

Libraries in a Multicultural Society

Public libraries' Services to Ethiopian Israelis and to Russian Israelis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to culturally map the services provided to two ethnic groups – new immigrants to Israel from Russia and Ethiopia – from Israeli public libraries, which are established cultural institutions. In the Israeli multicultural society, different cultural populations live side by side and receive services from the same public library. We asked whether there was a difference between the library services provided to Russian and Ethiopian Israelis, and were also interested in examining whether there was a difference between the library usages of these two populations. We aimed to provide a practical framework for answering these questions, and through measurable indicators to culturally map the usage of public libraries in Israel by the two research populations, in hope that it would shed light on the usage practices of the two groups and the benefits entailed by these practices.

For this purpose, we began by examining the services provided by public libraries throughout the world, particularly in the United States, the United Kingdom, Scandinavia and within it Denmark and Sweden and Australia, to different immigrant populations. Apparently, in the United State, a multicultural society in which the white majority might lose its hegemony in the near future, several legislative initiatives limited the provisions of educational and cultural services, including library services, to illegal immigrants. Simultaneously, the libraries themselves demonstrated strong awareness of the need for providing library services for different ethnic groups, and actively worked to make the libraries fit for providing services for these communities.

The American Library Association (ALA) supports providing these services, and is aware of the need to adjust library services to the needs and languages of a variety of populations. The situation in Denmark in particular and Scandinavia as a whole is similar. However, in the United Kingdom, despite the sensitivities of ex-colonialist Britain and its attempts to avoid racial discrimination, massive criticism is leveled against providing library services for immigrant populations. The British librarian association has formed a section concerned with services for various populations.

In order to study public library services to the two populations mentioned above, we presented two mail research questions: Is there a difference between public library services offered to Russian Israelis and Ethiopian Israelis, and is there a difference in the manner in which these services are received? The answers to these questions are complex in light of the multicultural split in Israel, which is, on one hand, an immigration country, and on the other – a nation state. As a nation state, Israel can not officially practice multicultural governmental policy. Nevertheless, various cultural groups take advantage of the democratic regime to promote and focus on their own cultural heritage and perpetuate its existence for their offspring – a situation resulting in a reduction of the dominant culture's status, which becomes merely one culture among many. Israel's democratic regime allows free and open cultural expression for various ethnic groups, and, indeed, many of these groups, including the Israeli Russian and Israeli Ethiopian communities, preserve their original culture while contributing to mainstream Israeli culture. The 900,000 Russian Israelis constitute a vibrant and politically active community, which supplies their own supplementary educational and cultural services. Ethiopian Israelis are much fewer (85,000 in number), more religious and less economically privileged, the cultural gap between their country of origin and Israel, an industrialized country, makes them depend more upon governmental assistance and receive a sometimes paternalistic treatment. The heroic circumstances surrounding their immigration to Israel are not always duly appreciated.

This nation-wide study is based on a user's questionnaire to 319 users, aged 14 to 30, and designed to examine the public library services received by Russian Israelis and

Ethiopian Israelis. In addition, 45 managers filled a manager's questionnaire examining the services provided to these two populations. The two questionnaires were distributed by mail and collected for eight months in libraries which, according to the Israeli Bureau of Statistics, were located in neighborhoods where Russian Israelis and Ethiopian Israelis resided.

The findings show that both groups greatly enjoy public library services in Israel, but Ethiopian Israelis, who are economically and politically weaker, use them more intensively. The one exception is loaning services, which require more financial resources, and are therefore used more intensively by the more affluent Russian Israelis. In addition, Russian Israelis send a little more e-mails from the library, which can be attributed to their stronger economic status and to the large availability of computers within the community. Our comparison of library usage patterns shows that Ethiopian Israelis spend more time in the library than Russian Israelis, attend the library more often with their families, and use it more for obtaining books.

The findings also show that Ethiopian Israelis appreciate more the library and the Israeli Russians appreciate more the librarian, which could be easily explainable in the light of the fact that there are many more librarians from Russian origin than of Ethiopian origin. Despite the dearth of collections in Amharic, Ethiopian Israeli's language of origin, the respondents, who were 14 to 30 years old, used the library to read in Hebrew, which proves their acclimation to Israel. It is estimated that an examination of older respondents from both populations will yield more significant differences between them, because Russian Israelis come from a country in which reading was a strong and dominant cultural feature and books were almost sanctified cultural artifacts, while Ethiopian Israelis, in comparison, come from an agricultural, economically weak country.

Both Russian Israeli and Ethiopian Israeli respondents used the public library and its services quite intensely for learning, entertainment and reading. The rate of using the public library was reported to be higher in Israel than in the countries of origin, for both

groups, albeit for different reasons. Russian Israelis come from a country only recently liberated from the communist regime, where library services were provided in order to create a sympathetic public opinion and to hide unflattering facts and data about the government, rather than for freely distributed information. Ethiopian Israelis come from a country where library services were not sufficiently available. It appears that there is little difference between the usage of library services in Israel in the two populations; however, the findings regarding the services provided to them show that the smaller size of the Ethiopian Israeli community is reflected in the amount of effort and resources devoted to them.

The study shows that both populations are eager for a librarian who speaks their language and relates to them. It is hoped that, with time, there will be more librarians who speak the Ethiopian Israeli native language, which will perhaps allow for more focused services for this population. Nevertheless, when asked, whether library services were designed for the local or the immigrant community, Ethiopian Israelis more often opted for the latter, though both groups, in general, felt the services were more aimed at the local community. Apparently, it is necessary to train and employ more librarians who speak the native languages of both populations, which will allow the users to be able to communicate better with the librarian, and to receive the warm and personal services they need as immigrants. Both populations ascribe much importance to the computerized services available in the library, but Ethiopian Israelis appreciate these services more than Russian Israelis.

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