

Can perceptions of similarity reduce the ability to see the other's needs? The case of immigrant students' integration policy

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Abstract In this age of wide migration waves all over the world, when schools' populations become more diverse, educators often make policies regarding groups of immigrant students (from the same origin) with unique needs. Perceptions of homogeneity of the group, as well as perceptions of similarity between the decision maker and the group members are likely to have a major influence on these policies. Although research has shown that perceptions of great similarity between the decision maker and a target group enhance empathy and promote decisions in favor of the group; results of the current research, examining immigrant students' integration policy in schools, suggest that inaccurate high similarity perceptions (on a relevant domain) might decrease the ability to understand the targets' diverse needs and may lead to decisions that do not serve the group, or the decision maker's goals. Two studies were conducted to examine the effect of perceived homogeneity and similarity on immigrant integration policy in schools. In the first study, lay people recommended fewer programs for immigrants students when those were judged to be more similar to themselves and more homogenous. Similar results were obtained in the second study, examining school principals' reports of existing programs for immigrant students in their schools. Implications on policy making are discussed.

Keywords Perceived similarity · Integration policy · Decision making · Educational policy · Immigrant students

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When a public decision maker is confronted with a decision regarding a group or a certain population, or has to make policies concerning such a group, the decision maker's perceptions of the target group might play a major role in his/her decisions. Certainly there are many types of group characteristics that might influence the decision: group size, homogeneity, stereotypes, perceived needs and other characteristics may all play a role. However, beyond all those factors the perceived similarity between the decision maker and the target group is a core factor that might shape perceptions of the group.

In this paper we examine how perceptions of similarity between the decision maker and a target group affect decisions concerning the group. Research has shown that perceptions of great similarity between the decision maker and the group might enhance empathy and the ability to understand the groups' needs and as a result promote decisions in favor of the group. However, we suggest that perceptions of great similarity between the decision maker and the group target might lead to biased decisions when the actual similarity between the decision maker's needs and the group target's needs are really low in the relevant attributes. In such cases, decision makers might ignore or miss the diverse needs of the group and therefore, their decisions might not serve the group's needs, or the decision maker's goals.

1 The effect of perceived similarity and homogeneity on decisions

The idea that people feel closer and understand better the viewpoint of others which they perceive as similar to themselves has a strong foundation in social psychological theory. Already Heider in his seminal book *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, (Heider 1958), noted that interpersonal similarity (on a relevant dimension, such as attitudes, personality, background variables, or any other characteristics) enhances 'unit relations' between the perceiver and the target, meaning a sense of "belongingness" or closeness. More recently, researchers have pointed to the relationship between perceived closeness to others and judgments of similarity (Tesser and Campbell 1980; Tesser and Paulhus 1983). The sense of closeness to similar others increases attractiveness and liking (Newcomb 1961), as well as empathy towards the other (Batson et al. 1981; Krebs 1975). The ability to take the role of the target and identify with his/her emotions, including the targets' distress and perceived needs is greater when the target is perceived to be similar to self (Krebs 1975; Stotland 1969). Furthermore, perceptions of similarity increases the degree to which one values the others' welfare and wants to have their needs relieved (Batson et al. 1995, 2007). Self-other similarity indicates that the self and the other are "of the same kind"; when people recognize aspects of themselves in the other, the other's welfare becomes more self-relevant (Batson et al. 1981; Sturmer et al. 2006). The 'similarity breeds liking' principle (Byrne 1971, 1997) suggests that people are willing to help others more when they feel that they share similar characteristics or beliefs (for review, see Bar-Tal 2000, pp. 1–14). One of the explanations for this phenomenon is the sense of community and connectedness people tend to feel toward others who are like themselves. Similarity was indeed found as promoting helping by creating a feeling of 'oneness' (Cialdini

et al. 1997). When the target's needs are ambiguous or unclear, similarity may provide a basis for inferring the nature and the extent of the other's need (Batson et al. 1995).

Following the above findings, researchers suggest that the greater understanding of similar others' thoughts, feelings and needs, puts one in a better position to intervene on their behalf (e.g., Grusec 1981). However, in some cases one might perceive great similarity with another individual or a group of individuals on one domain, and as a result assume similarities with the same target in other domains. For example, perceivers expect individuals with similar physical traits (such as skin color) to possess common psychological traits (Ip et al. 2006). Incorrect perception of similarity might also occur due to wrong perceptions of homogeneity of the group target.

