across the Jewish ethnic cleavage. Their offspring are of mixed (Jewish) ethnicity. This growing segment is under-identified as both parents were born in Israel and no information is available on grandparents. Another concern over the “objective” family origin-based measure of ethnicity is that it is static, implicitly assumes that one's ethnic identification is aligned with the locus of ethnic origin, and does not permit the self-expression of complex ethnic identification.

Data recently collected as part of Wave VII of the European Social Survey (ESS) provides a unique basis for deep probing into ethnic categories and identity in the Jewish population of Israel. Detailed information of the country of birth of respondents, their parents and, most importantly, grandparents permits the assignment of ethnic origin to first, second and third generation of the Jewish immigrant population and the identification of “mixed” ethnic origin. Additionally, indicators of self-reported ethnic affiliation permit an analysis of the relationship between the “objective” - demographically-based - ethnic origin and “subjective” ethnic identification.

Utilizing this newly available data source, the present paper addresses two issues of ongoing interest to academic and public discourse on ethnic divisions within the Jewish population. The first concerns inequality between Ashkanzim and Mizrahim, whether or not it persists into the third generation, and how it is affected by ethnically mixed marriages. Here we will focus on educational attainment which is crucial for socioeconomic success in market economies. The second issue we address is the perceived ethnic identification of respondents and how it is related to ethnic origin and generation of migration.
Migration and ethnic cleavage

Israel defines itself as the State of the Jewish people and was established as a haven for all Jews; a place where they will be safe from persecution and discrimination. Its population of over 8 million is comprised of a Jewish majority (approximately 80 percent of the population) and an Arab minority classified by religion as Moslems, Christians and Druz. During Israel’s 68 years of statehood the Jewish population grew almost ten-fold. This phenomenal growth was largely due to the continuous flow of immigrants. Indeed, immigration accounts for approximately 50% of the growth of the Jewish population (Della Pergula 1998) and by the end of 2010 31 percent of all Jews in Israel were born elsewhere (Haberfeld and Cohen 21012). Jews migrated to Israel from practically every country on the globe. While they all claimed common ancestry they were a rather diverse population in terms of their socioeconomic attributes (Cohen 2002, Semyonov and Lerenthal 1991) and family characteristics (e.g., Khazzoom 1998).

Diversity was not a new phenomenon among the Jews in Israel. Culturally distinct communities of Jews were already present at the time of the Ottoman rule of Palestine and served as the basis of the ethnic cleavage within the pre-state Jewish society of the early 20th century (Khazzoom 2003). During this period immigrants arrived primarily from Eastern Europe and created the pre-state political, economic and civil institutions, which were in place at the time Israel gained independence. In 1948, when the State of Israel was established, the Jewish population numbered approximately 650,000. This number increased dramatically with the onset of mass Jewish immigration that followed the 1948 war and the forced migration of about 750,000 Palestinians from the area to become Israel in 1949. European Jews - Holocaust survivors – began arriving in 1947 and their numbers increased considerably in 1948 and 1949. Concomitant with the Jewish exodus from Europe large numbers of immigrants were uplifted by the State from Middle Eastern countries (primarily Iraq and Yemen). They were followed shortly after (in the latter part of the 1950s and early part of the 1960s) by emigrants from North Africa.

While European Jews formed the majority of immigrants in the early years the balance shifted rapidly. Overall, during the first two decades of statehood the immigrant population comprised approximately equal numbers of Jews of European
descent and Jews of Asian or North-African Descent (Cohen 2002; Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein 2003). The collapse of the Soviet Union, at the end of the 1980s, set the stage for another large wave of Jewish immigration to Israel. During the last decade of the 20th century close to 1 million immigrants arrived in Israel, mostly from the former USSR, increasing its population by nearly 20 percent.

