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Illusive Pluralism and Hegemonic Identity in Popular Reality Shows in Israel

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The present study aims to examine the pluralistic potential of reality shows, which might allow minorities to shape the program's script and to gain recognition for their particularistic identities. For this purpose, two prime-time reality shows were chosen—*The Ambassador* and *Seeking a Leader*—broadcast in Israel in 2005. The analysis of the programs included identification and deconstruction of their metanarratives and exposure of several mechanisms of stigmatization and othering used against minorities. In addition, the authors analyzed the tactics utilized by minorities to maneuver the script and steps taken by the majority to maintain its cultural dominance. The research reveals that the ostensibly pluralistic nature of reality shows is limited a priori by the hegemonic forces. Although the hegemonic discourse in reality shows is highly sophisticated and disguised, the sense of equality and pluralism that these programs inspire constitutes an even more powerful mechanism of exclusion and cultural domination.

Keywords: *reality show; minorities; pluralism; Israel*

The television genre defined as “reality show” began to achieve considerable popularity during the past decade. This genre is characterized by a mixture of popular entertainment and the conscious demand to deal with everyday life discourse. The events and figures in reality shows are presented as more “authentic” than those in fiction-based programs, such as dramas or soap operas. Similarly, in comparison to traditional media formats, reality shows document the events with minimal production mediation, which enables a more “realistic” presentation of a chain of events.

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In addition, reality shows are characterized by active audience participation and a minimal and flexible script that allows both participants and viewers to determine the development of the story. As such, the success of the reality shows depends on their ability to create an image of a pluralistic sphere that ostensibly lends greater power both to the audience and to the participants (Consalvo 2003; Quellette and Murray 2004). Accordingly, Kraidy (2006) claims that these characteristics explain the popularity of reality shows in traditional societies, such as Arab countries, where the audience enthusiastically participates in the voting process as a substitute for real democratic participation.

One might expect, therefore, that reality shows would allow an inherently more varied and egalitarian representation of ethnic, religious, and other minorities who can actively participate in shaping the program's narrative, as opposed to traditional media formats, where the script is rigid and predetermined and participants are primarily selected according to professional considerations. These characteristics systematically exclude minorities from dominant media discourse while reproducing majority-minority relations in various social and cultural contexts. Moreover, even when minorities successfully enter the media arena, their voices are usually limited by the hegemonic forces inherent in social reality (see, e.g., Avraham, Wolfsfeld, and Aburaiya 2000; Cottle 2000; Husband and Downing 2005; van-Dijk 1996).

Nonetheless, we assume that despite their seemingly more "authentic" character, reality shows too are subject to the hegemonic forces. First, these programs are primarily broadcast on commercial channels, and this requires the inclusion of components that increase ratings, such as drama and confrontations. In addition, despite a flexible script aimed to reinforce the credibility and authenticity of the program in the viewers' eyes, the final product is always the result of heavy editing. These editorial considerations are often rooted in hegemonic values that are severely criticized by neo-Marxist critics, claiming that popular media products inevitably exclude and stigmatize minorities and the issues with which they identify (Gitlin 1979).

Similarly, participants in reality shows frequently choose to cooperate with the hegemonic group that has the power to promote those who conform to its values and dismiss those who undermine them. In this context, Neiger and Yusman (2005) found that most minority contestants in the Israeli reality show *A Star Is Born* chose to perform songs representative of mainstream Israeli music.¹ This encounter between the minorities and songs that express the hegemonic Israeli values gives the minority the illusion of belonging to the dominant collective. Thus, despite the freedom given to contestants to choose any song at all, most chose songs identified with the hegemony. Accordingly, the research revealed the tension between the cultural diversity of the show's participants and the centripetal forces that gravitated toward the hegemonic center. Hence, despite this genre's potential for removing the traditional barriers between minorities and the dominant media discourse, Neiger and Yusman showed that the minorities' participation in the program involved adoption of the dominant national values and invalidation of their own particularistic identities.

Similarly, Aslama and Pantti's (2007) research, conducted in Finland, examines the characteristics of Finnish national identity in the popular reality show based on the *Survivor* format. This research found that despite the "global" nature of this program, it constituted fertile ground for the reinforcement of the dominant identity in a specific national context, which Billig (1995) defined as "banal nationalism." However, this claim was examined only within the boundaries of the dominant group since any attempt during the program to generate an expression of minorities' voices (e.g., the voice of a black contestant) was rejected by other contestants.