Real similarity between the perceiver and a sub-group on a relevant domain might be incorrectly included to perceptions of similarity to the entire group, especially when the target group is relatively homogeneous in a different irrelevant domain). For instance, common physical traits of a group of individuals increases perceived homogeneity of the group regarding different characteristics that might fit some people in the group, but not others (Ip et al. 2006).

Perceptions of closeness and similarity between the perceiver and the group-target may encourage the view of the target as a part of the same social category (i.e. in-group), which might also enhance perceptions of homogeneity of the group-target (Castano et al. 2003; Yzerbyt et al. 2000). The "in-group homogeneity effect" suggests that the in-group appears as more homogeneous than the out-group on relevant and positive attributes (Simon et al. 1990; Simon and Pettigrew 1990). Positive perceptions of the in-group such as self efficacy and high abilities (when those traits are possessed by in-group members), might cause the neglect of the weaknesses and needs of individuals or sub-groups when those are perceived as a part of the in-group (Rubin and Badea 2007).

The described misperceptions may lead to wrong representation of others. Moreover, they might influence public decisions and policy making when the decision maker is in a position of authority. In particular, perceptions of high similarity between the decision maker and a target group (especially in positive characteristics) might decrease the ability to see the heterogeneity of the group and the diverse needs of different sub-groups or individuals in the group.¹ As public decision makers usually belong to high social statuses, perceptions of high similarity between self and the target-group might make the decision maker think that the target "just like me" is in a better position than its actual state, and may cause the oversight of the targets' diverse needs.

Perceptions of similarity between the target group and the decision maker are likely to play a major role in public policies, especially in multi-cultural societies. This influence might be predominant in the case of decisions regarding groups of immigrants, particularly when immigrants come in big flows (from the same region and in large groups), as often happens in Israel. We took advantage of that special situation in Israel

¹ According to Self-Categorization Theory (Turner 1987), similarities between self and the other ingroup members in positive features, make each individual group member to becomes less personalized; which leads to in-group homogeneity (e.g., Haslam et al. 1995).

to examine our hypothesis that perceptions of high similarity and homogeneity of a target-group may decrease the ability to see the group's or sub-groups' diverse needs.

2 Immigrant integration policy in the Israeli education system

Israel defines itself as a Jewish immigration state and as a home to all the Jews around the world. According to the "Law of Return" and the "citizenship law" there is an automatic naturalization process for Jews that immigrate to Israel. The fact that the immigrants are Jewish and get an automatic citizenship increases the perceived similarity between the veteran society in Israel and the immigrants as well as their perceived belongingness; especially since many of the Israelis themselves (or their families) were also immigrants at some point. In the case of immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU), their western looks (usually bright skin that resemble the look of the local Ashkenazi Israelis) and their perceived belongingness to the western culture further enhance the subjective perceived similarity between them and the veteran society (as compared with the Ethiopian immigrants who are different in their skin color and their culture). Moreover, at the beginning of the big immigration wave from FSU (1989) most of the immigrants came from big cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg; they were relatively educated (60.4% of the formers have more than 13 years of schooling) and belonged to a relatively higher socio-economic status. These characteristics created relatively homogeneous views of the FSU immigrants. The homogeneous view permeates to the Israeli education system as well, such that the prototype of a "Russian" or "Soviet" immigrant student referred to a student from educated family with high motivation and abilities to study and to integrate into the new society. (Horowitz 1999).

However, since 1999 most of the FSU immigrants to Israel come from different provinces of Russia (85–87%), rather than from the big cities. The immigrants from the provinces are less educated (only 45% of them have more than 13 years of schooling) and come from a lower socio-economic status (Tolts 1997, 2003). Despite the decline in the amount of immigrants who came from big cities (in the last decade) and the decrease in their average socio-economic state and level of education (Tolts 1997, 2003; Sikron 1998), the Israeli society still has the former image of the typical FSU immigrant (the one that came from a big city and is highly educated). The common homogeneous perception of the FSU immigrants ignores the real diversities that exist among the immigrants, and therefore, fails to understand the needs and the anticipated difficulties of many of the immigrants in general and immigrant students in particular (Bram 2003).

