

False Consciousness

True or False?

STEPPING OUT OF THE SURVEY

Excitement and Anxiety

On a swelteringly hot day in August 2009, my research team and I waited for our first group of informants. We were tense and anxious. Strangers to us and to each other, this group of Mizrahi men without a college education, the “self-defeating” protagonists in Israel’s version of the “great paradox,” were about to arrive at our sociology laboratory on the campus of Tel Aviv University to launch the second phase of our investigative project.

All of the participants had recently completed a telephone survey, and now they would serve as critics and interpreters of the survey findings that they themselves had helped to produce. As the crew checked the cameras and mics, I reviewed the session protocol with my research coordinator and the two focus group facilitators. My mind was racing, and I was ill at ease. We were about to slap the informants in the face, confronting them with the “bitter truth” about their inferior position in Israel’s social hierarchy.

How would they respond to this revelation? I imagined scenes of the men confronting painful moments of betrayal by the state to which they had been so loyal. I could see them overwhelmed with conflicting emotions, charged with deep feelings of insult and resentment. Would this truth crush their sense of self-worth? Would this be a moment of devastating disillusionment?

The participants were arriving from all over the country, each on his own. One participant, Sasson, had apparently gotten off the bus at the wrong stop and was lost. He called my research coordinator and asked if someone could pick him up.

I volunteered. I spotted him standing at a bus stop, a short, stocky, swarthy man in his sixties wearing a thin jacket and holding a used plastic shopping bag containing homemade sandwiches. I stopped my car, rolled down the window, and asked if he was heading to the university campus. Hesitantly, he said he was. Had he ever been to the campus before, I asked. "Yes," he replied matter-of-factly, "I was here with my wife, at the [low cost] dental clinic." His unpretentious response was heartening. At once, the abstract subject drawn from my statistics had morphed into the flesh-and-blood, solid and whole Sasson.

The results of the telephone survey we had just completed were also in our minds, heightening the tension. The findings clearly revealed the different arenas in which Mizrahim recognized their class inferiority. For example, Mizrahim were more aware than Ashkenazim of their under-representation among doctors, recipients of the Israel Prize (Israel's highest civilian award for contribution to science and culture), and admissions to universities. Ashkenazim, however, were more likely identify their group's over-representation among university faculty.

We can hypothesize that greater percentage of correct answers by Mizrahim or Ashkenazim comes from exposure in their daily lives to these phenomena: Mizrahim take note of their Ashkenazi doctors and the recipients at the Israel Prize ceremonies on television and are aware of their and their relatives' and children's difficulties getting into universities. Ashkenazim, who attend university in greater numbers, are more aware of the under-representation of Mizrahim among university faculty; in 2008 they were only 9 percent of faculty (Blachman, 2008). In the areas in which we can assume that Ashkenazim and Mizrahim are equally exposed to Mizrahi under-representation—for example, doctors' visits and television broadcasts—it may be that Mizrahim are more sensitive to, and perceptive about, the under-representation.

However, we were forced to make a methodological choice: which questions that produced statistically significant differences between the two groups would serve as our focus? We chose to focus on the findings of a classic and provocative study of social stratification, which showed the inferiority of Mizrahi high school graduates in 1970 when compared both to Ashkenazim and, surprisingly, to Arabs. This provided us with an opportunity to examine the subjects' intuitions with regard to these findings.

Other factors also informed our decision to focus on this question. First of all, the other questions dealt with comparisons between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, while this question included Palestinian citizens of Israel and would broaden the discussion on inequality from the internal Jewish context to a more universal civic space. Second, unlike other cases, in which the exposure of Mizrahim to inequality may differ according to factors such as age, background and area of residence, we did know for sure that most of the Mizrahim had experienced educational-vocational tracking. Indeed, as the following discussions demonstrate, a

significant portion of the focus groups had personal familiarity with the phenomenon. The younger participants did not have first-hand experience of the overt form of this ethno-class tracking system, as it has changed guises over the last three decades: the “low-status academic tracks that replaced the vocational tracks did not improve the life chances of low-achieving students from disadvantaged social groups” (Bar-Haim and Feniger 2021, p. 423). However, the younger participants, as we will see, were familiar with the earlier iteration of academic tracking through the experiences of their parents and other family members. Third, in this question, unlike the others, the participants were dealing with a classic study of stratification in critical sociology, which provided solid and unexpected findings that enabled us, in Bauman’s (1976, p. 102) words, to put the “emancipatory potential” of sociological knowledge to the test with our informants.

Our findings suggested that Mizrahim were better informed than Ashkenazim and Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel and knew that they (Mizrahim) had been in the lowest position in the structure of opportunity in education during in the 1970s. Perhaps these traces of Mizrahi group awareness could be a sign of a hidden political awareness that was straining to break free.