These studies point to the question of hegemonic identity as a key issue in reality shows. Nonetheless, the programs analyzed did not locate majority-minority relations at the core of the script. Thus, it was impossible to identify the minorities' strategies in their struggle for cultural recognition versus the hegemonic group's attempts to maintain its superiority. In the Israeli study, the researchers limited the analysis to an examination of the subjects of the songs chosen by contestants, whereas the Finnish study focused on identifying the themes that define Finnish national identity. Thus, both studies could not expose the dynamics of domination and resistance that were likely to develop between the minority and majority participants and, therefore, could not discover possible steps undertaken by the minorities to challenge the programs' metanarrative.

The present study wishes, therefore, to fill this gap and to examine the pluralistic potential of reality shows, which might allow minorities to shape the program's script and to gain recognition for their particularistic identities. For this purpose, two prime-time reality shows were chosen—*The Ambassador* and *Seeking a Leader*—broadcast on Israeli commercial channels in 2005. It is important to mention that unlike most reality shows, whose *raison d'être* is promoting participants' personal interests—publicity, financial prize, finding a partner, and the like (Quellette and Murray 2004)—both programs under study located "public interests" at the heart of their script. The goal of *The Ambassador* was to find a spokesperson to explain Israeli policy abroad, whereas *Seeking a Leader* attempted to discover a young leader worthy of heading an important public enterprise.

The judges in both programs represented the "finest" Israeli public representatives, such as a former head of the Israeli General Security Service, a former Israel Defense Forces spokesperson, a senior political reporter, and the like. It appears, therefore, that the judges in both programs hailed from the core of the Israeli elite and represented the dominant collective identity. Furthermore, to increase the judges' status, both programs gave them final authority with regard to dismissing contestants, as opposed to other reality shows where the audience usually participates in the dismissal.

As required by the programs' rationale, the selected contestants had leadership skills, political awareness, and a social vision. These characteristics are contrary to the image of the spoiled young people focused on personal profit, who are the typical contenders for the valuable prize in most reality shows. That is, participants

and judges in both programs were presented as “the salt of the earth,” with a desire to promote a normative “Israeli vision.” This orientation also found expression in the sociodemographic composition of the participants, who were selected with the intention of reflecting the social and ethnic diversity of Israeli society, thereby lending the programs a multivoiced and pluralistic appearance. Accordingly, contestants in both programs included representatives of minorities usually excluded from Israeli media discourse, based on geographical, national, ethnic, and religious characteristics.

We assume, therefore, that both programs offer a rare research opportunity to examine the pluralistic potential ostensibly hidden in the reality shows and likely to be utilized by the minorities to challenge and redefine the dominant collective identity. Thus, an analysis of the programs includes identification and deconstruction of their metanarratives and exposure of several mechanisms of stigmatization and othering employed against the minority representatives. In addition, we analyze the tactics utilized by the minorities to maneuver the script to gain recognition for their authentic identity as well as the steps undertaken by the hegemonic group to maintain its cultural dominance. For this purpose, before approaching the findings, we briefly present the ethno-cultural hierarchy in the Israeli context.

Minority–majority Relations in Israel

The state of Israel was built according to the cultural characteristics of secular Jews of a primarily Eastern European origin, who came to Palestine to establish a Jewish–Zionist state. As such, this group may be seen as a hegemonic elite that has dominated the political, economic, and cultural spheres with the full support of state institutions. That elite has defined the Israeli anthem, Israeli literature, Israeli theater, and other main features of national identity according to four axes, Jewish, pro-Western, Zionist, and secular, the prevailing language being Hebrew. As a result, the national symbols and the dominant culture that have developed in Israel have, through various means, excluded various national, ethnic, cultural, religious, and ideological minorities, such as the indigenous Arabs, Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries, and Orthodox Jews (Jamal 2002; Kimmerling 2001; Ram 1993; Shafir and Peled 2002; Shapiro 1976; Shinhav 2006).

At the beginning of the 1970s, the cultural dominance of the established elite began to fracture, very much as a result of the October 1973 war, followed by the rise of the right-wing Likud party in 1977, supported by new peripheral groups, mainly Sephardic Jews (i.e., *Mizrakhim*). Alongside expressing particular political preferences, their support of Likud was aimed to express feelings of ethnic discrimination and cultural deprivation. Later on, during the past three decades, additional ethnic, religious, and ideological groups joined the struggle over national identity; most prominent among them were the Palestinian citizens of Israel, Orthodox Jews, and recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union (Kimmerling 2001). These changes

created a basis for more pluralistic public discourse, where the “old” Ashkenazi elite were forced to negotiate with new political and cultural voices.