In addition to the general move towards school-based management in Israel, the perception of the Russian immigrant students as "strong" students, who do not need any special treatment, brought the Educational Minister Office to give the role of decisions and policy making in regard to the immigrant student's matters (such as the kind of help or programs that should be given to them), to the school principals (especially in junior high and high schools). Although immigrant students have special needs in their social, cultural and academic integration (as a result of cultural differences between them and the veteran society and due to the integral life change), their difficulties are

perceived by the education system as temporary and technical, and as resulting mostly from language deficient and unfamiliarity with the new place (Yogev 1996; Horowitz 1999). Accordingly, many of the school principals, who are directly responsible for the integration of the students, concentrate on teaching the new language and do not see the need for other special intervention or the implementation of special programs for immigrant students (Hacohen 2001; Horowitz 1999; Tatar 1998).

Integration policies and the attitude toward other groups of immigrants in Israel, such as the Ethiopians or immigrants from eastern countries are very different than those described in regard to the FSU immigrants, and involve the implementation of more special programs for immigrant students (Horowitz 1999). One of the main differences between the immigrants from FSU and other immigrants (e.g., Ethiopians), is the perceived similarity between the local society and them. Furthermore, the perceptions of similarity between the FSU immigrants and the local society may enhance perceptions of homogeneity of the FSU immigrants' population. The language difficulty which is the prominent difference between the immigrants and the local society gets most of the attention and therefore, many of the integration programs focus on teaching the language, assuming that the immigrants' difficulties are temporary, only until the immigrant will learn the language (Horowitz 1999).

Based on the above literature and on the description of the FSU immigrants' integration policy we hypothesize that although research suggests that perceptions of high similarity between perceiver and target increases the ability to see the target's needs and to provide help, incorrect perceptions of high similarity and homogeneity of the target may decrease the ability to understand the target's needs and to provide the right support. We suggest that in cases where perceptions of similarity are based on inaccurate attributions (such as semblance), the ability to see variations in a group-target as well as its unique needs decreases. In such cases, salient differences between the perceiver and the target (such as language) become predominant and get high priority in support programs. Increasing familiarity with the group target might promote a better understanding of the group's diversity and hence improve the ability to see its members' various needs (Linville et al. 1989).

Specifically, we hypothesize that decision makers will allocate less resources to support programs for immigrant students when perceiving them as similar to themselves. Perceptions of high similarity will be related to the integration of the immigrant students within existing programs in school (with the rest of the students), rather than creating specialized programs for immigrant students. Perceived similarity increases the view of the language deficit as the prominent need of immigrant students. We will also show that people in Israel still hold the earlier view that FSU immigrants come from big cities and are relatively academic.

3 Overview of the studies

Two studies were conducted to test the above hypothesis in the context of the integration of FSU immigrants' in Israeli schools. The experiments examine perceptions of lay people (study 1), as well as school principals, who are in position of authority and are the actual decision makers in the case of immigrants' integration in schools

(study 2). We asked participants for their view of the FSU immigrants in terms of similarity, homogeneity and familiarity (independent variables) and about the number and type of programs for immigrant students that should be implemented (dependent variables). Lay people (undergraduate education and social studies students) were asked about their recommendations, while school principals reported about existing programs in their schools. Our main assumption is that perceptions of high similarity between the perceiver and the immigrants and perceptions of high homogeneity (low awareness to varieties within the immigrants' population) decreases the ability to see the immigrants' diverse needs, which lead to programs (recommended as well as existing) that concentrate on teaching the new language and give very little attention to immigrants' other needs e.g., cultural, social, study etc. On the other hand, increased familiarity with the immigrants reduces biased perceptions and increases understanding of the immigrants various needs.

3.1 Study 1

The first study was designed to examine lay people's current perceptions of FSU immigrants, including perceptions of their origin (big cities, small cities, or peripheries), education and perceived similarity between them and the participant. Moreover, we examine the relations between these perceptions and participants' ideas regarding the recommended programs school should apply to better integrate the FSU immigrant students.