Pushing the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi Ethnic Cleavage to the Fore

The survey question under discussion was based on the findings of sociologist Yossi Shavit, published in 1990 in the *American Sociological Review* in an article titled “Segregation, Tracking and the Educational Attainment of Minorities: Arabs and Oriental Jews in Israel.” The study found that “in recent [1970s] cohorts, Palestinian men who are citizens of Israel attend post-secondary schools at higher rates than Oriental Jews [Mizrahim]. This pattern emerged despite the socioeconomic disadvantages of Arabs, the small share of resources allocated to Arab education, and government efforts to advance the attainment of Oriental Jews” (p. 115). Shavit explained these trends in terms of ethno-class tracking applied in the Jewish education system, which channels Mizrahi Jews primarily into vocational rather than academic studies. By preventing Mizrahi Jews from accessing higher education, the tracking system was effectively maintaining the current Jewish ethno-class social status quo. Paradoxically, the Palestinian Arab education system, which operated outside of the Jewish nation-building project, had effectively escaped tracking. It thus enjoyed a relative autonomy that enabled it to channel its students toward academic learning.¹

Shavit’s findings were sociologically provocative and politically unsettling. They offered proof that the educational system, presumably as a result of the unintended consequences of the tracking system, was failing to achieve its ostensible mission and was an obstacle to the Zionist vision of the Jewish melting pot. Ironically, Palestinian citizens of Israel, because they were positioned outside the symbolic and institutional boundaries of the Jewish polity, had more educational opportunities (or less tracking) than the Mizrahim. Seen in the broader socio-political context, the findings pushed the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi ethnic cleavage to the fore

and threatened to shatter the mirage of Jewish ethnic integration. We were about to find out if these conclusions would have emotional and perhaps political repercussions among our Mizrahi subjects and, if so, what they were.

Shavit's study belongs to the type of critical research on social stratification that uses systematic statistical analysis to reveal a hidden power structure that determines the course of events on the surface, in what can be referred to as an act of "unmasking." This genre of research characterizes many studies of stratification, exploring gender, ethnic, class, racial and other biases in various institutional, political, and labor market contexts. To the research community, Shavit's findings seemed counterintuitive, surprising, and even provocative. But did they come as a surprise to the respective populations themselves? In other words, how would Palestinian citizens of Israel, Ashkenazim, and Mizrahim respond to the unmasking?

Astute Assessments

In our telephone survey, we had asked a random sample of the adult Israeli population the following multiple-choice question: "A study conducted 15 years ago found that within the cohort born in the 1950s, the group having the least chances to be accepted to a university was. . ." The participants could choose to fill in the blank with one of the following possibilities: women, Ashkenazim, Arabs, Mizrahim, or "don't know." We then analyzed and compared the responses according to subgroups and observed that there was a gap between Palestinians and Jews with regard to their understanding of the structure of educational opportunity, as displayed in figure 1.

Whereas all Jews clearly recognized Ashkenazim as the privileged group in Israeli society,² Palestinian citizens responded that Ashkenazi Jews had a relatively lower chance of access to higher education than Mizrahi Jews. The lack of awareness of internal Jewish ethnic distinctions demonstrated by the Palestinian participants is consistent with our other findings. As we had learned in response to a different question, more than one-third of the Palestinian respondents in the sample were unfamiliar with the categories "Mizrahim" and "Ashkenazim." This uncertainty is reflected in the large percentage of Palestinians who responded with "don't know" to the question about university acceptance. Arabs and Jews selected the answer "women" in similar percentages.

Among Jews overall, the responses, as one would expect, tended toward the usual suspects—Mizrahi Jews and Arabs, although Mizrahi Jews were viewed as even less likely to be accepted to university than Arabs. This finding is somewhat peculiar. Why would Jews believe that Mizrahim, ostensibly fully integrated members of the Jewish polity (Lamont et al., 2016), were more disadvantaged than Arabs, the group least identified with the Jewish state, the most excluded, and the most discriminated against? Figure 2 casts some light on this.

Figure 2 clearly shows that the source of the differences in the overall orientation of the Jewish responses (figure 1) is rooted in the different response rates

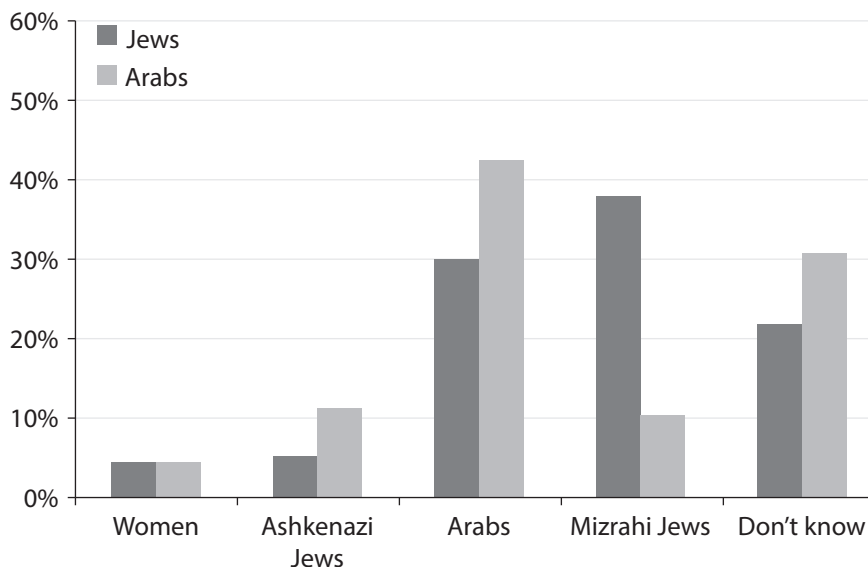


FIGURE 1. Percent distribution of responses by Arabs and Jews to the question, “Which group (women, Ashkenazi Jews, Mizrahi Jews or Arabs) had the least chances to gain admission to a university in the 1970s?” N=1022.