Nonetheless, the majority and minorities participating in this negotiation are not equal in their influence since the traditional hegemonic values have remained central to Israel’s cultural fabric. This is particularly prominent in the dominant media formats in Israel, where the most overrepresented group is characterized by an overlap of the following characteristics: secular Jews of European origin born in Israel. In contrast, the absent groups include Palestinian citizens of Israel, immigrants, Orthodox Jews, and Jews of Eastern origins. Media discrimination concerning these groups finds expression not only in their absence but also in the one-dimensional and stereotypical ways in which they are represented (see, e.g., Avraham et al. 2004; Elias and Bernstein 2007; First 1998; Lemish 2000).

In contrast, the two reality shows under study wished to present a different format, characterized by a more balanced ethnic and cultural composition. It is important to emphasize that both programs’ production teams were aware of not only the exclusion of the minorities from various television programs, but also the attempts of the Israeli media regulation authority to emphasize the value of cultural diversity and pluralism.² It is not a coincidence, therefore, that both programs were broadcast at a time when channel owners were fighting to renew their broadcasting licenses, seeking to satisfy the regulator by providing a more balanced representation of minority groups.

The Ambassador

The Ambassador was a coproduction by the Israeli commercial Channel 2 and Israel at Heart—a New York-based Jewish public relations organization. This organization was established at the height of the second Palestinian Intifada in response to public criticism of ineffectual Israeli public relations officials abroad, who had failed to evoke empathy and sympathy for Israel’s plight. As such, the program was constructed around the selection of an envoy that would operate on behalf of Israel at Heart to persuade the American public of the justice of Israeli policy. To achieve this goal, the envoy had to have excellent rhetorical skills, a presentable appearance, and fluent English. In addition, since this envoy was supposed to promote the interests of the Jewish citizens of Israel, which are frequently incompatible with the interests of Israeli Palestinians, the contestants were chosen according to this national definition, excluding, a priori, potential Palestinian contestants.

During the first season, ten weekly episodes were broadcast, based on collective and individual tasks that dealt with the participants’ future role as national spokesperson outside the borders of Israel. The final decision of disqualifying contestants rested with the judges, who, as mentioned, included prominent representatives of Israeli hegemony. Throughout the program, the judges asked the contestants

personal questions, judging their suitability in terms of “normative Israeliness.” Based on this perspective, one may assume that the judges’ task necessarily required them to identify contestants who matched the definition of “we” (“normal” and “acceptable”) and those who matched the definition of “Other,” who are different in some way (Hall 1997). Accordingly, from the second episode onward, it was clear that the “Other” in the program was an immigrant, meaning a Jew who had immigrated to Israel and become a citizen by virtue of the Law of Return. Thus, the issue of the contestants’ seniority in Israel became a key factor in assessing their suitability for the role, whereas the cultural differences between native-born and immigrant participants became a dominant motif in the show’s metanarrative.

The “immigrant team” included two female contestants: Maharata Baruch and Dafna Alfarassi. Maharata had immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia at the age of ten after a long journey on foot, and she symbolized the Ethiopian Jews’ successful integration into Israeli society: her Hebrew was perfect, she was married to a native Israeli, and she was a film actress by profession. In contrast to Maharata, who came to Israel as a child, Dafna immigrated to Israel from Holland in her early twenties. Dafna was an MA student of diplomacy and, being tall and blond, was strikingly European in her appearance. Despite the significant difference in their backgrounds, from the beginning of the program, the other contestants wished to emphasize a similarity between Maharata and Dafna, as newcomers who were culturally and mentally different from native Israelis. Similarly, the judges also took an active part in defining normative Israeliness by labeling and disqualifying the immigrants as cultural “Others,” thereby maintaining the “immigrants versus natives” division as a central component of the script.

The labeling and alienating tactics directed at the two immigrants made them realize that the only way they could justify their candidacy for the role of “ambassador” was to expand the limits of Israeli national identity. To do so, they wished to utilize the openness and flexibility of the reality show genre and change the program’s dominant discourse that had rejected them, suggesting an alternative and more inclusive one. Thus, the analysis of the program identifies the individual and collective tactics they exhibited toward other contestants and the judges, which challenged the hegemonic values, and the measures taken by the hegemonic group to maintain its cultural dominance.

First and foremost, since Maharata was a dark-skinned immigrant from Ethiopia, other contestants attributed to her the same qualities identified with the “Orient” in colonial discourse (Bhabha 1996; Said 1978), such as passivity, emotionality, and ignorance, which are incompatible with a Western, educated, and achievement-oriented person who would, therefore, be more suitable for the role of a public relations person. Thus, for instance, pending a general knowledge quiz, “native” contestants claimed Maharata was potentially less likely to succeed in the quiz. Maharata’s image of lacking general knowledge did not change after the quiz, although she scored as high as anyone else.