3.2 Method

Ninety two undergraduate university students, 70% of them from the department of education and 30% from other social studies departments (75% of whom were female) participated in the study in return for course credit. They all received a four page questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards the immigrants from FSU. Participants were first told that the questionnaire examines perceptions of immigrant students and recommended programs for their integration in schools. They were informed that an immigrant student is one who came to Israel within the last ten years (which is the official definition given by the Israeli Ministry of Education). The first part of the questionnaire examined perceptions of similarity and connectedness between participants (perceivers) and the immigrants from FSU, using two different scales: The "Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale"—Aron et al. (1992), which is a pictorial measure of closeness, presenting two same-size circles, one circle indicating the self and the second circle representing the other. The scale is scored from 1 (no overlap) to 7 (complete overlap), (see Fig. 1). Participants were asked to indicate which of the animations best reflected their feeling about the similarity between them and the immigrants. The second measure is a self-report of connectedness and similarity in which respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they would use the term "we" to describe self and immigrants from FSU (Dovidio et al. 1991; Cialdini et al. 1997). The last question in this part examined familiarity with the immigrants from FSU. Participants

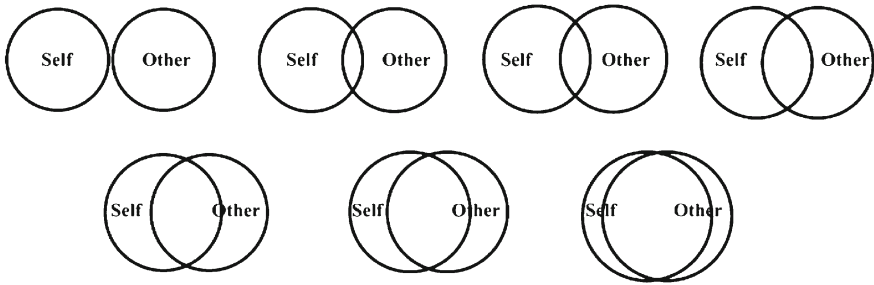


Fig. 1 The inclusion of other in the self scale (IOS) Aron et al. (1992). Instructions: Please circle the picture that best describes the similarity between you (self) and immigrants from FSU (other)

were asked to rate the degree of familiarity they have with the immigrants from FSU on a five point scale ranging from “very little” to “very well”.

On the second part of the questionnaire, participants were asked about their perceptions of homogeneity of immigrants regarding two characteristics: their origin and their education. For each of these questions, participants were given a drawing of an empty circle (with a dot in its center) and were asked to divide the circle into three parts (angles) representing their perception of the percentage of the immigrants that came from big cities, small cities, or provinces. Similarly, participants were asked to divide the second circle to three parts representing their perception of the immigrants' education: percentage of immigrants with academic, high school, or partial high school education.

The third part of the questionnaire examined participants' recommendation regarding integration policy for the immigrant students in school. Participants were asked about the type and number of programs schools should have to help students from FSU. In this part of the questionnaire participants first read: “Think about a middle school or high school that has a large number of students from the FSU (about 30% or more). How many programs should the school have to help these students?” Participants were asked to remember that the costs of every program would be taken from the school's overall budget. They were then asked to indicate the number of recommended programs between 0 and 6. Next, participants were asked about the type of programs schools with a large number of immigrants should have. Specifically, they were asked whether the school should pay for special programs that are meant specifically for immigrants, or use existing programs which are oriented for the rest of the students in school and integrate immigrant students in these programs (hence, programs' target population). Participants were asked to rate their preference on a visual analogical scale with no digits, ranging from “the school should have mostly special programs for the immigrants” on the one side, to “mostly general programs with the rest of the students” on the other side. Next, participants were confronted with four different aspects that programs for immigrants may concentrate on: teaching the language, studying assistance, social integration and Israeli culture and identity, and were asked to rank them according to their relative importance (given the higher score (4) to the subject that is the most important and lowest (1) to the least important).

The last part of the questionnaire examined perceptions of the immigrants' academic skills as a function of the immigrants' origin. In this part, participants were randomly divided into three experimental groups. Each group was presented with a story of an immigrant from the FSU. The immigrant origin was manipulated between subjects such that participants read about a new student that recently arrived to Israel from Moscow (big city condition), Birobidjan (a periphery) or from FSU (in general without stating the exact place) and is new in school. Participants were asked to characterize the student on three features each on a four degree scale (from the lowest to highest): learning skills, knowledge in math and in exact sciences, and parents' support and ambitions.