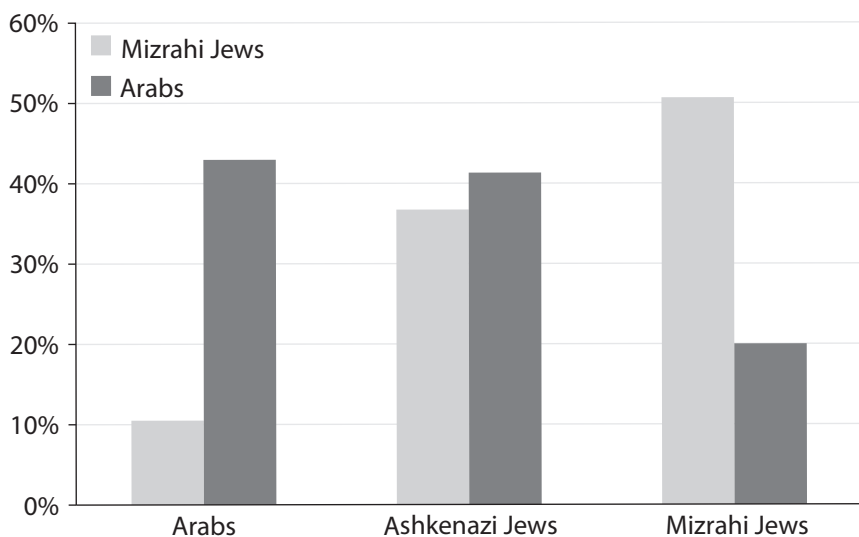


FIGURE 2. Percent distribution of responses among Arabs, Ashkenazi, and Mizrahi Jews to the question, “Which group (Mizrahi Jews or Arabs) had the least chances to gain admission to a university in the 1970s?” N=1022.

of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews. Once we disaggregated the responses, we discovered that Mizrahi Jews were significantly better informed than either Ashkenazi Jews or Palestinian citizens of Israel regarding their own (Mizrahi) chances to gain admission to an institution of higher learning. When compared to Ashkenazim or Palestinian citizens of Israel, being Mizrahi was found to be a superior predictor of Shavit's provocative findings, irrespective of religiosity, education, or age. (Differences between Mizrahim on the one hand and Ashkenazim and Arabs on the other were statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.) Put simply, the Mizrahi population was significantly more aware that their location had been *below that of Arab Israelis* in the structure of educational opportunity during the 1970s.

Between Awareness and Consciousness

On the face of it, the survey pointed to traces of the informants' political awareness. However, this raised several questions. Were they aware of what had actually happened? If by "what had happened," we mean a bare factual difference in chances to attend an institution of higher learning, then, according to the statistics, the answer is yes. When compared with other groups, Mizrahim were more cognizant of the effective structure of opportunity in the Israeli education system. We were about to find out what emotional, moral, and political meaning our participants would attach to this awareness.

To be sure, we had no guarantee that this random group, selected from among the participants in our sample, would actually arrive at Shavit's conclusions. Just because in our survey Mizrahim as a group had been relatively more capable of choosing the correct answer when compared to the other two groups did not mean that this particular grouping would do the same. Whatever conclusions they might reach, the purpose of the group discussion was to follow the systems of classification and justification they would use to make sense of our question and explain their answers, whether or not the discussion directly reflected the intriguing statistical finding.

THE ENCOUNTER

Mizrahi Men without a College Education

With all this in mind, we began our focus group encounter. Our first set of participants, six Mizrahi men who had no higher education and were strangers to one another, was made up of two distinct age groups: three were in their twenties and three in their sixties. The younger members of the group were: Eliran, 20, an instructor in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) technical high school; Ron, age 20, a soldier on active duty; and Yehezkel, 28, a Jewish religious artifacts salesman. The older men were Haim, 60, a factory worker; Gidi, 60+, a retired IDF veteran; and Sasson, 65+, a butcher, whom we met before.

At this point, these men knew only that they had all participated in the telephone survey; they did not know anything else about each other, about their

shared ethnic origin, or anything else they had in common. They knew very little about the purpose of the study. Two middle-aged Ashkenazi male facilitators conducted the session. The session began as Facilitator B introduced himself and Facilitator A thanked the participants for making the effort to come, explained how the session would be conducted, and told them that it would be recorded. One participant asked about the purpose of the study. Facilitator A answered that all he could say is that this is a study about social inequality and the distribution of social resources, that is, the issues at the heart of the telephone survey they had completed. Some participants nodded their heads in understanding and approval. The facilitator stressed that all comments and materials would be used exclusively for the purposes of the research, which was led by a university professor. In response to a request for clarification of those purposes, Facilitator B explained that they relate to equality and the structure of opportunity in Israel. He repeated that the participants' identities would remain confidential. Each participant briefly introduced himself.

The facilitators then put the first category in our research to the test. They introduced the word "Mizrahi" into a group composed entirely of Mizrahi men without a college education. Would they accept the term Mizrahim as a working category? Would they identify themselves and the others as belonging to the same ethnic group?³ In other words, would they adopt a basic level of group identity?