Another accusation directed at Maharata related to her inability to initiate or promote an independent stand and to her lack of a unique contribution to the success of the team. Maharata, who quickly identified her colleagues' attempts to label her as "passive," wished to suggest an alternative interpretation of the negative traits attributed to her as an Ethiopian immigrant. Thus, she presented Ethiopian Jewry as an ethnic group characterized by tolerance, honesty, and openness to people from other cultures, which made her a particularly suitable candidate for the role of "ambassador." By emphasizing these qualities, Maharata expressed her own criticism of native Israelis for excluding the "Other" on the basis of ethnic and cultural difference.

Moreover, to refute the accusation of passivity and resist her negative labeling by the majority group, Maharata also used the tactic of constantly referring to the Ethiopian Jews' epic journey to Israel. At this point we should note that the Israeli media discourse typically presents the Ethiopian Jews' immigration to Israel as part of a long-term secret activity by Israeli political and military figures, which culminated in two daring rescue operations. With time, these operations became part of the national ethos that presented native Israelis as heroes who risked their lives to save endangered Ethiopian Jews, who were portrayed as weak and passive (Ben-Ezer 2005).

Ethiopian Jews, on the other hand, claim that their coming to Israel stemmed from an ideological calling since they did perceive Israel as their national homeland. This declaration negates the Israeli establishment's attempt to present their immigration as a response to their lives being in danger in Ethiopia and not as an act motivated by Zionism. In addition, contrary to the perception of their being passive refugees who were saved by the state of Israel, the Ethiopian Jews emphasize their journey on foot through the Sudan to Israel as a heroic and determined act (Ben-Ezer 2005). Maharata also chose to recruit the journey as a unique cultural resource, and throughout the program she stressed her participation in this journey as a ten-year-old girl. This emphasis was intended to counter her labeling as passive and weak, presenting her instead as a determined, courageous, and active person.

Ethnic stereotypes were applied also to Dafna, although these were completely different in nature. Because of Dafna's European background and appearance, the native-born contestants attributed to her those qualities usually identified with a Western person—reserved, logical, cold, and formal—which were presented as the opposite of the "Israeli spirit." That is, throughout the program, the other contestants emphasized the contrast between the typical qualities of the native-born Israelis, which were presented as positive—warmth, spontaneity, and emotionality—and the negative characteristics attributed to the "European" Dafna.

It seems, therefore, that the "native" contestants were well aware of the complexity of the Israeli identity that dwells on the junction between East and West, thus acquiring the advantage of "European" qualities to exclude "African" Maharata while presenting Dafna's "Europeanness" as a significant flaw, which ostensibly

made her incompatible with normative Israeli identity. Yet, contrary to Maharata, who confronted her negative labeling by presenting an alternative interpretation of the qualities attributed to Ethiopian Jews, Dafna wished to deflect the program's dominant discourse from dealing with her as the cultural "Other" to the conservative nature of Israeli society. For this sake, Dafna recruited her familiarity with contemporary academic discourse to promote multiculturalism as a normative alternative to the prevalent Israeli ethnocentricity.

Furthermore, during one of the confrontations between Dafna and the native-born contestants, it was claimed that as a native of Holland and a professional (student of diplomacy), she could represent any country with the same degree of success, not specifically Israel, with which she had no "primordial" affiliation. Against this charge, Dafna wished to present an alternative interpretation of her affiliation with Israel. She referred to her choice to immigrate to Israel from a Western country with a higher quality of life as an indication of her Zionist motivation. This testified to her emotional affiliation with Israel, which was even stronger than that of her native-born critics, for they were simply born into their Israeliness and did not consciously choose it as she did. It is interesting that both Maharata and Dafna, each in her own way, wished to stress the Zionist ethos that sanctifies the "homecoming" of the Jews from the various Diasporas as a meaningful component of their identity, which clearly indicates their internalization of the dominant Israeli discourse, where Zionism plays an important part in determining the boundaries of national identity.

Together with the individual tactics used by each immigrant to change the script and so the boundaries of normative Israeliness, their most outstanding attempt to challenge the cultural domination of the native-born majority was revealed in a cooperative action, nicknamed the "Immigrants' rebellion." The impetus for this event was the understanding of both immigrants that they were candidates for disqualification by the other contestants and that there was nothing they could do to prevent it. Thus, when asked to present their own candidates for disqualification (as required by the script), in a surprising move, they both disqualified themselves, using the following argument: "After great deliberation we arrived at two names. They do not seem to be particularly Israeli. Neither has an Israeli accent. They have odd, very unconventional ideas. They are not conformist and, primarily, because they are problematic and very different from the rest of the group: Maharata and Dafna."

