

**BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

***The Secret of Their Academic Success:***  
**Protective Factors**  
**That Foster Academic Resilience**  
**Among Male Ethiopians in Israel Who Completed a**  
**B.A.**

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# ABSTRACT

## 1. Background

The Jewish Ethiopian community in Israel makes up less than two percent of Israel's Jewish population and this community still faces many challenges in the integration process into Israeli society. One of the keys to improving the economic and social status of the members of this community is academic success both at school and in higher education (State Comptroller Report, 2013).

Numerous studies have shown that belonging to a minority population constitutes a risk factor for academic failure and school dropout. For many decades, research has focused on uncovering the factors that lead to academic failure. But recently, and particularly through the lens of positive psychology (Seligman, 2002), researchers have begun to focus on identifying the **protective factors** that lead to academic success among students at risk. **Academic resilience** is a term which refers to both the process and the outcome, when an individual with one or more risk factor succeeds academically "against the odds" (Trotman & Morales, 2004). Research has shown that there are two main kinds of protective factors that foster academic resilience: **internal protective factors**, which are related to a learner's inner characteristics, and **external protective factors**, which are related to the support the learner receives from key figures in their environment.

Among several minority populations in the United States (e.g. Hispanics and African-Americans), males have been found to be less successful in their academic achievement as compared to their female counterparts. This gender difference also applies to the Ethiopian community in Israel (Kahan-Strawczynski et al., 2017), hence the subjects of this research were solely males.

## 2. Research Questions

The main research question is: What are the protective factors for fostering academic resilience among Male Ethiopian Israelis who completed their B.A. degree? More specifically : ( 1) What are their internal protective factors? (2) What are their external protective factors? (3) What, if any, are their protective factors which relate to their belonging to a minority population, a third type of protective factors not previously studied in studies of academic resilience (See OECD, 2018a,b)?

## 3. Methodology

**3.1 Population.** The subjects were ten male Ethiopian Israelis, half of whom were born in Ethiopia and the other half born in Israel, all of whom had completed a bachelor's degree or higher (hereinafter referred to as "the learners"). They are all considered to be academically resilient since they all succeeded academically despite their risk factor of belonging to a minority group.

**3.2 Research Framework and Tools.** The Grounded Theory qualitative method of research

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was the theoretical framework and a semi-structured interview (Spradley, 1979), was used to collect the interview data.

**3.3 Methodology and Analysis of Results.** Each interview was conducted for one or two sessions, for 2-4 hours each. The ten interviews were recorded and transcribed to a total of more than 400 printed pages. The analysis of the interviews and the identification of the protective factors were based on the constant comparison method of Strauss (1987) and Gross (1995). Samples of the different categories of protective factors were presented as quotations by interviewees. A quantitative summary of the findings is also provided to complement the qualitative findings. The analysis of the interviews was validated using the expert judgment of two academics with advanced degrees.

## **4. Research Findings**

**4.1 Internal Protective Factors.** As a result of the analysis, nine internal protective factors were identified: (a) taking initiative, (b) motivation and willpower, (c) application of effort, (d) perseverance in the face of difficulties, (e) taking responsibility, (f) future orientation, (g) an attitude of gratitude, (h) self-awareness, (i) religious belief. The following five of these internal factors were found among all the interviewees: factors a, b, c, d, and i (n = 10).

### **4.2 External Protective Factors.**

(a) Supportive People. It was found that the learners were supported by many people, particularly by adults rather than peers, and particularly by parents and teachers.

(b) Different Types of Support. These supportive people gave the learners many types of support, which we grouped into 4 main categories: (1) emotional support, (2) support by expecting the learners to invest effort in their studies, (3) support via concrete actions, and (4) support via advice and direction. Each of these four types of support included 2-3 more specific kinds of support, as detailed in the study. The most prevailing type of support was emotional support, which included: encouraging the learner to succeed, inspiring, and being their role model.

(c) Significant Service in the IDF. In Israel, military service is mandatory for males for three consecutive years after their graduation from high school. The vast majority of the interviewees (n = 9) participated in demanding tracks in the IDF, such as combat service and officer training. Participation in special frameworks during their school years (such as a youth movement, and leadership programs) was also found to support learners both personally and socially; we consider all of these frameworks as external protective factors because, even though they do not directly relate to the academic field, according to the learners they indirectly assisted them in achieving academic success.

### **4.3 Protective Factors Relating to the Learners' Minority Status.**

4.3.1 (a) Ethnic/Cultural Identity (Phinney, 1992). The findings showed that most of the learners (n = 8) have a strong- positive ethnic/cultural identity.

4.3.2 (b) Acculturation Strategies (Berry, 1982). Out of Berry's four acculturation strategies, half of the learners adopted integration strategies, and half assimilation strategies. None adopted separation or marginalization strategies.

While analyzing the interviews, the author discovered two additional protective factors in this sub-category of protective factors which do not appear in previous studies on academic resilience:

4.3.3 (c) Attitude towards Racism. Although all the subjects (n=10) felt racism in their youth and feel strongly that racism exists in Israeli society, they expressed not feeling any racism aimed towards them personally in the past three years or more.

4.3.4 (d) Sense of Mission. Half of the learners feel a sense of mission as representatives of the minority group of Ethiopian Jews. They feel this sense of mission towards the Israeli society and/or towards their own Ethiopian community. They feel this gives them motivation to persist until they thrive, despite the hardships along the way.