Each participant was asked to write down which group he thought had the least chance to be admitted to a university. This was followed by a fifteen-minute debate over the options, and the group was tasked with reaching a common answer. Sasson and Haim were the first to voice their views.

Sasson: I think it should be Arabs in first place. Even though I don't enjoy saying it, but I have no choice; Mizrahim are in second place.

Haim: Should we rank it [them]?

Facilitator B: Do so based on mutual agreement.

Sasson: Like it's two peoples.

Facilitator B: Two peoples?

Sasson: We're two peoples, us and the Arabs. Even though I'm against letting them get an education.

Before proceeding to our analysis of this portion of the discussion, we note that the two questions we raised above were decisively answered: the term "Mizrahim" raised no confusion or doubt about its meaning; at the same time, the participants made no reference to a shared Mizrahi identity.

Sasson's initial remarks, along with his disclaimer ("even though I don't enjoy saying it") may have reflected discomfort about voicing his views in a room located at Tel Aviv University, an institution publicly associated with liberal progressiveness, while taking part in a group discussion conducted by two college-educated Ashkenazi men. If his position truly indicates political cautiousness, a closer

reading of his argument may reveal Sasson's attempt to unveil the "true reason" for his attitude. He seemed to be suggesting an alternative organizing principle, rooted in national belonging rather than racism or universal citizenship. That is, what appeared to bother Sasson is the classificatory order reflected in the question's phrasing, one that positions Mizrahi Jews and Arabs on the same scale. According to Sasson's classification system, this is a category error; the two groups rooted in different wholes cannot belong to the same order of categorization. The very notion of Arabs and Mizrahi Jews as two equal groups of universal citizens, competing over the same social, symbolic, and economic resources, and living in one neutral state, was unsettling to him. For him, liberal democracy as the "model" for a proper moral and political order was impossible, given the deep national divide between the two groups. To put Sasson's comment in context, one should know that he, like many other Jewish Israelis, believes citizenship is not universal and the state is not neutral (see Lamont et al., 2016, chap. 4).

The group discussion continued:

Yehezkel: If it's women, Ashkenazim or Mizrahim [excluding Arabs], I would say Mizrahim, because they didn't have the means to get into the university. I look at my father . . .

Facilitator B: Yes, but listen, guys, it's not a question of means, but of who had a more difficult time being admitted.

Yehezkel: Chances . . . they had no chances. I think it's the women, because they were perceived at the time as having to stay home and raise their children. They were perceived as less skilled than men.

Haim: No, that's the 1980s already.

Sasson: This was much later.

Haim: It was before that time, this was already in my mother's time, not in the days when . . .

Sasson: You're still young—we're talking about those things from our [my own] experience.

Citing economic reasons, Yehezkel initially mentioned the Mizrahim as the group with the lowest chances of being admitted to a university. He then switched to women. The older participants rejected Yehezkel's choices, asserting their authority to disqualify his answers.

Gidi: I'll tell you what I think, guys. Look, those who were born in the 1950s—those with grey hair or bald [Gidi is referring to the older participants, including himself]—at least remember a little bit; they were here during the first years after Israel attained statehood . . . or in 1952, when the economic recession began. If you remember, they used to distribute food stamps, they used to ration food.

Sasson: That's right.

Gidi: They rationed food and everything; resources was limited, and everything was weighed and counted The country wasn't developed yet. We barely had anything, and if you remember in the mid-'50s we were already at war—after the [1948] War of Independence we had the Sinai Campaign [1956]. This means that in the 1950s, those who were born, I think, into a difficult period and the early revival of the country, with the difficulties of building a new state, difficulties of the recession [. . .], war, and only toward the late 1950s, I think [. . .], after we managed to catch our breath a little bit, then the country began to develop, I think, at a faster pace, we are [now] seeing the results . . .

Facilitator B: How did that affect [the question of] who can get admitted?

Gidi: Well, now these kids, who were born in the '50s, they only just started their lives then, right?

Haim: I'm sort of like that.

Gidi: They went to first or second grade, they finished elementary school, did the army after almost twenty years, that's already the mid-1970s. [. . .] The country was more developed by that time; you could make more progress . . .

Haim: That was after the Six Day War [1967].

Gidi: Whoever wanted, whoever had the means, whoever had parents who could help him with more tutoring, with support. I'm telling it like it was.

Facilitator B: Which group do you think it was?

Gidi: Now I'll tell you which group. Until now I only gave you some background. I think that the group was the Mizrahim. The Arabs were those with the lowest chances. Because they simply were, only after '67, only after the war, did they, like, start becoming assimilated in the country. If you remember. [. . .]

Gidi organized his account according to the state's narrative of Israel's rebirth and infancy, punctuated by the chronology of economic and political events and crises that affected its development. He portrayed the state's development within the framework of Zionist temporality as an organic process, devoid of competing groups or conflicting narratives. Instead, he offered a unified narrative that neutralizes the political connotations of inequitable distributive justice, social inequality, systematic discrimination, and even wrongdoing. He addressed only the objective constraints surrounding nation-building.

Toward the end of this exchange, Facilitator B pushed Gidi to directly address the question they were asked. Gidi first stated "Mizrahim," the factually correct answer, but then quickly and inexplicably shifted mid-sentence to Arabs. His

reference to Mizrahim could be read at this point perhaps as some sort of “Freudian slip,” surfacing from the depths of his subconscious. We cannot say. What stands out is that he quickly shifted his response to “Arabs.”