This event has special significance because it reflects the connection between the two immigrants, lending their statement a dimension of collective protest. Moreover, this unscripted "rebellion" reveals the pluralistic potential inherent in reality shows. Instead of obeying the script and trying in vain to suggest other candidates for disqualification, Maharata and Dafna chose to serve "a bill of indictment," concerning the labeling and othering mechanisms enacted against them throughout the show. That is, instead of trying to survive the show by adapting to its rules, they chose to use a tactic that undermined the very foundation of the show's metanarrative. By disqualifying themselves, Maharata and Dafna declared their refusal to surrender to

the traditional power relations between immigrants and native residents, which thwarted the latter's attempt to instigate the disqualification process.

The representatives of the native majority, on their behalf, refused to accept the change in the show's rules and the immigrants' attempt to undermine the hegemonic definition of Israeliness. Therefore, to discourage the protest action of the "immigrant team," the judges decided to summon Maharata and Dafna (each one separately) to a special committee meeting where it was suggested that they bring a "character witness" who could endorse their suitability for the role of "ambassador." In addition, the two "rebels" were asked to answer the judges' questions on such subjects as geographical knowledge of Israel, Israeli literature, and Israeli cinema, aimed to test the degree of their normative Israeliness.

During the committee meeting, Dafna remained loyal to her subversive agenda, even when standing alone before the three judges. First, she refused to bring a character witness to testify to the degree of her Israeliness. In addition, during the questioning, she continued to challenge the hegemonic definition of Israeli identity, and when she identified the judges' attempt to test how "kosher" an Israeli she was, she refused to answer their questions. Instead, she offered her identity card as undeniable proof of her affiliation with the Israeli collective.

We could claim, therefore, that during the committee meeting Dafna successfully exploited the potential pluralism of the show to maneuver its course. As a result, it was the judges who found themselves being criticized by Dafna for their lack of tolerance and openness, and they exhibited a great deal of discomfort because of the role reversal imposed on them by the unruly contestant. In response, the judges behaved with impatience and hostility, using against Dafna the same negative stereotypes that were earlier employed by the contestants, such as separatism and arrogance.

Maharata too was forced to face similar questions aimed at examining the degree of her Israeliness. However, unlike Dafna, she chose to join the hegemony, willingly answering all the judges' questions. Maharata's answers emphasized her familiarity with Israel's landscapes and its popular culture, and they directly contradicted the undermining agenda she had attempted to promote, together with Dafna, at an earlier stage of the show. As a result, in contrast to the judges' weak position vis-à-vis Dafna's dissidence, with Maharata they opted for a patronizing attitude, exhibiting great satisfaction with her answers, which were completely compatible with hegemonic values.

Another indication of Maharata's conformism was her consenting to bring a character witness in response to the demands of the script. She chose to invite a counselor from the boarding school she had attended during her first years in Israel. His image was compatible with Israeli hegemonic characteristics, both in his physical appearance (a man of European origins) and in his social standing (doctor of education). Similar to the judges' patronizing attitude toward Maharata, the counselor also emphasized her successful assimilation in Israel as a result of her swift internalization of local cultural codes. He thereby strengthened Maharata's image as

a model of desirable integration of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, which necessitates (so it seems) relinquishing meaningful aspects of their original identity.

This brought about the end of the “immigrants’ pact” that was formed during the program as well as the potential for changing its metanarrative. Dafna, who remained faithful to her agenda, was disqualified from the show, whereas Maharata, who chose to obey the hegemonic dictates, continued on to the next stage. Moreover, the results of the committee meeting indicate that Israeli hegemony is not yet ready to expand the boundaries of the normative Israeliness to include the unique identity of immigrants. Despite the completely different tactics used during the committee meeting, each contestant exposed the reticence of Israeli society toward immigrants: Maharata managed to survive in the show by virtue of her surrender to the hierarchy between immigrants and native-born Israelis and to the dominant cultural values, whereas Dafna was disqualified for her resistance to these values.³

Seeking a Leader

The show *Seeking a Leader* consisted of a diverse panel of twelve participants who represented the various ethnic and cultural groups in Israeli society and were competing for a prize of five million shekels for the promotion of their own social enterprise.⁴ In each episode, contestants were divided into two competing teams, the losing team having to choose two contestants who they felt had not contributed enough to the success of the task. These contestants appeared before the judges who had the power to disqualify them from the show. The panel of judges included three prominent representatives of Israeli hegemony, led by Benny Gaon, a successful businessman, who constituted a model for the contestants.

