

GRADING PAPERS ON EVERYDAY RACISM IN ISRAEL

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It is time to grade the last assignment I have given my undergraduate students in the course I teach on Minorities in Democracies at one of Israel's institutions of higher education. The course draws a diverse group of students, including Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of European descent), Mizrahi Jews (Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent), immigrants from the former USSR and Ethiopia, Bedouin and other Arab citizens from both the north and south of Israel. My classroom serves as a microcosm of Israeli society, one of the rare contexts in which the broad spectrum of Israeli citizens is represented.

In preparation for this assignment, I have asked the students to read Philomena Essed's insightful essay in which she defines the concept of everyday racism, describes incidents that illustrate what it looks like in practice, and details a careful format for interviewing people who have experienced or witnessed incidents of everyday racism in their own lives (Essed 2002). The assignment is simple. Interview someone who has experienced an incident of everyday racism or discrimination (I broaden the concept slightly to fit the Israeli context) and analyze it using Essed's format.

The results are raw, painful and revealing. While the world's attention is focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, my students document incident after incident of everyday racism that takes place within Israel's borders and among its citizens. Some write about the racism of Israeli Jews toward Palestinian Israelis. Arabs (including Muslims, Christians and Druze) constitute approximately twenty percent of Israeli citizens and many identify themselves as Palestinian. A number of students write about the daily discrimination and humiliation Palestinian Israeli citizens experience from Israeli security guards on busses and at the entrances to train stations and shopping malls. One student who interviewed himself describes being delayed by security guards at the train station while he was on his way to the university. The security guard kept him waiting

while allowing other passengers to enter the station until finally, the student missed his train. When the student asked why he was being delayed, the guard replied, "The difficult situation [in this country] is because of you and you're still complaining?"

Another interview concerns a Bedouin student from a remote village who sought a room in an apartment near the university. Each time he called about a room for rent, he received the reply the room was already taken. After receiving the same negative answer for the eighth time, he finally asked the man on the phone, "Is it already taken because I'm Arab?" The man replied, "Yes," and hung up the phone. The student eventually found a room in the dorms that he shared with a Jewish student who barely spoke to him.

Many of the student interviews, however, do not concern Jewish racism toward Arabs. They concern Jewish racism—or ethnic discrimination—against other Jews. These students write about discrimination against Mizrahi Jews, that is Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent, discrimination against Ethiopian Jews and discrimination against Jews who recently immigrated from the former USSR. Most of the perpetrators in these stories are Ashkenazi Israelis.

Some of the stories concern discrimination that takes place in public settings—the army, the workplace, and educational institutions such as the university. Each year several students report how friends have been prevented from entering nightclubs on the basis of their Ethiopian, Mizrahi, or Bedouin descent. Some of these incidents end in physical skirmishes while others simply result in humiliation and resignation on the part of those denied entrance to the clubs. One student notes the irony and bitter resentment of a young, Ethiopian soldier who risks his life during the week to defend his country but is denied entrance to a nightclub on the weekend due to the color of his skin.

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Another interview concerns a young Bedouin woman who goes for a job interview at a branch of a large chain of pharmacies located in an upscale shopping mall in Tel Aviv. The store manager is clearly taken aback when he realizes the job applicant is a young, Bedouin woman wearing a hijab, a Muslim headdress. When he finally interviews her after making her wait a long time, the first thing he asks is whether she would be willing to remove her headscarf at work. He then asks her a series of questions about her personal and family life, none of them relating to her qualifications for the job. The young woman who faced discrimination on the bus and at the entrance to the shopping mall in order to attend the interview is hardly surprised when she doesn't get the job. Nor is she surprised to learn a few weeks later a Jewish peer with fewer qualifications has been hired for the position.

The intersection of gender and racial discrimination described in this interview is also present in others. One student interviewed a 35-year old Russian with an engineering degree who was reduced to working as a cleaner (janitor) at the airport after immigrating to Israel. The woman describes the intense discrimination she faced from prospective employers as well as in other public settings such as the grocery store where workers hurled comments at her like, "Go back to your stinking Russia" and "Go work in prostitution like all the other Russian women."

Another student who interviewed herself describes going to the home of a male friend with whom she attended one of the country's most elite high schools in Jerusalem. She enjoyed the delicious lunch served by her friend's mother and commented to him afterward on what a nice mother he had. Well, he replied, the only reason his mother was being so friendly was because she knew the two of them were just friends. "If my mother thought I was dating a Mizrahi girl," he continued, "she wouldn't let me in the house."