Eliran: The entire time of the 1950s was accompanied by murders of Jews by Arabs.

Gidi: Forget it, the ‘50s is who was born [refers to when they were born]. We’re talking about the ‘70s, when they started their university studies.

Eliran: Yes, but the education itself of the children was affected, among other things, by fears of Egyptian bombings, if I’m not mistaken, of course, the bombing of Rishon LeZion [a small city south of Tel Aviv], [and] there was fear of the Arab population also because of the fedayeen,⁴ and all the [IDF] reprisal requirements at the time. I think it’s the group of the Arabs—nobody gave them the time of day.

Again, discrimination against Arabs was framed in terms of the objective constraints that accompanied Israeli nation-building. In this way, Eliran justified his choice of Arabs as the group with the lowest position in the structure of educational opportunity.

Sasson then interjected his own impressions on the matter:

Sasson: [. . .] I’d say it’s women, Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, with the Mizrahim being the last on that list [with Arabs removed from the list of possibilities based on his objection to their inclusion, as recounted above].

Eliran: Its Arabs, Mizrahim, and then women and Ashkenazim.

Sasson: Economically.

Facilitator B: Who is last in line? The question is, who has the lowest chances?

Gidi: The lowest I’d say would be the Arabs.

Sasson: I think so, too.

Haim: Because they didn’t develop awareness.

Yehezkel: But nobody gave them the time of day in those years; the Arabs were considered good for nothing. [. . .] You would drive in Jerusalem or in Gaza at the time, and they’d fear you then. Now there’s more of them at the universities, not because I’m racist or anything, God forbid, but in such a way that the country, the government’s policy, the peace agreements and all that, so they got in. We’re talking about today’s status. If you do it [Shavit’s study] today, between Jews only, then of course I think it’s Mizrahim. [. . .]

The group then voiced a sweeping agreement regarding the low position of Mizrahim when considering Jews exclusively. Overall, the participants appeared to agree that Arabs comprise the group least likely to be admitted to a university. The deep-seated animosity surrounding the role of Arabs in the history of the state seemed to provide the group with blanket justification for their choice. In his remarks, Yehezkel implied a link between left-wing politics and the growing number of Arab university students. In closing, he mentioned that today, the Mizrahim have the lowest chances for admission, but qualified his assessment as referring to Jews only.

Following this last comment, the discussion shifted to the present.

Facilitator B: I have a question. Suppose they did the same study today, let's say. [. . .] What would you say about now, today, not in the 1950s, not in the 1970s?

Haim: If it was today?

Facilitator B: Yes, who would have the least chances?

Sasson: The Mizrahim are already studying today.

Facilitator B: Then who would have the least chances?

Eliran: Women—in the university. I have three sisters and thank God, they all went to college,⁵ and . . . my mother went to the university and studied. My father didn't go to the university. I can tell you that women, in my opinion, don't have the lowest chances, but between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, yes [meaning there is still a gap between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim]

Facilitator B: Either Mizrahim or Ashkenazim are the least?

Gidi: I think that today they are equal; in my personal opinion, today they are equal.

Facilitator B: There's no difference?

Yehezkel: But there is influence because of money. There are always demonstrations about the rising tuition fees, to lower them. We still have the tuition problem. Many hold demonstrations about the fact that those who don't have money or support from home, those from weak families, don't have money to study.

Haim: You probably mean the Mizrahim? [. . .]
[. . .]

Facilitator A: Yes, we didn't hear Ron. What's your opinion?

Ron: I think that today there shouldn't be big gaps [. . .] because the universities, and the country in general, have an affirmative action policy for various sectors and weak layers in society.

Facilitator A: So, which is it then? Women, Ashkenazim, or Mizrahim—today?

Ron: Today?

Facilitator A: Today.

Ron: The Mizrahim.

Facilitator A: And why?

Sasson: Economic means.

Haim: I think it's a byproduct of economic means, which still keeps pulling the generation down.

At this point Facilitator B limited the options to women, Ashkenazim and Mizrahim. The group began to center on Mizrahim as the group with the least chances. Their reasons remained economic and circumstantial. None of them expressed any thoughts about discrimination, injustice, or wrongdoing.

Facilitator A: Gidi wants to tell us something.

Gidi: I think it's not. I think that in my own opinion and based on my personal knowledge, I can talk about my children—OK? I can't talk about someone else . . .

Sasson: My children also, God bless.

Gidi: There you have it, yours and yours, too. So let's say, in my opinion, today there's pretty much equality, I can't say [exactly, but] there's pretty much equality between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, because a kid who wants to go study nowadays will.

Sasson: You got that right.

Gidi: Will work nights, work [. . .] and go study.

Facilitator A: But who has better chances?

Gidi: Today, whoever wants to study . . . it's true—until you get there it's a little difficult. As you know, you have the entrance exams and all that, and it's true that the [private] colleges cost three times as much as the university here. I know because I also pay it from my pocket every year and I have, so I know. But whoever wants to study, and today there's equality, I believe today there's equality between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim and women and Arabs. This means that an Arab who wants to study, if we go to the Technion in Haifa or here, I think they have a presence, a relative percentage, I think. I don't know how many [Arab] students are here, they have a pretty big percentage.