Despite the cultural diversity that the program sought to demonstrate, it turned out that only one contestant, Abir Kobati, came from the Arab minority, whereas the rest of the team came from the Jewish majority. Abir, an attractive, educated young woman, presented herself as a feminist, accentuating her feminine identity no less than her Arab identity. Abir’s starting point in the show, therefore, emphasized her complex identity as an Israeli Palestinian as well as her ideological ambition to promote a social project that would improve women’s status in Israel. Moreover, Abir wished to avoid being labeled as an Arab whose participation in the show could be perceived as a mere token. As such, her behavior, dress, and expressions were not significantly different from those of the Jewish contestants, and she clearly deviated from the cultural codes of a traditional Arab woman by occasionally hugging male contestants.

This strategy proved effective for the first six episodes of the show, during which Abir demonstrated her desire to fit in with the Jewish contestants. In response, her counterparts appeared to be generous, trusting her and choosing her as a worthy partner for group tasks. This behavior temporarily disguised Abir’s national and

cultural otherness, as if it were irrelevant to the contest. However, the feminist aspect of Abir's identity, which constituted a bridge between her and the Jewish contestants, was gradually rejected by other contestants during the second part of the show, whereas her national identity assumed a key measure of significance. That is, despite the common cultural ground shared with the Jewish contestants, it did not become a core parameter for evaluating Abir's abilities and actions. Her counterparts and, later on, the judges had eventually chosen other parameters (enforced and exclusive ones) to examine her compatibility with the requirements of the show and with normative Israeliness, which ultimately led to her disqualification.

As the show progressed, the tension between the remaining contestants increased, and so Abir's national identity became more visible as a measure for her evaluation. From the second part of the contest, Abir was trapped in the constant tension between her desire to determine the characteristics of her identity and the ethnic stereotypes ascribed to her by other contestants. This confrontation eventually led Abir to focus on defending her national identity while, in parallel, she abandoned the universal social agenda she wished to promote at the beginning of the show. The growing emphasis on Abir's national identity as an excluding and alienating factor is illustrated by three events: "the *tabuleh* event," "the soccer game," and "the anthem."

The first event to indicate the national tension developing in the show was the *tabuleh* event. In the framework of the event, the contestants, without their knowledge, were flown to Cyprus where they had to divide into two teams, each of which received an equal sum of money. This money was designated for an economic venture that would prove the participants' ability to increase their initial allocated budget. Among the ideas raised by members of her team, Abir suggested preparing a traditional Arab salad—*tabuleh*—that could be sold to Cyprians at a high price because of their love of Middle Eastern cuisine. The other contestants accepted Abir's idea and cooperated with her. However, when the *tabuleh* turned out to be an economic failure, Abir found herself severely criticized by her counterparts, who, as mentioned, fully participated in the initial decision. This criticism not only was based on economic arguments but also assumed a distinctly ideological flavor when Abir was accused of promoting her national identity instead of the team's best interests. Abir attempted to defend her loyalty to the team, maintaining that she saw *tabuleh* solely as an economic venture with no connection to her ethnic roots. Accordingly, in this event, Abir still chose to pursue the universal agenda as a tactic aimed to prevent the stigmatizing attempts of other contestants, who wished to accentuate her national identity.

The second event, in which Abir was pushed to the margins of the Israeli identity and, consequently, to the margins of the show, took place during preparations for the soccer game between two neighborhood teams, Maccabi Sha'araim and Ha-Poel Marmorek, both affiliated with Jewish political movements. It must be noted here that this script forced Abir, as sole representative of the Arab minority in the show, not only to work in an environment that was completely alien to her but also

to support a soccer team that was identified with national Jewish values. Moreover, the atmosphere that developed among the rest of the contestants during the preparations for the match also excluded Abir since it was so innately rooted in Jewish history and folklore, such as the “David and Goliath,” “Haman the Wicked,” and the “destruction of the second temple” themes.

At this point too, Abir surrendered to the script and cooperated with other contestants in her team, relinquishing the right to promote an alternative national discourse in the show. This tactic of joining the majority was supposed to help her to survive in the contest, as she accepted the dictates of the script and the Jewish hegemonic values. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Abir did not make her voice heard, her body language and facial expressions clearly indicated her alienation from the historical tension between the two soccer teams and the Jewish national pride expressed by other contestants. This process of Abir’s alienating and othering culminated in the third event—the anthem—which eventually led to her disqualification from the show.