Some of the most poignant and provocative interviews concern racism that takes place in intimate, family settings. Last year one of my students was an angry young man who was convinced I was grading his assignments unfairly. Time and again I tried to explain the academic criteria on which the grades were based and show him where his work needed improvement. He became angrier and more belligerent as the semester progressed until I honestly began to fear him. Then he turned in his interview on everyday racism. In contrast to all of his other work, it was detailed, articulate, and straight to the point. He had chosen to write about his own family. The essay described the racism displayed by his Polish maternal grandparents toward his Egyptian-born father and the schisms this caused in his family while he grew up. He recounted the deep ambivalence these experiences provoked in his own sense of identity as the son of a "mixed" Mizrahi-Ashkenazi couple.

This year a female Arab student registered for my course but rarely attended class due to her obligations for a teacher-training program she attended simultaneously. Her absences were made more noticeable by the fact that

when she did attend, she was outspoken, articulate, and very sharp. At the beginning of the semester, the student arrived immaculately dressed in a long robe and matching headscarf. When she returned at the end of the semester, her appearance had changed. She wore a stylish black pantsuit with brightly colored accessories. The student approached me sheepishly on the last day of class and apologized for all of her absences. She was also concerned I might not recognize her. I assured her that of course I recognized her. She expressed surprise. But her appearance had changed so much, she said. I tried to explain that despite the contrast in her wardrobe, the person wearing the clothes was still clearly recognizable.

In one of her first assignments for the class, this student wrote about her own "mixed" identity. She described the tensions involved in growing up as the daughter of a Circassian mother and a Muslim Arab father and the discrimination and confusion she faced at school as a result. The Circassians comprise a minority ethnic group associated with the Arab population in Israel. Whereas Circassian men serve in the Israeli army, Muslim Arabs do not. My student grew up constantly feeling if she defended the actions of one side of her family, she was offending members on the other side.

In her essay on everyday racism, the same student describes the discrimination faced by a young Muslim woman who was denied entry to a Christian school due to her religion. Another student who teaches school in a Bedouin town writes about the racially discriminatory attitudes of "white" Bedouin students toward "black" Bedouin students, the descendants of slaves, who complain about being called "ugly blacks." These stories point to varieties of intra-Arab discrimination among Israeli citizens that are rarely acknowledged or discussed within Israeli society.

In past years when I gave this assignment, a sizable minority of my Jewish students chose to write about incidents of everyday racism that took place outside of Israel. I did not restrict the assignment geographically. I had already learned from other experiences some Jewish students were simply unwilling to confront the possibility racism exists in Israel. Nearly all of those who wrote about racism outside of Israel conducted interviews with family members who had experienced anti-Semitism in either Europe or the United States. This year, however, the vast majority of my students chose to write about racist incidents that took place in Israel itself.

Most students write about contemporary incidents. A few choose to interview older family members about experiences in their past. One Mizrahi student, for example, interviewed her grandfather about the extreme discrimination he experienced from Ashkenazi bosses in his workplace as a new immigrant from Iraq in the 1950s.

What emerges from these interviews is a unique and often startling picture of the multiple forms of ethno-racial and religious discrimination that take place in contemporary Israel. Not only Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, but also Mizrahi Jews, Ethiopian Jews, and recent immigrants

from the former USSR experience severe marginalization. Palestinian Arab citizens experience much more profound exclusion than citizens associated with the Jewish sphere but all of the groups mentioned are subject to various forms of formal and informal discrimination not experienced by veteran Ashkenazi citizens of Israel.

Two things become immediately apparent as I read my students' essays. One, everyday racism is alive and well in contemporary Israel and my students know it.

Unlike most of their elders in politics, the media, and academia who shy away from any mention of racism within Israel, my students recognize racism when they see it—on a daily basis. They recount incident after incident of blatant discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, and gender.

I realize there is a problem in importing Philomena Essed's approach into an Israeli context. Essed notes, "The concept of everyday racism relates day-to-day experiences of racial discrimination to the macrostructural context of group inequalities represented within and between nations as racial and ethnic hierarchies of competence, culture, and human progress" (203). She asserts "everyday racism involves cumulative practices, often covert and hard to pinpoint" (208). The incidents Essed describes—in places as diverse as the Netherlands and contemporary South Africa—are examples of aversive, subtle, often hidden racism. The stories my students tell, by contrast, are mainly of blatant, in-your-face, aggressive racism. There is no need to apply Essed's careful analytical approach in order to determine whether racism is at play in these cases. The perpetrators in the incidents my students describe are not shy about their racist beliefs or restrained in their actions.

The second thing I quickly realize is a good number of my students have not bothered to read Essed's eloquent article. Even those who have apparently read the article apply her careful methodology sloppily, partially, or not at all. Some of these students rarely attended class either. Others came to class and participated in our discussion about ethnic discrimination in Israel based on Henriette Dahan-Kalev's moving analysis of Ashkenazi oppression of Mizrahi Jews based on her own childhood experiences as a Moroccan Jew who passed as Ashkenazi (Dahan-Kalev 2001). At least some of my students took part in in-class exercises concerning self-fulfilling stereotypes and racial privilege based on well-known works by Mark Snyder and Peggy McIntosh whose relevance to the Israeli context we debated at length (Snyder 2001, McIntosh 2001). I want to believe these sessions contributed to the sensitive ways in which my students approached their final assignment on everyday racism.