As part of the effort of nation building the State of Israel developed a strong ideology of integration. It set out to establish an "Israeli" identity among Jews and to erode cultural markers that distinguished Jewish communities from one another. Yet, the sheer size of the immigrant population and its cultural diversity strained the newly established state of Israel not only economically, but culturally as well. The veteran population, mostly of European origin, concerned over its dominant position; was indifferent to the cultural and socioeconomic diversity of populations that emigrated from countries in the Middle East and North Africa and typically held rather uniform paternalistic views toward them (Eisenstadt et al., 1993). This homogenization and dichotomization was reinforced by the introduction by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS) of a binary place of origin item distinguishing Asia and Africa from Europe and America as an approximation to the distinction between "Sephardim" and "Ashkenazim" commonly used in the pre-state period (Sikron 2004, p. 56).

Studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980 documented socioeconomic gaps between immigrant groups associated with their place of origin (e.g., Hartman and Ayalon 1975; Smooha and Kraus 1985). The Ashkenazi immigrants were quick to integrate into Israel's economy and society. They benefitted from the higher (on average) education and acquaintance with modern Western economies which the newly established state aimed to emulate (Semyonov and Lerenthal 1991). They also benefited from the dominance of Ashkenazi Jews in the political and economic institutions. Institutional and other forms of discrimination also contributed to preserving the socioeconomic divide between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews in the early decades of statehood (e.g., Nahon 1987; Swirsky 1981).

Over the years, additional studies found that socioeconomic gaps between the two immigrant groups remained substantial (Smooha and Kraus 1985). Furthermore, a clear ethnic educational gap remained among native-born Israelis of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi origin (e.g., Amit 2005; Cohen and Haberfeld 1998; Perlman and Elmelech
2012). Indeed, some researchers argue that country specific variation in education was larger within the broad Ashkenazi and Mizrahi categories in the immigrant generation than in the second generation (Khazzoom 2005; Nahon 1987) a fact that further reinforced the validity of the Ashkenazi – Mizrahi ethnic divide (see also Amit 2005). While the debate regarding the appropriate way of addressing ethnicity in the Jewish population of Israel is ongoing the dichotomous categorization based on continent of origin is by far the one most commonly used in research as well as in public discourse.

Research on the third generation, grandchildren of Jewish immigrants to Israel, is scant. This is primarily the result of lack in appropriate data to conduct such research. Official and most social surveys typically collect information on place of birth of respondents and that of their fathers. Yet, by 2014, 57 percent of native-born Jews had fathers who themselves were Israeli-born; thus, information on place of birth of parents alone would not suffice to determine the ethnic origin. A small number of studies were able to examine ethnic educational gaps in the third generation by combining a number of data sets (e.g., Cohen et al 2007; Dahan, et al. 2002; Friedlander et al. 2002). While the conclusions are not always consistent the weight of the evidence seems to be that educational gaps in high school matriculation and higher education between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, although narrower, persist even in the third generation. At the same time the attainment of persons of mixed ethnicity places them between the two ethnic origin categories, but closer to that of the Ashkenazi group (Cohen et al. 2007; Okun and Khait-Marelly 2008).

Although the present sample is smaller than samples used in previous studies that were derived from the Central Bureau of Statistics the present dataset has fuller ancestry details. Moreover, while previous studies based their conclusions on the third generation on data from 1995, when the third generation was relatively young and the grandparents arrived in Israel before statehood, the current study is based on 2015 data, when third generation Israelis are older, and most of their grandparents came to Israeli in the first decade after statehood.

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3 Israel central Bureau of Statistics. 2015. Statistical Abstract, Table 2.6
Ethnic origin and ethnic identity

In the present study we adopt the commonly used demographic definition of ethnicity which, as noted above, is based on country of origin and collapsed into a binary classification. A notable shortcoming of this approach is that one loses the ability to follow the descendants of immigrants and study the intergenerational progression unless one collects information on place of birth of previous generations. Another concern over the demographic approach to ethnicity stems from the sociological view of ethnicity exemplified in the Weberian definition of ethnic groups as "… human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration" (Weber 1922:389). This definition calls attention to the perception of belonging and the expression of identification as an important component of ethnicity. From this perspective the use of continent of origin as the basis for categorizing Ashkenazim and Mizrahim essentializes ethnicity and implicitly assumes that ethnicity is static rather than an emergent and dynamic phenomenon (Hever et al. 2002; Yancey et al. 1976).