As mentioned earlier, we argue that the Israeli society still holds the former image of the typical FSU immigrant (the one that came from a big city and is highly educated), despite the decline in the amount of immigrants who fit this description. We suggest that this biased perception of the FSU immigrants hurt the ability to understand their difficulties and needs. In line with this assumption, we hypothesize that due to the above misperception of the immigrants' population, a student that 'came from FSU' would receive similar ratings to those of the student that came from Moscow; these two are expected to receive higher ratings (in studying abilities) than the student that came from Birobidjan.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Perceptions of the immigrants' academic skills

The first part of the analysis examines the differences between perceptions of the immigrants' academic skills as a function of their origin (A student that came from FSU, Moscow or Birobidjan). A one way ANOVA examined the differences between ratings of the immigrant students' academic skills (learning skills, knowledge in math and in sciences, and parents' support and ambitions), by the students' origin. As can be seen in Table 1 results show a significant difference between the three groups: ($F(2,89) = 3.80, p < .05$) for learning skills; ($F(2,89) = 7.59, p < .01$) for math and sciences; and ($F(2,89) = 4.98, p < .01$) for parents' support and ambitions. A post hoc analysis reveals no significant differences between academic skills ratings of students that came from FSU and students that came from Moscow; on the other hand, the student from Birobidjan was rated significantly lower from the student from FSU in all three academic skills: $t(60) = 2.58, p < .05$ for learning skills; $t(60) = 3.33, p < .01$ for math and sciences; and $t(60) = 3.29, p < .01$ for parents' support and ambitions. In sum, the results strengthen our assumption that although most of the immigrants from FSU in the last decade come from provinces, are less educated, and need more help with academic requirements; people still perceive them as "strong students" who probably do not need much study assistance.

We note that this part of the study appeared last in the questionnaire, to avoid the influence of the different versions of the questionnaire (manipulating the origin of the student) on perceptions of similarities and recommended programs.

Table 1 Study 1, mean (SD) ratings of the immigrant students' academic skills (learning skills, knowledge in math and in sciences, and parents' support and ambitions), by the students' origin

Origin	Learning skills	Math and sciences	Parents' support
FSU	3.13 (.67)	3.61 (.55)	3.65 (.55)
Moscow	3.10 (.84)	3.57 (.56)	3.47 (.77)
Biribidjan	2.65 (.79)	3.03 (.79)	3.10 (.74)

Table 2 Study 1, regression of programs attributes (number of programs, target population and language importance) as predicted by ratings of similarity and familiarity with the immigrants

	Number of programs		Target population		Language importance	
	t	β	t	β	t	β
Similarity	-3.11**	-.35	-2.22*	-.26	2.33*	.27
Familiarity	2.10*	.24	.74	.08	-.31	-.04

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

3.3.2 Perceptions of similarity

Cronbach's Alpha of the two similarity scales ("weness" and IOS) was 7.5, thus we computed a combined measure of similarity, which is the average of the two scales. Mean of this similarity scale was 4.40, $SD = 1.54$. Ratings of familiarity with the immigrants were lower, $M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.10$. Three regression analyses were conducted to examine the role of these two factors in predicting participants' recommendations regarding the appropriate programs schools should adopt in integrating immigrants from FSU. The first analysis examined the number of recommended programs; the second and third analysis examined the type of programs recommended, in terms of target population (specifically for the immigrants, or with the rest of the students) and programs' main goals (the relative importance of learning language over the other three needs). The independent factors were: perceptions of similarity between the perceiver and the immigrants (mean of the two similarity scales), and self report of the familiarity with the immigrants.

The model of the first analysis, examining the number of recommended programs was significant ($F(2,89) = 5.11$, $p < .01$) and contributed 8.5% of the variance ($R^2 = .10$). The role of perceptions of similarity in predicting of the number of programs was significant ($\beta = -.31$, $p < .01$) showing that perceptions of high similarity are related to fewer recommended programs. The role of familiarity with the immigrants was also significant ($\beta = .24$, $p < .05$), such that greater familiarity was related to recommendation of more programs (see Table 2).