I sigh deeply as I began marking down essays written in vivid prose about the injustices of racism taking place inside Israel on a daily basis. The interviews, some of them transcribed and submitted without any analysis, are searingly honest. My students are alive to the nuances and plentiful varieties of everyday racism in Israel. Their interviews may not follow the format I asked for but

their transcriptions are full of emotion and potent detail. I begin to realize this emotional power is less apparent in the essays by those who have spliced the interviews into sections and summarized them according to the instructions I gave. With the analytical rigor and comparative potential gained through Essed's methodology, the sense of immediacy is often lost.

I grade the papers carefully, applying the criteria I laid out for my students in writing, the criteria I repeated in class, the criteria I insisted yet again would influence their grades on this assignment. Israeli students are not known for following directions (or for coming to class). They nodded; they insisted yes, yes, they understood—and here are the results.

As I begin enforcing the rules I have created, I feel my heart breaking inside. I am enraged at the injustices my students have so eloquently exposed at my request and at myself for perpetuating inequalities my students have revealed by grading these essays according to academic standards that privilege members of the dominant group.

The same socio-political and institutional circumstances that contribute to the instances of everyday racism described in their essays also contribute to some students having more sophisticated academic skills and preparation than others. The article I have assigned is in English, a language Israeli students are required to know in order to enter the university. But whereas English is a second language for Jewish students born in Israel who began learning it in the first or second grade, it is at least a third language for my Arab and immigrant students. Many of my Ashkenazi students come from middle class families and attended schools with high academic standards in cities and suburbs in the center of Israel, while many of my Mizrahi and immigrant students come from working class families and attended schools with poor reputations in low-income development towns on the outskirts of the country. The socio-economic and educational standards in Israel's Arab communities are lower still.

Asking my students to read and digest Essed's essay as the basis for this assignment means I am posing a far greater challenge to some students than to others. As an instructor who is teaching this class in my fifth language, Hebrew, I am well aware of this discrepancy. I doubt I would be able to read and fully understand Essed's essay if I had to read it in Hebrew instead of English. In other words, I'm not sure I could complete the assignment I have given my students—certainly not if I had to turn in the final written product in Hebrew.

I go back to the essays. An Ashkenazi student details the story of an Ethiopian peer who was denied entrance to a nightclub and then argues articulately the incident was not necessarily racism. After all, she too has been denied entrance to nightclubs in the elite suburbs north of Tel Aviv. Sometimes they're just full. That essay gets a 10, the top grade. She followed all the rules. She organized her presentation and made her argument precisely according to the format I prescribed.

I look back at the powerful interview by the Arab student who exposes discrimination between Muslims and Christians in Arab schools—a topic rarely addressed in Israeli society where Arabs are conveniently lumped in a single group and ignored by the Jewish establishment. That essay gets a 3. The student makes no reference to Essed's essay whatsoever.

I cringe as I write these numbers on the papers. Looking at the grading patterns makes me feel sick. As usual, I watch the ethnic hierarchy emerge in the numbers I assign. The Ashkenazi students, careful and obedient and well-prepared by their former academic training, receive the top grades. The Mizrahi and Ethiopian students, less academically privileged and often under greater financial and family stress, receive the middle grades. The Arab students, often completely unprepared academically and frequently unable to attend class due to family crises and work obligations, receive the lowest grades in the class.

Essed's meticulous methodology was developed for evaluating incidents in countries where racism is often cloaked in euphemisms and superficial politeness. What relevance does it really have in a country where people make no effort to hide their racism? Why did I even bother to ask students to scientifically evaluate whether the incidents they wrote about were racist when they included comments like: "Yeah, that's right, I'm not letting you into the nightclub because you're Ethiopian;" "My mother wouldn't let me into the house if I dated a Mizrahi woman;" "Why don't you become a prostitute like the other Russian women;" and "Yes, the apartment is unavailable because you're Arab."

I go back over all the papers again. I raise every grade to 10. My students may not have read the article. They may not have learned how to analyze an interview according to Essed's criteria. But they have documented—in stark, revealing prose—the ugly mechanics of how racism operates on a persistent, grinding, daily basis in Israel. That knowledge is far more important than format or footnotes. And it is far more than most of their peers have learned.

I continue to berate myself for not having instructed them better, for having been soft on the deadline, for not having done enough to reduce the gaps in conventional academic skills. And then I tell myself, no, Lauren, your students have shown you they learned the more important lesson. Give them the credit they deserve for having reached that understanding. Give yourself credit for having helped them in that process. We all deserve 10 on this assignment.

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