The present study benefits from the multiple indicators, both demographic and perceptual of ethnicity in Israel, available in the European Social survey. Although we use place of origin in order to classify respondents into ethnic origin categories, we do not assume that ethnic origin is synonymous with ethnic identification. In fact an important goal of this study is to clarify the relationship between ethnic origin and perceived ethnic affinity among Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, and to examine if and how this varies across immigrant generations.

Methodology

Data

Data for the 7th round of ESS were collected in Israel between May and November 2015. The sample is a multi-stage probability sample of all individuals age 15 and above living in households in Israel. Households were randomly selected from 250 statistical areas that were clustered on the bases of social and political, economic
characteristics to ensure representation of the population. Within each household one person was randomly selected for interview. Interviews were conducted in 3 languages – Hebrew, Arabic, and Russian. The final sample includes 2,562 cases representing a response rate of 74%. The present study focuses solely on the Jewish sample which comprises approximately 2050 cases (80% of the total sample). For the present analysis we excluded 44 first and second generation Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia since their particular origin and immigration history sets them apart from other Jewish communities and their numbers in each generation were too small for separate analysis. We also exclude from the present analysis 70 respondents, some of which are fourth generation (or higher) natives (i.e., their grandparents were born in Israel) and others have insufficient information on place of birth on parents or grandparents.

Variables

Ethnic origin - The ESS questionnaire regularly collects information on country of birth of respondents and their parents. As noted earlier a supplement was added to the questionnaire in Israel in which respondents were asked to provide the country of birth of their mother's and father's parents (the 4 grandparents). Place of birth was then collapsed into a 3 category variable – Europe or America (including Oceania and South Africa) whom we refer to as Ashkenazi, Asia or Africa whom we refer to in the paper as Mizrahi, and a third category comprising those born in Israel. ⁴

Age – derived from year of birth of respondent.

Education - Two educational attainment variables are available in the ESS. The first is a general measure of the total number of years of education one completed. The second measure is whether or not respondents completed tertiary education (a bachelor's level or higher) and is based on responses to the question, "what is the highest level of education you have successfully completed?"

⁴ We used the coding algorithm provided by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics for coding countries into the 3 categories.
Ethnic identification - A unique feature of round 7 of the ESS is the inclusion of two items placed at the end of the questionnaire that ask respondents to describe their ancestry. The question was worded as follows: “How would you describe your ancestry? Please use this card to choose up to two ancestries that best apply to you”. Seventeen different categories are listed in the case of Israel including broad ancestry affiliations such as "Israeli" and "Jewish", ethnic affiliations such as "Ashkenazi" and "Mizrahi" and country specific ethnic categories for the largest Jewish immigrant populations. The full list is provided in an appendix A. A supplement added to the Israeli questionnaire included an item which read: "If you had to define your ethnic origin, which of the following possibilities would you choose?" Response categories were: Mizrahi, Ashkenazi, Mixed. Respondents could also volunteer "other", "do use this ethnic definitions" or "refuse".