Similarly, the model of the second analysis significantly predicted the type of recommended programs regarding their target population ($F(2,87) = 4.75$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .064$), but only perceptions of similarity had a significant contribution to the prediction ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .05$), such that greater perceptions of similarity are

related to the recommendation of programs that are not uniquely meant for the immigrants (i.e. integration in existing programs with the rest of the students).

The model for the third analysis significantly predicted participants rating of relative importance of studying the language (as compared to the other three goals) $F(2,87) = 3.09$, $p < .05$, R square = .07. Only perceptions of similarity significantly contributed to the model ($\beta = .27$, $p < .05$), showing that perceptions of high similarity are related to higher ratings of language as a main goal of the programs. Familiarity did not significantly contribute to the model.

3.3.3 Perceptions of homogeneity

Finally, turning to perceptions of homogeneity, results show that participants believe that on average 72% (SD = 20.32) of the immigrants that arrived within the last 10 years came from cities and only the remaining 28% came from provinces. As for their academic level, participants assume that on average 23% of the immigrants did not complete high school education (SD = 15.21). A regression analysis was conducted to examine the role of the two homogeneity factors (percentage of the immigrants that came from big cities and percentage of them who are academics) in predicting the number of recommended programs schools should have. The model shows that homogeneity perceptions significantly predict the number of programs ($F(2,86) = 4.05$, $p < .05$, R square = .09). Only percentage of the immigrants that came from big cities had a significant contribution to the model ($\beta = -.29$, $t = -2.76$, $p < .01$), such that participants who rated the percentage of the immigrants that came from big cities as higher, recommended fewer programs for immigrants. Although percentage of academic immigrants did not have a significant contribution to the prediction of the number of recommended programs, a significant correlation was found between percentage of the immigrants that came from big cities and percentage of academics $r(90) = .29$, $p < .01$. No significant results were found for the prediction of the type of recommended programs by perceptions of homogeneity. Finally, perceptions of homogeneity significantly predicted higher relative ratings of language as a main goal of the programs; here only percentage of academics had a significant contribution to the prediction ($\beta = .23$, $t = 2.15$, $p < .05$).

The results of the first study demonstrate lay people's perceptions of immigrants from FSU. Overall, these immigrants are perceived to be highly educated, with strong studying abilities. Although people know that immigrants from the periphery are less educated, they still believe immigrants from FSU are mostly from big cities. Perceptions of high similarity between the responder and the immigrants decreases the number of programs recommended for the immigrants in schools, as well as the perceived need for programs that are planned specifically for the immigrants (rather than their integration in the existing programs for the rest of the school's students). On the other hand, perceptions of high similarity are positively correlated to higher relative ratings of language as a main goal of the programs. This is probably a result of the perception that other needs (such as study assistance, social or cultural integration) are less important for immigrants that are similar to the local population in their study abilities and culture.

3.4 Study 2

The first study examined the relationships between people's perceptions of similarity to the immigrants as well as their recommendations for school policy for the integration of the immigrant students. However, the participants in the previous study did not have real experience with these students. The second study used a similar method to examine school principals' perceptions of the immigrant students and the existing programs for immigrant students in their schools. Specifically, we examine the correlation between the principals' perceptions of similarity and homogeneity of the immigrants and different aspects of programs for immigrant students in schools. The schools we chose for this study are all middle and high schools, in cities that extensively deal with absorption of immigrants. Since school principals in Israel are responsible for their schools' budget and are relatively free to decide how to allocate it, the number of hours allotted to programs for the immigrant students reflects the principals' perceptions of their needs. Another important aspect of the programs is their proclaimed goals. If the principal is aware of the immigrants' various needs, besides the need to study the language, the school should have several programs with different proposes. As in the previous study, we were also interested in the programs' target population (whether the programs are intended especially for the immigrant students, or are meant for all the students in school while integrating the immigrant students). Finally, we examine perceptions of homogeneity of the immigrants and whether the old image of the FSU immigrants as "strong students" with high academic skills still exists among school principals as well.