As is usual at sport events, the national anthems of the competing teams are played before the game while players and the audience stand up. Since in the Israeli context the anthem represents the Jewish majority only, Abir decided not to stand up while it was played. This decision became a key turning point in the show, as the attention of all other contestants and the judges was focused on Abir, and her choice was interpreted by them as disloyalty and even a betrayal of one of the core symbols of the state of Israel. As a result, Abir’s counterparts abandoned her, showing no understanding for her position, although they knew she was excluded by the Anthem’s text. Likewise, the judges too turned respect for the Jewish symbols of the state into a prerequisite for Abir’s participation in the show, thereby ignoring the fact that the Israeli anthem invalidates the Arab citizens of the country.

Marking Abir as guilty of disloyalty exposes the hidden paternalism in the ostensibly pluralistic discourse of the program since she was judged not according to her leadership skills but according to criteria external to the script that were connected to the hegemonic relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority. This event ultimately exposes the absence of pluralism that was easy to hide at the beginning of the show, whereas at its end Abir was no longer in control of how she would fit into the majority and how she would be presented in the program. As a result, Abir’s national protest was not accepted as a legitimate one, and she was removed from the national consensus and eventually from the show.

Nonetheless, we should emphasize that the disqualification and exclusion of the Arab contestant required sophisticated refinement, and, to legitimize it, two additional representatives of the Arab minority were temporarily added to the judging panel. A well-known sports broadcaster and a famous soccer team manager were invited to participate in the disqualification episode to create a contrast between them and Abir since, from the Jewish majority’s perspective, both were considered as “good Arabs,” who prefer not to challenge Jewish hegemony but rather to submit to it at sensitive junctions.

The one-time participation of the two in the judges' panel reflects the manipulative nature of the show, as they constitute an example of a "normal" Jewish–Arab relationship. It was not by chance, therefore, that the Arab team manager was asked if he stood up for singing of the anthem. His affirmative answer was rather predictable, and it reinforced Abir's negative image as a "bad Arab," providing a legitimate reason for her disqualification without the judges being accused of intolerance for disqualifying her on the grounds of her nationality and without undermining the allegedly pluralistic nature of the show.

The eviction of the Arab contestant from the competition did not occur in accordance with the core criterion declared by the show, which is the contestant's capacity for leadership. Abir's disqualification was for nationalistic reasons that were disguised at the beginning of the show but that continually erupted until they could no longer be ignored. That is, Abir's disqualification stemmed from her refusal to accept the dictates of the hegemonic discourse that wished to impose on her behavioral patterns that were inconsistent with her opinions and values.

Abir's participation in the show illustrates, therefore, the inability of the Arab contestant to determine how she would be presented or the parameters according to which the other participants would relate to her. Abir's strategy of highlighting the complexity of her identity and emphasizing the similarities between her and the Jewish contestants ended in failure. She failed to persuade the other participants and the judges that her national identity was not an obstacle for her participation, and she discovered that the pluralistic potential of the show was limited to criteria desired by the Jewish majority. Moreover, the analysis of the program reveals that each time Abir utilized its pluralistic potential to make her authentic voice heard, she was accused of double loyalty and even betrayal of the basic values of the state, which simultaneously excluded her from the show and from the boundaries of normative Israeliness.

Discussion and Conclusions

In recent years, reality shows have become one of the most popular television genres, among other things because of their pluralistic format that is not packaged in a rigid, predetermined script. Accordingly, the present study examined whether minorities can exploit the reality shows' pluralistic potential to challenge the hegemonic narrative of the program and redefine the dominant collective identity. For this purpose, we analyzed two popular Israeli reality shows that purposely dealt with issues of national identity, and the sociodemographic composition of their participants reflected the cultural and ethnic diversity of Israeli society.

At first glance, the findings indicate that the genre conventions of reality shows, which require a certain amount of independence for participants to create drama-filled situations for increased ratings, are exploited by the minorities to express their

values and represent their unique interests. The absence of a structured, predetermined script facilitates a space for maneuvering, which evokes unexpected, even surprising actions on the part of the participants. Therefore, one cannot ignore the importance of the built-in flexibility of reality shows as a possible source for expression of nonconformist attitudes, challenging hegemonic values.

This flexibility creates a pluralistic appearance, allowing minorities to find expression in the show and even to achieve certain victories, even if these are ultimately revealed to be short lived. In reality shows, the minority representatives are not limited a priori to their fixed spheres and roles (as is usually the case in other television genres) but are given an opportunity to promote their own agenda, even if it challenges dominant values. Therefore, in contrast to traditional television formats, minority participants in the reality shows could make better use of their unique cultural resources to promote an alternative discourse, such as the epic journey of Ethiopian Jews in Maharata's case.