Assigning "objective" ethnic origin to the Jewish population in Israel

Based on place of birth and family migration history we assigned origin and generation codes according to the following algorithm, which is similar to that used by previous studies (e.g. Cohen et al. 2007): Respondents who were not born in Israel are first generation immigrants and they are classified either as Mizrahim or Ashkenazim according to their continent of birth. The second generation consists of those born in Israel to immigrant parents. They were classified into 3 origin groups: Mizrahim, if both parents were Mizrahim; Ashkenazim, if both parents were Ashkenazim; and Mixed if one parent was Mizrahi and the other Ashkenazi. The 2.5 generation consists of offspring of parents, one of whom was Israeli-born and the other an immigrant. In this case we use the grandparents’ information to determine the origin of the Israeli-born parent. Here too we identify 3 population groups, Mizrahim, if the origin of one parent is Asia or Africa and that of the grandparents (in the case of the parent born in Israel) is also Asia or Africa. Respondents are classified as Ashkenazim, if the origin of one parent is Europe or America and that of the grandparents (in the case of the parent born in Israel) is Europe or America. If one or both grandparents (on the side of the Israeli-born parent) were born in Israel, the assigned ethnicity was according to that of the foreign-born parent. Finally, we define as mixed origin those with one Mizrahi, and one Ashkenazi, parent (or grandparent).

Respondents also had the option to add an ancestry that was not included in the list or refuse to choose any ancestry.
The third generation includes respondents whose parents are Israeli-born. Their ethnic origin is determined by that of their grandparents. The classification rule that we used in this case is that if at least one grandparent was born in Asia or Africa (Mizrahi) and no grandparent was born in Europe or America (Ashkenazi) the respondent was classified as Mizrahi. If at least one grandparent was born in Europe or America (Ashkenazi) and no grandparent was born in Asia or Africa (Mizrahi), the respondent was classified as Ashkenazi. All other cases (at least one grandparent from each ethnic group) were classified as Mixed.

Findings

*Origin, generation of migration and educational attributes*

The distribution of cases across the ethnic origin and migration generation categories is presented in Table 1. We see the Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews each constitute over 40 percent of our sample and only 7 percent of the entire sample is defined as mixed origin based on their parents or grandparents place of birth. Yet, although those of mixed origin comprise only 6 percent of second generation immigrants they are 19 percent of the 2.5 and third generation. The small number of cases, however, requires that we evaluate the characteristics of this group with some caution.

Table 1

Figure 1 presents the mean age for each of the generation by origin populations. As expected on the basis of migration history the first generation immigrants are generally older the later generations. This is especially evident among the Mizrahi population, dropping from an average age of 70 in the first generation to around 50 in the second generation to 40 in the 2.5 generation and just under 30 in the 3rd generation. Among Ashkenazi Jews the mean age in the first generation is similar to...
that of second generation Ashkenazi and considerably lower than the age of first generation Mizrahim. This reflects the fact that Israel incorporated a large wave of emigrants from the Former Soviet Union in the 1970s and even a larger wave in the 1990s as well as a small but continuous flow of emigrants from North America and Western European countries following the 1967 war. All these contributed to reducing the mean age of first generation Ashkenazi Jews. Not surprisingly, Jews of mixed origin are younger than others although in the third generation the mean age of all groups is similar (with a slightly lower mean among Ashkenazi).

**Figure 1 here**

*Education*

As noted at the outset persistent socioeconomic gaps between origin groups have been a source of considerable strain on Israeli Jewish society and have been the subject of much research. Expectation (or hopes) in the early days were that the disparities would narrow over time and disappear as later generations go through the Israeli education system and fully integrate into Israeli society. Due to shortcoming of data sources most research on ethnic socioeconomic gaps focused on the first and second generation immigrants and natives Israeli born to Israeli-born fathers were generally group together into one category. With the present data we are able to examine the educational attainment of first, second, and third generation Mizrahim and Ashkenazim as well as that of respondents of mixed origin. The European Social Survey includes two measures of education. A global measure based on years of schooling and a more specific measure based on the highest level of education successfully completed. The latter variable is not only a more precise measure of education but also more important as an indicator of human capital necessary for succeeding in the labor market and the socioeconomic benefits derived from employment. The following discussion, therefore, focuses on the distribution of academic education across origin groups.⁷

In figures 2a and 2b we present the proportion of respondents with an academic degree for each of the origin by generation groups. We calculated educational attainment of respondents age 25 and over in order to capture the population that is