3.5 Method

A sample of sixty three principals (70% of whom were females, mean age 52, mean years of experience 9) of various middle and high schools in Israel, located in cities that extensively deal with absorption of immigrants (schools in cities in which at least 20% of the students are immigrants from FSU, who came to Israel within the last 10 years), voluntarily and anonymously participated in this study *via* a mail survey sent to all schools within these cities. This sample represented a response rate of 60%. They all received a four page questionnaire which was similar to the one used in the first study. Perceptions of similarity and connectedness as well as perceptions of homogeneity (of origin and education) were measured using the same methods as in the previous study. Since the school principals in the current study all work with immigrants from FSU extensively, familiarity with the immigrants is obvious; hence, we used the number of immigrant students from FSU in school as a measure of familiarity. The average number of immigrant students in these schools was 91, $SD = 103$.

The main part of the questionnaire examined the existing programs for the integration of immigrant students from FSU in school. Principals were asked to report about programs the school has for immigrant students. For each program, they were asked to indicate its number of weakly hours and main goals (e.g., learning the language, social integration, study assistance).

The last part of the questionnaire was similar to the one used in the first study, in which participants randomly received one of three descriptions of a new student that recently arrived to their school from FSU. The student's origin was manipulated between subjects as one of the three options: a student from FSU, from Moscow or from Biribidjan. Participants were asked to rate the student's academic skills, as in the previous study.

3.6 Results

3.6.1 Perceptions of the immigrants' academic skills

We began our analysis examining principals' perceptions of the immigrants' academic skills by comparing the ratings of those skills under the three between subject conditions. Results of a one way ANOVA with the three scales of academic skills as the dependent variables, and the origin of the student as the independent variable, reveals a significant difference between rating of the three groups ($F(2,54) = 8.03$, $p < .001$): for learning skills; ($F(2,54) = 3.01$, $p < .05$), for math and sciences and ($F(2,54) = 5.59$, $p < .01$) for parents' support and ambitions (Mean (SD) ratings of the immigrant students' academic skills are presented in Table 3). A post hoc analysis reveals no significant differences between academic skills ratings of students that came from FSU and students that came from Moscow; on the other hand, the student from Biribidjan was rated significantly lower from the student from FSU in all three academic skills: $t(34) = 2.85$, $p < .01$ for learning skills; $t(34) = 2.40$, $p < .05$ for math and sciences and: $t(34) = 2.29$, $p < .05$ for parents' support and ambitions. In sum, the results show that school principals, like lay people, tend to think of a "strong student" with high academic skills when they think about a student that came from FSU.

3.6.2 Perceptions of similarity

The number of hours dedicated to different programs for the immigrant students reflects the schools' recourse investment and priorities in the integration of these students. In order to examine the role of perceived similarity of the immigrants (to the perceiver) and the number of immigrant students in the school in predicting the number of hours dedicated to these programs, a regression analysis was conducted. The model includes the number of immigrant students in school and the two similarity measures.

Table 3 Study 2, mean (SD) ratings of the immigrant students' academic skills (learning skills, knowledge in math and in sciences, and parents' support and ambitions), by the students' origin

Origin	Learning skills	Math and sciences	Parents' support
FSU	2.97 (.60)	3.08 (.60)	3.13 (.77)
Moscow	3.14 (.59)	3.26 (.54)	3.54 (.58)
Biribidjan	2.35 (.67)	2.82 (.49)	2.65 (1.04)

Results reveal that the model significantly predicts the number of hours dedicated for the programs ($F(3, 43) = 9.86, p < .001, R^2 = .50$) contributing 45% of the variance. The role of the number of students was significant ($\beta = .71, t = 5.97, p < .001$). Looking at the similarity measures, the IOS scale showed a significant contribution to the model ($\beta = -.26, t = -1.98, p < .05$) such that higher perceptions of similarity were related to fewer hours dedicated to programs for immigrants. The “weness” scale did not have a significant contribution to the model. However, overall (mean of the two scales) the similarity scales had a significant specific contribution to the model after controlling for the number of students, and contributed 7.5% of the variance.

Looking at the programs' goals, principals mentioned various goals the programs for the immigrants focus on (including study assistance, social activities, and teaching the language). Comparing the principals that indicated teaching the language as the only goal, to the other principals (who mentioned several goals), we found that the former group perceive the immigrants significantly more similar to themselves ($M = 6.0$, for the combined similarity scale) than the later ($M = 4.8$).