Nevertheless, the thorough analysis of the tactics employed by the minority and majority participants and the deconstruction of the programs' metanarratives indicate that this pluralism is more illusive than real. Although the minority representatives could make themselves heard, this opportunity was subjected to the dictates of the hegemony to survive in the show. Thus, Dafna and Maharata both utilized the Israeli Law of Return, which was intended to lend them equal status with native-born contestants, whereas Abir expressed a willingness to devote herself to preparations for a soccer game with distinctly Jewish cultural connotations to gain entry to the majority.

These findings highlight the hegemonic narratives at the basis of the Israeli dominant culture. As mentioned, that culture is anchored in the values of an Ashkenazi–Jewish–Zionist hegemony that by necessity excludes various minorities who could offer a new definition of Israeli identity that would be incompatible with traditional Jewish nationality. The programs therefore reveal the tensions inherent in the process of constructing Israeliness, which has characterized the state of Israel since its inception, but increasingly so since the 1970s. On one hand, such tensions are fueled by the cultural, political, and ideological demands by minority groups to expand the boundaries of dominant Israeli identity; on the other hand, these demands are being fended off by the traditional hegemonic forces clinging to the narrow prism of nationhood, thereby inevitably restricting and excluding the minorities.

An unequivocal and explicit expression of hegemonic Israeliness in both programs can be found in the composition of the panel of judges who were chosen from the core of the Israeli elite. The judges, who were presented as a neutral body ostensibly acting in accordance with professional criteria, used their power to define the boundaries of dominant Israeli identity, favoring those contestants affiliated with the majority. Similarly, the attempts to exclude and alienate the minority members were also reflected in the tactics employed by other contestants, who emphasized their normative Israeliness by drawing attention to the otherness of the minority group.

This said, the mechanisms of exclusion used in the programs were highly sophisticated and disguised by questions about popular Israeli culture and local geography—subjects that excluded, a priori, Israeli Palestinians and Jewish immigrants altogether. The tasks given to participants in the shows and the criteria for judging their achievements were drawn from the conceptual world of hegemonic Israeliness, which is as foreign to Arab citizens of Israel as it is to immigrants, even if they are Jewish. Hence, the image of social and cultural diversity, promoted by both programs, turns out to be empty of content since their dominant cultural environment was that of native-born Jews. As a result, instead of seeking the most professional candidate, both programs were involved in an intensive search for the “ideal” Israeli, thus turning minority representatives into the ultimate “Others.”

The analysis of the two programs also indicates that Israeli hegemony is not yet ready to expand the boundaries of the collective identity to include the unique identities of minorities, which is plainly seen in the disqualification processes of Dafna and Abir, who refused to surrender to hegemonic dictates. It should be noted, however, that in both cases the judges (and we assume the production team as well) were aware of the potential damage to the seemingly pluralistic and egalitarian agenda of the show as a result of the disqualification of the minority representatives. Thus, in both programs, the judges chose to cooperate with other minority representatives to maintain the pluralistic image of the show.

In *The Ambassador*, concurrent with the disqualification of Dafna, it was decided to keep Maharata on, thereby preserving the presence of immigrants in the show, even if their authentic voice was denied. Similarly, in *Seeking a Leader*, for Abir's disqualification, it was decided to add two Arab judges who were accepted by the Jewish majority and even constituted an example of “normal” relations between Jews and Arabs. Similar to Maharata, they preferred not to challenge the hegemonic values, thereby legitimizing Abir's disqualification without this being interpreted as an act of discrimination and exclusion.

We can therefore conclude that the ostensibly pluralistic nature of the reality shows is limited a priori by the hegemonic forces. Though the hegemonic discourse in reality shows is disguised and more sophisticated in comparison to other television genres, the sense of equality and pluralism that reality shows inspire constitutes an even more powerful mechanism of exclusion and, hence, cultural domination. As such, reality shows can be seen as a television genre whose primary strength lies in their ability to create a false sense of pluralism, aimed at concealing the power relations in society.

Notes

1. The Israeli version of *American Idol*.

2. The first report of the Second Authority for Television and Radio focusing on minorities' representation on Israeli commercial channels was published in 2004, a year before the programs were broadcast, and it exposed an unbalanced and stereotypical representation of minority groups (Avraham et al. 2004).

3. Although Maharata did get to the final stage, the role of “ambassador” was won by another contestant, who came from the Israeli elite.
4. The equivalent of \$1 million.

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