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⁷ For those interested we provide information on years of schooling in appendix B.
likely to have completed its education. The figures are provided separately for men and women in order to take account of gender differences in educational patterns over the generations. Three inferences present themselves in Figure 2a that pertains to men the data. First, the gap in attainment of higher education between Ashkenazi men and Mizrahi men among first generation immigrants is very large (over 30 percentage points difference). While earlier studies also reported large differences between first generation Ashkenazi and Mizrahi men the extent of the gap found in our data partly reflects differential immigration periods and age structure of the groups. There was practically no immigration of Mizrahi men since the aftermath of the 1967 war. Hence first generation Mizrahi men are generally early arrivals. This is also evident from their high average age presented earlier. Although Ashkenazi immigrants comprised about half of those who entered Israel in the first 2 decades, immigrants from Europe and North America continued to come in later years, two-thirds of whom emigrated from the Former Soviet Union after 1990. Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union were very highly educated, but even if we exclude them from the calculations the proportion of academically educated first generation Ashkenazi men does not drop by much and stands at 40.1 percent.

Our main interest in this section of the paper is gaps in the second, and especially the third generation. Thus, a second inference from the data is that the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi education gap among men narrows significantly in the second generation to 21 points (from 31 points in the first generation), but since then narrowing of the ethnic gap slowed down and stood at 18 points in the third generation. This is primarily due to a steady increase in the attainment of Mizrahi men and only a modest increase in the attainment of Ashkenazi men, with the exception of the 2.5 Ashkenazi generation whose college graduation rates is 10 points higher than the rates among second generation Ashkenazi men. Still, the disparity in the third

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8 Recall that Ethiopian immigrants, the main Mizrahi group to arrive Israel in the post-1970 period and the second largest immigrant group since 1980 (about 93,000 immigrants), are excluded from our analysis.
generation defies rhetoric and actions taken to wither ethnic differences in education and shows how deeply-entrenched the ethnic socioeconomic divide still is.

The third finding of interest is that men of mixed origin are more similar to the Ashkenazi group in their educational attainment that to the Mizrahi group. The figures for mixed origin men, should be taken with some caution since the numbers are small. Altogether there are only 44 men in this category split fairly evenly across the generations 2, 2.5, and 3. The fluctuations from one generation to the other are likely a result of these small numbers, but the fact that a similar pattern is evident in all generations provides credence to the conclusion that the educational attainment of offspring of mixed marriages is more similar to that of Ashkenazi men than Mizrahi men.

The educational gaps among women (Figure 2b) are generally similar to those found among men, but with some important differences with respect to trends. On the whole a higher proportion of women than men have an academic degree. This is most pronounced in the third generation. Yet, substantial differences exist between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi women. Unlike the case among men, where the ethnic gaps in the second and third generation are almost identical, among women the trend of narrowing the ethnic gap in education does not stop at the second generation but continues into the third generation. Specifically, the ethnic gaps in college graduation among women narrows from about 40 percentage points in the first generation to 30 points in the second generation, reaching 20 in the third generation. We find a steady increase in the proportion of highly educated Mizrahi women from one generation to the next. On the other hand the proportion of highly educated Ashkenazi women is rather stable in generation 1, 2, and 2.5 but shots up in the third generation (reaching 64 percent), preserving the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi educational gap even in the third generation. The proportion of academically educated women of mixed ethnicity is in-between the two ethnic groups in the second and third generation (although it falls in the 2.5 generation). Although third generation women of mixed origin are better educated than mixed origin men they lag behind third generation Ashkenazi women. Once again, the reader is reminded that the number of women of mixed ethnicity is rather small and the variation across generations may be simply random fluctuation. If we combine the second and third generation it is still the case that the educational
achievement of women of mixed ethnicity falls between the two ethnic groups but not as close to the Ashkenazi groups as was found in the case of men.