We should note that Gidi interpreted the notion of equality as equality of opportunity or formal accessibility, rather than structural outcomes, which do not necessarily reflect that assumed equality (McCall, 2013).

Facilitator A: OK, discussion's over. Let's go over your answers again.

Yehezkel: Today [who has the lowest chances]? I hesitate between Arabs and Mizrahim, but Mizrahim.

Facilitator A: It's Mizrahim you think are most discriminated against. [. . .] Eliran?

Eliran: I also think Mizrahim.

Facilitator A: Gidi?

Gidi: I think they're equal.

Facilitator A: They're all equal?

Gidi: I think so.

Facilitator A: Sasson?

Sasson: I'm with the Mizrahim, 'cause I know, I have experience in that.

Facilitator A: Mizrahim.

Ron: I also hesitate between Arabs and Mizrahim.

Facilitator A: If you had to choose?

Ron: Mizrahim.

Haim: I also think it's very close to that. The percentages look very similar.

Facilitator B: If I understand correctly what you're saying, it's that in the '70s it was Arabs, and now it's the Mizrahim. True? Is that more or less what you're saying?

Sasson: It's the Mizrahim almost all the time.

Facilitator B: Right.

Sasson: Arabs today, let's say, let's take just one example, municipal taxes; if I don't pay taxes to the municipality, they will cut off my water supply. If you live in [the Bedouin-Palestinian town of] Rahat, you don't pay for the water and you don't get your water supply cut off. [. . .] I see it on TV, on the radio, in newspapers; they don't cut off their water supply, because they're afraid. This is why they have money; they don't want to give back one cent to the state.

Facilitator A: You mean they have an advantage because we're afraid of them, so they can save money?

Sasson: Exactly, that's right.

With the exception of Gidi, all the participants suddenly agreed that Mizrahim were the group with the worst chances for being admitted to a university. The realization was abrupt, coming as if out of nowhere, a puzzling leap from a long-winded discussion to a shared conclusion that echoed the statistical findings of our survey.

Had we been witness to the sudden eruption of a collective recognition, signs of imminent consciousness raising? Sasson's earlier statement—"I have no choice"—might have signaled a reluctance to admit that Mizrahim are in an inferior position, even though, at that point, he ranked them above Palestinians. In the same vein, Gidi's apparent Freudian slip, in which he said "Mizrahim" instead of "Arabs," may point to a larger hidden truth. However, Gidi's early insight was not addressed until the session was about to end, when the other participants' opinion shifted, as if a process of consciousness raising had finally reached fruition, and we were about to witness a moment of "political awakening."

To our amazement, however, the group's understanding of the events did not generate any political energy. Their realization was not accompanied by any sense of injustice or victimhood, defiance of the Zionist state, or resentment of the hegemony of Ashkenazi elite. We saw no evidence of any personal discomfort. The stark incongruity between their social awareness, on the one hand, and their benign compliance with that awareness, on the other, was perplexing. The timing of this realization only added to the perplexity. Throughout the entire session, the group had maintained that the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi gap had narrowed. As noted, when the discussion focused on the 1970s, the group recognized the gap between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim but ranked the Arabs at the bottom of the structure of educational opportunity. Yet, when the discussion moved to the present, they contended that the gaps had disappeared, and then reached the collective conclusion that Mizrahim have been the most disadvantaged all along.

Furthermore, it was only after Facilitator B highlighted their statements about diminishing social inequality and their examples of Mizrahi progress that group suddenly, and counterintuitively, came to a consensus on Mizrahi marginalization in today's educational system.

INFERIORITY AND SENSE OF SELF

How can we explain the fact that the Mizrahi men without a college education in this group accepted their past and present inferior position in the social hierarchy with such equanimity? How can we understand the ostensibly paradoxical timing of their conclusion regarding ongoing discrimination?

The Zionist Narrative and Personal History

So far, I have touched on a number of possible ways to understand the "deep story" (Hochschild, 2016) and the alternative logic that organized the Mizrahi participants' interpretive position. At face value, it would seem that the Mizrahim were repeating a story well-known to every Israeli. Members of the group readily accepted the Zionist narrative about nation-building, the ingathering of the exiles, and the establishment of a Jewish and democratic state (that is first and foremost

Jewish although it also provides equal rights and opportunities to the non-Jewish minority that lives within it). All of the participants saw themselves as members of the Jewish majority.

This stance enabled them to understand their relatively inferior position within the structure of opportunities as the birth pangs of the emergence of the Israeli nation. They were optimistic and believed that ongoing change will accelerate and further narrow social and economic gaps. Although the subjects recognized that they occupied a lower position, this recognition did not create a foundation for a separate identity as a minority group demanding its rights from the majority. Powerfully and precisely, they presented the well-known Zionist narrative in a manner that would please all of Israel's governments, from the left and the right.

From the perspective of critical sociology, the conclusions reached by the group would rouse suspicion or be rejected completely. The subjects appeared to be merely spouting Zionist ideology, whether out of lack of choice or lack of consciousness. Interpretive suspicion would be heightened by the apparent emergence of a "deep story," in Hochschild's (2016) words, that follows the critical scripts, a set of positions taken in response to structural oppression.⁶ Any critical reader's interpretive pendulum would be swinging, in a Pavlovian movement, between meaning (the honest effort to understand) and suspicion (the effort to unmask the establishment story and expose the "true story" that lies beneath.) But the critical reader would find it difficult to avoid the impression that the respondents' story was a representation of something else, a "false consciousness" that was obscuring the "real story" about the discrimination, exclusion, and oppression that the Zionist establishment has inflicted on the Mizrahim.

