



Sin and Punishment on Campus: Ethnic Differences in Academic Misconduct and Its Treatment by the Academic Disciplinary Committee

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Authors' contributions

Author LZ initiated and planned the study, as well as analyzed the data and authored vast parts of the manuscript. Author AH managed the practical aspects of data collection and contributed to the study design. Authors DM and RR provided advice and support on qualitative analyses as well as co-authored the manuscript text.

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ABSTRACT

Aims: While academic misconduct has been the subject of a growing body of research, there is a lack in empirically based literature on how academic institutions are managing misconduct. We present a preliminary examination of academic misconduct patterns and how they were treated by the academic authorities in a teaching College, compared across 2 cultural groups: Jews and Arabs.

Study Design: A retrospective, comparative design was used to examine our research questions.

Place and Duration of Study: A midsized teaching college situated in northern Israel served as the study setting and as a representative sampling frame of teaching college nation-wide.

Methodology: 90 cases of disciplinary hearings regarding student misconduct were extracted from the college's files, analyzed for content units and compared across various sections, emphasizing the possible role of culture (Jewish/ Arab).

Results: We compared Arab and Jewish students on type of misconduct, the nature of their plea

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and the decision by the committee. While no differences were found for type of misconduct across both cultural groups, patterns of students' plea in their own defense varied marginally suggesting different basic assumptions. We found significant differences in the committees' decisions for Arab and Jewish students, reflecting a complex and indirect bias.

Conclusion: Culture may play a more sophisticated role than we originally assumed in accounting for academic misconduct and the manner in which it is mitigated by the academic authorities.

Keywords: Academic misconduct; discipline; cultural differences; teaching college.

1. INTRODUCTION

College can be a formative life experience for young adults on numerous levels – cognitive, social and professional [1]. As such it may be of special importance to study human behavior patterns typical of the 'college experience' that may model and shape future patterns through the life cycle. Here we examine the darker side of such experiences and behaviors, namely academic misconduct and the way it is treated by college authorities. Of special interest is the issue of possible different patterns of misconduct by students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds and potential differences in the way it is mitigated by the college authorities.

1.1 Academic Misconduct

Academic misconduct is a broad term only loosely defined and often referring to varying sets of behaviors. That being said, most existing definitions agree on the following components in defining such behavior: 1) Any behavior that goes against the academic institute's code of ethics or formal academic conduct code, and (2) Any behavior (included in the above condition or not) that will give the perpetrator unfair academic advantage, that is – an advantage that was not earned through personal striving and achievement [2]. This general definition may apply to a broad range of misconduct ranging from submitting academic work that is not one's own (in part or as a whole), using unauthorized materials to support academic work or assessment, misinforming faculty or staff to gain credit for work that was not really completed, and in most cases misconduct will also include uncivil or unethical interpersonal communication and behavior with peers, faculty and staff [3].

Academic misconduct is considered an alarming phenomenon, constantly on the rise on campuses across the western world [e.g.: 4]. For obvious reasons, attempts to assess the prevalence of the phenomenon are limited, but estimates propose that 39-88% of college and

university students have demonstrated at least one type of academic misconduct through their academic studies [2,5,6]. The phenomenon is considered a threat on more than one level: On one hand, when common, it undermines the validity and added value of academic training, while on the other hand it might indicate tendency toward unethical behavior beyond the context of college [7,8]. Educational institutions have therefore instated written norms, codes and rules of academic conduct that serve both to inform and educate incoming students (and faculty) as well as guide enforcement by local committees, now a part of most academic institutions' administration [e.g.: 9].

Studies explored a broad range of factors associated with academic misconduct. These basically reflect the philosophical divide between two schools: First is the situational school, suggesting that settings, opportunities and perceived chances of being caught play the major role in determining such misconduct [e.g.: 10,11]. The second school is based on the individual differences approach, suggesting that certain individual characteristics affect the chance of misconduct [e.g.: 12]. A more recent body of research explores the role of a factor bridging the divide between the environmental and personal schools – cultural background.

1.2 Culture and Academic Misconduct

Culture can be defined as a set of basic assumptions about the nature of the world, values and norms shared by a group in a manner that guides their perceptions, behavior and interaction patterns [13]. The manner in which culture guides individual behavior is a focus of recent interest of the psychological, and educational sciences [e.g.: 14]. The picture emerging from this body of research is quite consistent: Culture is perceived as a frame of reference that shapes group and individual perceptions, interpretations of reality while providing guidelines for individual behavior in the shape of values (what is good and desirable) and

norms (how we do things around here; what's right or wrong).

While the literature is quite consistent when it comes to how culture shapes individual behavior it is less consistent when it comes to what happens when two or more cultures meet in formal settings: College is one of the most 'traditional' meeting points for individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds. The academic setting inherently encourages global vision of the world, encourages interactions among learners and researchers to produce knowledge that is generalizable and transferrable across nations, cultures and populations [15]. Moreover, 'the College experience' is often harnessed by educators, policy makers and others to foster intercultural dialogue in hope of germinating processes that will thrive not only within the walls of the academia but also in society once incumbents graduate and take their experiences and know-how to the world [e.g.: 16].