Overall, the results confirm earlier findings regarding the existence of very substantial gaps in education not only in the first and second generations but also in the third generation. Likewise, the results confirm the findings that persons of mixed ethnicity are more similar to Ashkenazim. However, our results reveal a greater reduction of the gaps between the second and third generation than found by Cohen et al. (2007) based on the 1995 census. While Cohen et al. found no reduction in college graduation gaps between the second and third generations, we found a reduction of 3 points among men, and 10 points among women. However, Cohen et al. (2007) included the 2.5 generation with the second generation and limited the analyses to persons 25-34 years old in 1995, hence their results are not directly comparable to ours. Notwithstanding these differences, the important point is that in 2015, as in 1995, there are still substantial gaps in higher education between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim of the third generation, and this is despite the dramatic expansion of the higher education system in Israel that started in the 1990s, enabling more Israelis of all ethnicities to obtain academic degrees.

Ethnic identification
Ethnicity is increasingly acknowledged as multifaceted and the subjective perception of ethnic and national identification is central to much of the literature on migration and immigrant incorporation. The European Social Survey aims to advance research on this topic by asking respondents for the self-identification of their ancestry (in the sense of descent or origin) in addition to place of birth. Specifically, respondents were asked to select in sequence up to two ancestries that best apply to them. Figure 3 describes the first ancestry category chosen by Jewish respondents in Israel, sorted by their ethnic origin and migration generation. As is evident from the figure the two categories selected by the overwhelming majority of Jewish Israeli respondents are either “Israeli” or “Jewish”. Only a minority of less than 10 percent chose some other category as their first choice of ancestry.
Given the opportunity to choose among categories that reflect country of origin (one’s own or that of precursors), the broader Mizrahi or Ashkenazi identity or religio-national identifiers, practically all respondents chose the latter. The important attribute of both “Israeli” and “Jewish” ancestry is that they are inclusive and override ethno-cultural divisions within the Jewish population. In this sense one might argue that the Zionist project succeeded in instilling in the minds of most Jews in Israel the sense of belonging to a larger unity beyond their community of family origin. In view of ambivalence among Jews in Israel with regard to internal cultural divisions that are seen as weakening Jewish society, the option to select these broad national ancestry categories provided an escape from associating oneself with the ethnic cleavage.

Taking a closer look at the distribution of the first ancestry category chosen by respondents we find some differences especially between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi respondents. A larger proportion of Mizrahi Jews selected “Jewish” as their first ancestry rather than “Israeli” and the opposite is true for Ashkenazi Jews, with the Mixed origin Jews more closely aligned with the Ashkenazi. This reflects in part the larger proportion of religious and traditional persons in the Mizrahi population and their greater tendency to identify with Israel via its Jewish history than with the Zionist project of modern Israel. It is also noteworthy that choice between “Israeli” and “Jewish” ancestry is not systematically related to generation of migration. Although in both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi origin the first generation is more likely than later generations to choose “Jewish” ancestry, the differences within origin groups are not very large. On the other hand the contrast between the two extreme groups is quite large. Among first generation Mizrahi, 57 percent selected “Jewish” as their first ancestry and 36 percent selected “Israeli”. Among third generation Ashkenazi respondents the respective figures are 25 percent and 70 percent.

Having the option of choosing two ancestries has the advantage of permitting respondents to express (at least partially) the multifaceted nature of their ethnic identity. In the context of national states this may also free respondents from the dilemma of choosing between a broad national identity and a more specific ethnic identity. In the case of Israel these options primarily provided respondents with the opportunity to express their identity as both Jewish and Israeli. Figure 4 presents the
combined proportion of respondents who selected “Jewish” as their first ancestry and “Israeli” as their second option, or vice versa. Approximately 80 percent of all respondents chose only these two ancestry categories rather than more specific ancestries associated with their place of origin. In other words most Israelis prefer to identify with the larger – unifying - religio-national collective than with specific sub-groups that may imply internal cleavage. As might be expected this is somewhat more apparent among those with mixed origin, but the Mizrahi respondents do not differ much in this regard. Although two-thirds of Ashkenazi respondents selected either “Jewish” or Israeli, this proportion is lower than in other origin groups. This can be attributed to the fact that European Ashkenazi ancestry carries with it symbolic benefits as the politically and socially dominant group for decades.