It is precisely for these reasons that we must turn the interpretive suspicion on itself and ask: could it be that the stance of the Mizrahi subjects is a representation of themselves and not of something else? What would be the theoretical benefit if we were to read it as a wellspring rather than an offshoot, an authentic attitude rather than a merely reactive behavior, an independent stance rather than a symptom of a deep social malady known to critical researchers and hidden from the subjects themselves?

This is the moment when I took a radical turn and focused my research gaze on the critique of that banal public Zionist narrative that every critical researcher views as ridiculous. This is the moment to turn the suspicious gaze toward suspicion itself, and ask: What is it that allows us to listen to the story our respondents tell as if, *a priori*, we know that it is untrue, a product of their own false consciousness? What are the theoretical foundations on which we are basing our certainty regarding the truth value of our subjects' narratives and beliefs?

These questions bring us back to the liberal grammar and allow us to sketch the initial design with which to open up an interpretive space that breaks through its limitations. However, before I discuss this evolving space, I need to address the assumptions that form the basis of the suspicion and certainty of the current progressive-critical position.⁷

First of all, most critical researchers accept the assumptions of a contractarian ontology (Abbott, 2016), according to which inequality is an absolute and universal moral injustice because it entails biased opportunity structure-based group belonging. This is deeply embedded in the foundational civic belief in the contractual agreement between the autonomous “universal citizen,” who is equal and free to choose, and the neutral state. Second, the expectation among critical researchers (including, initially, myself, since I am a Mizrahi researcher), is that when individuals from excluded groups recognize inequality in the recent past, it will resonate with their present experiences of inequality and lead to an understanding of the ways that oppressive power structures are reproduced, marking the beginning of an “awakening” from their false consciousness. Third, the subjects’ recognition of their inferior position (as well as the inferior position of other excluded groups) in the social hierarchy will generate discomfort, frustration and perhaps even the initial signs of a new political consciousness⁸ oriented toward changing existing power structures and, in this particular case, doubts about the Zionist-Ashkenazi hegemony.

Reading through the Lenses of Rootedness

We now return to examine the primary findings. Unlike the autonomous subject, the experience of the rooted subject is significantly determined by social connections and a sense of collective belonging. Rooted Mizrahim view themselves as an integral part of the People of Israel, which is greater than any individual. The rooted Mizrahi person feels connected to the past and the future of the People of Israel, and their location in society and status cannot be examined without relating to the greater Jewish and national story, one narrated in Zionist time.

Therefore, in the civic context, Mizrahim do not perceive their relationship to the state in terms of the contractarian ontology described by Abbott (2016). Our Mizrahi participants did not experience themselves as neutral citizens living in a universalist state, but rather as citizens who belong to the Jewish whole and live in the Jewish polity, which represents the purpose and fate of the Jewish people. As noted, their descriptions of past events and their evaluation of the moral and political meaning of these events were based on a natural acceptance of the process of Jewish nation-building in which they are partners. Based on their deep attachment to the national Jewish entity, they examined the attempt to position Mizrahim and Arabs as oppressed minorities in a shared neutral civic space as a category error. Classifying them as “victims” of the state or of the common Zionist hegemon because of their position in the social hierarchy contradicts their basic identity.

The worldview that links Mizrahim with Palestinians and that often generates fantasies of a shared “awakening” among the two groups, which might even lead to an “Alliance of the Oppressed” against the Zionist-Ashkenazi hegemon, appears to lack any basis in reality. This is an example of how the notion of inequality stemming from individualistic ontology has downplayed or overlooked the meaning of group boundaries. We should approach the ways the participants

interpreted inequality in the educational opportunities, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, from the point of view of the rooted subject rather than from the ontological individualism of liberal grammar. Their personal stories are tied to the birth, growth, and development of the state. Inequality is not understood in terms of *homo aequalis*, as a particular injury to the autonomy of the individual, the absolute meaning of which is injustice.

To be sure, in the past, Mizrahim have protested against their economic situation and social exclusion, but these protests addressed concrete issues and did not coalesce into a Mizrahi political identity and consciousness. Herzog (1985) argued that only a Mizrahi political party, like Shas, that would emphasize Jewish identity and would ally the Mizrahim with the greater Jewish whole and reject ethnic separatism, could succeed. Some four decades later, her hypothesis has yet to be disproven.

In sum, inequality at a given point in time (in this case, the 1970s), was explained as a part of the broader story and the general price paid by the collective, even if the Mizrahim paid a higher price than the Ashkenazim elite who brought them here. The view of what constitutes “the good” was anchored in what is good for the whole. With regard to discrimination in education, their inferior position was often understood as part of their sacrifice to the greater story, the building of the nation, or attributed to a temporary injustice of specific circumstances. At no point in the discussion did the subjects present the state as “guilty”; any and all inequality is void of political significance.