#### **4.4 A Model for Fostering Academic Resilience among Male Ethiopians in Israel.**

Two versions were created. In the **first**, the three types of protective factors are shown separately, showing the interpersonal connections between them. In the **second** version of the model, the third type of protective factors associated with belonging to a minority status is introduced as a sub-topic of internal protective factors. That is because, after all, its four components of ethnic/cultural identity, acculturation strategy, attitude towards racism and the learner's sense of mission can be seen as a part of the internal characteristics within the learner himself (internal factors). While analyzing the connections between the 3 different types of protective factors, another finding was uncovered: the interviewees had a tendency to initiate reaching out to others in order to receive extra guidance or assistance from them; hence the internal protective factor "taking initiative", influenced an enhancement of external protective factors (support). This kind of behavior is much more common among women and we named it "male help-seeking behavior," which is -when the male learner seeks help or assistance from others- but without admitting or indicating the fact that he is having any difficulty whatsoever. In this way, asking for help is not seen as a threat to one's masculinity.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusions**

**5.1 Internal Protective Factors for Academic Resilience.** Each of the 9 internal protective factors identified has been previously found in the academic resilience research literature. However, taking initiative, which appeared among all participants, can be considered a pivotal protective factor among Ethiopian students in Israel, because asking questions and taking initiative are considered inappropriate behaviors in the traditional Ethiopian society (Shabtai, 1999). It seems that taking initiative plays a key

role in acquiring other protective factors, as well as plays an important role in succeeding in the learning environment.

**5.2 External Protective Factors for Academic Resilience.** Our findings corroborate the research literature findings which have established that parents and teachers are the most significant figures for supporting students at risk. In terms of types of support, the findings show that the provision of words of encouragement should not be underestimated, and that role models and sources of inspiration should be provided to learners, since this type of emotional support was the most prevalent and significant in the eyes of the interviewees. Surprisingly, support by practical actions, including educational and economic assistance, was found to be the least common type of support the interviewees received. This indicates that financial scholarships and scholastic assistance alone to minority students are not sufficient. Also, it is interesting that significant service in the IDF was found to be an external protective factor for developing academic resilience. Even though significant military service does not directly relate to the academic field, it seems that the challenges the learners had to face during their service provided them with important personal tools that later indirectly assisted them when facing challenges in higher education.

### **5.3 Protective Factors Relating to the Students' Minority Status.**

**a. Strong-Positive Ethnic/Cultural Identity.** Previous research has found correlations between ethnic/cultural identity and high self-esteem, self-efficacy and academic success; thus, learners should be encouraged to strengthen their ethnic/cultural identity, as well as their Israeli identity. .

**b. Acculturation Strategies.** Studies about immigrants have found that the best acculturation strategy is "integration": adopting a combination of the two cultures (the culture of origin and the culture of the majority). In contrast, in our study, only half of the respondents adopted this strategy, and the rest adopted the "assimilation" acculturation strategy, that is, adherence to the majority culture while abandoning the culture of origin. In our discussion we provide a hypothesis to explain these findings.

**c. Attitude toward Manifestations of Racism.** The Palmor Report (2016, page 21) states that "Ethiopian immigrants suffer from expressions of overt and covert racism ...". Interestingly, even though the interviewees feel that discrimination against the Ethiopian community does exist in Israel, none of the interviewees felt that they were subjected to any manifestations of racism (in the past 3 years or more). In our opinion, this protective factor is one of the most significant findings and may explain why these students were able to persevere in their studies, in contrast to other students who failed or dropped out. It should be noted that, to date, the research literature of academic resilience refers to the issue of racism from the point of view of a risk factor only. **d.**

Sense of mission (*shlichut*). In the research literature from abroad, we found no reference to this as a factor for academic success among minority populations, but rather the opposite: it was found that the need to constantly shatter stereotypes constitutes a burden on the minority learner ('The burden of proof'). In contrast, studies in Israel involving Ethiopian Israeli students support our finding that a sense of mission (serving as a representative of their minority group out of their awareness and choice) can act as a protective factor that increases the learners' motivation to invest effort in succeeding in school and in higher education.

**5.4 Differences between subjects born in Ethiopia and those born in Israel.** In this study no significant differences were found between these two groups of interviewees.

**5.5 Intervention Programs.** Suggestions for intervention programs are presented at the end of the discussion, for four different target audiences.

**5.6 Limitations of the Study.** There are a limited number of interviewees, no control group of academically unsuccessful Ethiopian men and the data was collected by only one method (interviews); nevertheless, these are common practice in qualitative academic-resilience studies (see: Lee, 2009; Harper, 2012). The interviewer is not of the same gender and origin as the interviewees and that is a limitation of the study.

**5.7 Suggestions for Further Research.** Similar qualitative studies are needed to validate the results of this study, as are quantitative studies on this subject with a control group of Ethiopian students who are not academically resilient. The design and evaluation of intervention programs for fostering academic resilience are highly recommended. Also, other minority populations in Israel and abroad should be studied, with an emphasis on the protective factors relating to minority status<sup>1</sup>. Finally, it is still not clear why males from traditional (but not modern) societies are under significantly more academic risk than women from these societies

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## **5.8 Significance of the Research**

This study can contribute to the scientific literature on academic resilience, both because of its focus on a minority population not studied previously, and because of its findings of sub-topics that have not been examined in the past, such as protective factors relating to minority status (a third group of protective factors that hasn't been examined yet), military service as an external protective factor, and male help-seeking behavior. That is why the study opens avenues for further research. The findings and models can serve as the basis for intervention programs designed to help improve the academic success of

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<sup>1</sup> The four components of the 'protective factors relating to minority status' in our research were:(a) Ethnic/Cultural Identity, (b) Acculturation Strategy (c) Attitude toward Manifestations of Racism (d) A sense of mission

male Israeli Ethiopians. Such academic success has the potential to improve their economic and social status, and as a result to strengthen the Israeli society as a whole.