We found that when given 2 choices of ancestry respondents prefer to identify with the over-arching religio-national “Jewish” collective and the more modern national collective “Israeli”, rather than the narrower proximate ancestry associated with their place of origin. Does this mean that the ethnic origin classification into Ashkenazi and Mizrahi categories is merely a construct of researchers that has no bearing on the self-identification of Jews in Israel? The appendix to the Survey questionnaire fielded in Israel included a question that asked respondents what they would choose if they had to define themselves in terms of ethnic origin. The categories presented to respondents were Mizrahi, Ashkenazi, and Mixed. Respondents were also able to volunteer “other” ethnic identity, or that they do not define themselves with respect to ethnic origin.

The distribution of responses to this question according to the demographically-based origin groups is presented in Figure 5. The data reveal a strong correspondence between the “objective” demographically-based origin and the self-proclaimed ethnic identity. Eighty percent of the first and second generation of those classified as Mizrahi on the basis of their origin define themselves as Mizrahi. The figure is approximately 10 percent lower in the 2.5 and 3 generations, where a similar proportion defines itself as having a mixed ethnic ancestry. The mirror image of this pattern, but not as strong, is found among the demographically defined Ashkenazi population. Between two-thirds and 70 percent define themselves as Ashkenazi and
the generational differences are minor. In other words, Mizrahim are more likely than Ashkenazim to identify with their demographically based ethnicity. Likewise, respondents with a mixed origin who do not choose to identify as “mixed ethnicity” are twice as likely to define themselves as Mizrahim than as Ashkenazim. Apparently, Israelis prefer the (lower status) Mizrahi identity over the higher status Ashkenazi identity.⁹

The proportion of respondents who define themselves as “mixed ethnicity” increases form the first to the third generation but is rather small compared to the proportion who view themselves as having mixed ancestry among respondents defined demographically as Mixed origin. Indeed, one-third (in the 2nd generation) to one half (in the 3rd generation) of respondents from mixed Mizrahi and Ashkenazi origin defines itself as “mixed ethnicity”.

Two additional points emerge from the findings in Figure 5. First, a small number of respondents demographically classified as Mizrahi define themselves as “Ashkenazi” and the opposite is true for those demographically classified as Mizrahi. This may result from misclassification of some respondents as in the case for instance of immigrants from France who are classified as Ashkenazi whereas they may be North African that migrated to Israel via France. In any case the numbers are quite small.

The second point is that the proportion refusing to use the tri-partite ethnic self-definition is rather small, ranging from 10 to 18 percent. Hence while preference is given to broader more inclusive ancestry categories the Mizrahi – Ashkenazi cleavage is still clearly present in the way Jews in Israel think of their ethnic affiliation which largely overlaps with their place of origin.

⁹ Even Prime Minister Netanyahu announced recently that a DNA test taken by his brother revealed the Spanish roots (hence Mizrahi, although he never used this term) of his family insinuating his affinity with his (mostly Mizrahi) supporters.

http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4807687,00.html
Discussion

There is considerable ambivalence in Israel concerning ethnicity and ethnic cleavages within the Jewish society. On the one hand socioeconomic disparities between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi populations are regularly reported in studies of education, labor market earnings and economic wellbeing. While these findings are often interpreted with regard to the mal-treatment of early Mizrahi immigrants and persistent structural discrimination, they are also said to evoke essentialist views of ethnicity and are criticized on these grounds. Indeed, there are those who claim that Jewish ethnic categories are constructs upheld by the Bureau of Statistics and researchers using the no longer relevant country of origin as an ethnic marker. Furthermore, using father’s place of birth to capture ancestry fails to capture the origin of over 50 percent of the Jewish population whose father was born in Israel. In this sense the passage of time is erasing the ethnic divide in a technical sense as more and more Jews are classified as “Israeli”. Yet, this does not mean that particularistic ethnic identities and ethnic socioeconomic gaps are actually disappearing. In our study we took advantage of detailed ethnic origin and ethnic identification data available in round 7 of the European Social Survey in order to probe into ethnic educational gaps and patterns of ethnic identification. Detailed country of origin information allowed us to identify the origin of first, second and third generation immigrants and to identify mixed origin in the second as well as the third generation.