From the position of the rooted individual we can understand the logic that underlines the differentiation that the subjects made between the economic and educational sphere, on the one hand, and the political and religious sphere (which constitutes the bulk of their identity) on the other. Examples of the relationship between their inferior status in the structure of opportunities in the past and the position of Palestinians in the same structure, or even of their inferiority to Palestinians in the given context, were perceived as circumstantial and as something that will change over time, so that they could accept it with equanimity. In other words, not only did the awareness of their inferior position in the structure not bring up any resentment or lead to any political consciousness—the comparison between them and the Palestinians in the fields of education and the economy lacked any political meaning and did not produce feelings of injustice or personal injury.

This view of inequality did not derive from the structure of stratification at a given moment. In their view, the description of the differences between the groups is not evidence of “injustice.” The organizing moral principle is equity, not equality (see Hochschild, 2016; McCall, 2013). Equity entails making resources (in this case, educational resources) available to all.

We should note that Gidi interpreted the notion of equality as equality of opportunity or formal accessibility rather than structural outcomes, which do not

necessarily reflect that assumed equality (see McCall, 2013). Gidi declared, “Today there’s equality between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim and women and Arabs.” This was a statement of his satisfaction with the positive changes that have taken place over the years. Gidi’s statements were fully supported by the rest of the participants, and not one of them had any reservations about the inclusion of Palestinians among the groups that enjoy equality. Even Sasson, who had some reservations earlier, joined in with the rest of the participants. Making resources accessible to all citizens, including to Palestinian citizens, within the framework of a Jewish state seems fair to the subjects.

Structural Inferiority and the Sense of Self-Worth

The ostensibly perplexing jump in consciousness on the part of the members of the group now suddenly becomes clear. As we remember, the group of men reached the conclusion that Mizrahim are in an inferior position after they had reached an agreement regarding the reduction in inequality overall, and between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in particular. This strange, unexpected move, seemingly an uncontrolled burst of political awareness that came from the depths of the group consciousness, invites a suspicious reading. But an alternative interpretation would suggest that only after they had secured their sense of self-worth and their position as deserving citizens who had paid their dues to the state (taxes, army service, and so forth) could they draw a moral line between themselves and the Palestinian citizens of Israel, who, they claimed, do not pay their dues. Only then, from a republican position of first-class citizens, could they assert their relative disadvantage.

From this stance, they could frame their inferior position in terms of fairness—or unfairness, to be more precise. Such framing does not jeopardize their sense of self-worth and may even strengthen it. Put differently, this reading enables us to distinguish between being disadvantaged when holding a position of equal citizenship and marginalization when coming from a position of inferiority. These two possible frameworks appear to bear opposite meaning for the Mizrahi sense of self-worth.

This explanation could be interpreted as a “reactive position” to inequality, similar to the manner in which Michele Lamont (2000, p. 3) demonstrates how working-class men “dissociate socioeconomic status from moral worth and thereby locate themselves above the upper middle class according to a standard to which they attach overarching importance.” By doing so, Lamont continues, they are able to maintain their dignity.⁹ This line of reasoning suggests that there was no underlying political awareness that suddenly erupted, echoing the intriguing statistical findings with which we had set out. I agree with Lamont’s line of argument: Mizrahim are not demonstrating a nascent political awareness. I do not, however, share the view that such behavior is merely a reaction to inequality. The members of the group resisted the implied connection between the inferior position

of the Mizrahim and the Palestinian citizens of Israel and any political meaning that would have had obvious political implications. Sasson rejected this at the very beginning of the discussion, yet the recognition of the inequality of the Mizrahim was put off until the moment at which they clarified their positions as deserving citizens of the Jewish state.

HOMO AEQUALIS AND THE COLLECTIVE WHOLE

In this chapter we've seen the meaning of temporality in the experience of the Mizrahi rooted subject. Unlike the autonomous individual, according to the logic of the *homo aequalis*, the moral and political meaning of inequality is not viewed as an affront to the individual's autonomy, but rather is derived from the historical context of the collective whole, within which the person is rooted—in this case, the Jewish whole situated in Zionist national time. They view history as a crucial dimension in understanding their position in the hierarchical structure. This was expressed throughout the discussion, especially in the ways the participants wove their personal narratives into the public narrative (Somers, 1994), as part of a process of sense-making of equal opportunity in education at different points in time. For them, the meaning of their relatively inferior position in the hierarchical structure is an integral part of their perception of their position in the story of nation-building, which Gidi described as a natural or organic process, stretching from Israel's early years to its current state of maturity. Thus, their attitude toward phenomena and events in the past, which the critical discourse views as oppressive, were viewed as childhood illnesses and growing pains during the state's early stages of development. The price that the Mizrahim paid along the way was viewed as a necessary evil or even as a part of the group's contribution to—and sacrifice in service of—the building of the Jewish nation.

In the next chapter, I will present the subjects' optimistic view of their role in this project of nation-building and their "naïveté," from the critical point of view, with regard to the significance of certain historical events, through direct confrontation with the critical interpretation of these same events. In other words, I will confront the subjects' interpretation with a more demanding interpretation. However, at the center of this investigation, I will position the subjects' optimistic historical narrative against the pessimism of critical historiography, and I will investigate whether there is any factual basis for their sense of change and the broad horizons they experience. Or perhaps this is an expression of false consciousness, albeit with a more colloquial meaning.