In conclusion, similarly to the first study, perceptions of high similarity were related to fewer hours, hence less programs that are meant for the immigrant students. The number of immigrant students in school (that may reflect the principals' familiarity with the immigrants' needs as well as the existing need) were positively correlated with the number of hours given to the immigrant students.

3.6.3 Perceptions of homogeneity

Examining the principals' perceptions of immigrants' origin and education reveals very similar results to those of the lay people. Principals' estimations of the percentage of immigrants who came from cities was on average 73% ($SD = 15.71$), and for the percentage of the immigrants who did not complete high school education was on average 24% ($SD = 16.08$). As in the previous study, the correlation between percentage of the immigrants that came from big cities and percentage of academics was significant $r(54) = .50, p < .001$. These two scales did not have a significant role in the prediction of the number of hours given to programs for immigrants. However, the pattern of results shows that perceptions of a higher percentage of immigrants from big cities are related to fewer hours.

The results of the second study further support our prediction that similarity and connectedness are related to fewer hours given to the immigrants for their integration in school, and to the focus on the language as the immigrants' primary need. Principals, like lay people, still have the image of the FSU immigrant who came from a big city and is well educated (which better fits the typical immigrant arriving prior to 1998); however, these perceptions did not have a significant effect on programs for the integration of the immigrant students in school.

3.7 General discussion

Immigrants' integration policy, like other policies that focus on a group of people with special needs, is largely dependent on the decision makers' perceptions of the

group. Among other attributes, perceived strengths or weaknesses of the group may play a critical role in determining the groups' needs and in making policy regarding its members. In the present research we demonstrate in two studies, examining lay people as well as professional decision makers that these perceptions are likely to be influenced by the perceived similarity between the decision maker and the group target. Perceptions of similarity might reflect real common attributes existing between the perceiver and the target, as well as biased ones. In regard to the FSU immigrants in Israel, our results suggest that people hold the foregone perception of these immigrants as a 'strong population' with high academic skills. Both lay people and principals rated the student from FSU as strong in math and sciences, with high study skills and enjoy parents' studying support an encouragement (a description that might reflect a typical immigrant 15 years ago).

Unlike previous research on perceptions of similarity, where similarity increases pro-social behavior and leads to a greater compliance with requests; the current research demonstrates that perceptions of great similarity and connectedness may hurt the ability to see the others' needs. In both studies perceptions of greater similarity between the decision maker and the immigrants were related to fewer recommended programs (first study) and to actual allocation of smaller budgets to the integration of the immigrants in schools, reflected by dedicating less hours to the immigrant students (as was reported by the school principals in the second study). As mentioned earlier, school principals are free to allocate their budget according to their policy. Our results suggest that in fact, perceptions of low similarity increase the ability to see immigrants' needs and to allow more hours to help them. A homogeneous view of a target group may also decrease the ability to see groups' diverse needs, as different group members are perceived to be in a similar state. The results of the first study suggest that perceptions of homogeneity of the immigrant students are related to the recommendation of fewer programs and to the integration of the immigrants in programs that are not oriented specifically for them. School principals seem to be less affected by this bias; probably due to their experience with diversities among school students in general, and immigrant students in particular.

However, school principals were still affected by their perceptions of similarity to the immigrants. A possible explanation is that perceptions of high similarity and connectedness may not allow the psychological distance a public decision maker needs when making policies regarding a group of people with special attributes and needs. Public decision makers usually represent stronger groups in society; unrealistic perceptions of similarity may therefore, cause a false image of strength of the group, and oversight of the groups' difficulties and weaknesses. Literature demonstrates that high perceptions of similarity are related to greater willingness to help and promote compliance with requests. High perceptions of similarity may reflect real similarities but may also be a result of a biased perception of similarity in a relevant domain due to existing similarities in other irrelevant domains. In such cases, although decision makers are willing to help the group and its members and feel connected to them, they may fail to see the groups' diverse needs which are not similar their own. Decision makers might wrongly concentrate on a prominent attribute of dissimilarity (the language in the case of the immigrants), and invest all efforts on that aspect (overlooking other important dissimilarities between them and the group target). Greater familiarity

with the group and its needs may decrease false perceptions of similarity on relevant dimensions and therefore, promote better understanding of groups' difficulties and needs, and improve policies regarding its members.

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