Using this information we were able to study the educational achievement and the extent to which educational gaps between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews narrowed from the immigrant generation to the third generation. In this regard our findings are mixed. The proportion of highly educated Mizrahi Jews steadily increased from the first immigrant generation to the third, and the gap between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi origin groups narrowed. At the same time a substantial gap is still observed among Israeli-born whose parents are also Israeli-born (third generation). This is despite a dramatic expansion of the higher education system in Israel that started in the 1990s, enabling more Israelis of all ethnicities to obtain academic degrees.

The findings for offspring of mixed ethnic origin support earlier studies that showed their achievements to fall in between the Ashkenazi and Mizrahi group. In our study the educational attainment of men is almost on par with that of Ashkenazi men.
Women of mixed ethnic origin do not do as well as Ashkenazi women but are more likely to have higher education than Mizrahi women.

Turning to the relationship between the demographically-based (objective) origin and ethnic affiliation and identification, our study offers two novel observations. First, there is a strong preference among Jews in Israel to portray their ancestry in broad inclusive categories rather than using more particularistic identities. The overwhelming majority of respondents selected “Jewish” or “Israeli” ancestry over one based on country or continent of origin. This can be viewed as an triumph of the nation-building project in Israel that aimed to subordinate particularistic histories and traditions to the imagined shared past and to emphasize the common present and future.

Yet’ our findings also reveal the multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of ethnic identification. Even though respondents see themselves first and foremost as having Jewish and Israeli ancestry they do not part with their more particular affiliations. Most respondents selected an ethnic origin category when asked to choose one and did not opt to refuse or to state that they have no particular ethnic identity. Their actual choices of ethnic identity overlapped to a very high degree with the objective – demographic – origin classification, giving credence to this indicator of ancestry.

One process that does seem to erode the Ashkenazi – Mizrahi ethnic distinction is marriages that cross this divide. Offspring of mixed ethnicity parents tend to shy away from the dichotomous distinction and to identify themselves as having mixed ethnicity or no particular ethnic identification. Yet, offspring of mixed marriages are still a minority even in the third generation so the process still has a long way to go.
References


Table 1. The distribution of cases by ethnic origin and migration generation

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<th>Mizrahi</th>
<th>Ashkenazi</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generation 1</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation 2</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation 2.5</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation 3</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (percent)</td>
<td>856</td>
<td>938</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(percent)</td>
<td>(42.5)</td>
<td>(46.6)</td>
<td>(7.4)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Mean age of for ethnic origin groups by generation of migration, respondents age 15 and over.
Figure 2a. Proportion of male respondents age 25 and above with an academic degree, by ethnic origin and generation of migration

Figure 2b. Proportion of male respondents age 25 and above with an academic degree, by ethnic origin and generation of migration
Figure 3. First ancestry selected from a list of possibilities, by ethnic origin and generation of immigration.
Figure 4. The proportion of respondents who selected “Jewish” and “Israeli” as their as their two ancestry choices, by ethnic origin and generation of immigration.
Figure 5. Self-identifies ethnic affiliation by ethnic origin and generation of immigration
Appendix A. List of response categories included in the ancestry question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>First ancestry Mentioned</th>
<th>Second ancestry Mentioned</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israeli</td>
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<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinian</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizrahi</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sephardi</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedouin</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druze</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethiopian</td>
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<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moroccan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romanian</td>
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<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ukrainian</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (WRITE IN)</td>
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<td>18</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Appendix B. Mean years of schooling of respondents age 25 and above, for ethnic origin groups by generation of migration