That being said, College has its own distinct culture, norms and rules. As mentioned above, many of these rules are formally set as rules of academic conduct and misconduct. Hence, beyond the meeting of individuals from various cultural backgrounds on campus, there is the challenge of a diverse group of individuals meeting the College culture and the way they react to it, accept it, or not.

Interestingly, authors in the field of academic misconduct and its prevention often use the term 'a culture of academic integrity' to describe a set of assumptions and values that reduce the tendency toward academic misconduct – on both the individual and departmental levels [e.g.: 17]. That alone suggests a 'culture clash' on campus. In addition there is anecdotal evidence suggesting departmental variability within the same Colleges in attitudes, and perceptions of academic misconduct [e.g.: 18]. On top of that, studies have identified essential differences between faculty and students in how they perceive and what they define as academic misconduct – yet another angle on how culture divides perceptions and actions on campus [e.g.: 10]. A few studies explored national and cultural differences in the perception of and the tendency toward academic misconduct. The findings are inconsistent but to a certain extent suggest culture does shape the perception of what consists of academic misconduct and how acceptable such misconduct is: For example, researchers [19] found that Croatian Medicine

students perceived behaviors that are defined as academic misconduct in US samples - to be normative and acceptable. Similar results emerge from a study in a formerly communist country [20]. It should be noted though that ethnic groups may not always adequately reflect cultural differences, especially since many ethnic groups consist of more than one sub-culture [21]. Therefore we will focus on a basic dual discrimination between 'minority culture' and 'local culture' or 'culture of majority': Additional studies found that cultural minorities had higher chances of being associated with misconduct when compared to the cultural majority on campus [e.g.: 22]. None of the above studies addressed the culture issue directly, but rather as a part of a set of background variables. At the time of authoring this report we were hard pressed to find any empirical studies addressing the issue of cultural background, academic misconduct and the way it is addressed and treated by academic authorities.

1.3 Academic Institutions' Mitigation of Misconduct

Academic institutions form and publish academic misconduct codes [23,e.g.: 24]. Codes include broad definitions of what constitutes misconduct, and often provide guidelines for sanctions and 'punishment' for students caught misbehaving. Not only is it estimated that academic misconduct is quite common, especially among undergraduate students, but also that the institutions' means and sanctions are far from effective in identifying misconduct and preventing it [e.g.: 25].

The codes are usually upheld and enforced by an institutional committee that acts as a local judicial entity, weighing the evidence and deciding on actions to be taken. We could not find empirical studies addressing this process directly from a cultural perspective.

1.4 The Current Study

To address the lacuna described above, we carried out a preliminary study exploring the dynamics of academic misconduct and the way it is treated by the academic authorities, considering cultural background as a factor. This time, however, we focused on a different target population and a different angle: most studies in this field survey the general student population. In this study we sampled students who were indicted of academic misconduct and brought

before a disciplinary committee in a mid-sized teaching College in northern Israel. We examined ethnic differences in both proportions and type of misconduct, as well as the type of punishment decided upon by the committee, controlling for departmental, course and academic year related factors.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Settings

This study was conducted in a mid-sized Teaching College located in an urban center in northern Israel. The college offers numerous undergraduate (B. Ed.) programs as well as Graduate level programs (M.Ed.) as well as an academic prep-program and a variety of diploma level programs (not included in this study). The college serves a diverse population consisting of Israelis of Jewish, and Arab (typically Druze and Muslim) heritage who often meet on campus and share the same classroom.

2.2 Sample

Ninety academic misconduct cases were extracted from the College's files. They consisted of 95% of the total number of disciplinary cases addressed by the committee between 2012 and the end of 2014. The cases that were excluded from the analyses were lacking in documentation or missing details required for the analyses.

The sample included 87% female students and 13% male students, 56% were of Jewish background and 44% were Arab. Table 1 details the participants' distribution by program/department academic year and cultural group.

The College's IRB approved extraction of data without any identifying information for the purpose of this study.

2.3 Data and Measures

We extracted the following data from the students and committee's files, and then coded them using two judges working separately to code each content unit. One judge was a faculty member and a member of the disciplinary committee, and the other was an educational psychologist. Inter-rater reliability reached .94.

2.3.1 Settings in which misconduct occurred

Included course type (introductory, advanced, project/ internship) as described in syllabi or program of study, or 'other' settings including non-course-related events (e.g.: field trip, misbehavior with staff etc.).

2.3.2 Type of misconduct

The type of misconduct was coded by 2 independent raters vis-à-vis the college's academic misconduct regulations. The description of each case was coded by type and severity. See coding key below (Fig. 1).

2.3.3 Students plea.

The files contained an extract of the students pleas and response to the charge and evidence brought forth. See Fig. 1 for the categorization and the appendix for sample content. Generally, responses varied dramatically and ranged from immediate acceptance of responsibility to denial of guilt.

Table 1. Sample distribution by cultural group (n=90)

		Jews	Arabs
Gender	Men	(17%)	(7%)
	Women	(83%)	(93%)
Academic year	Freshman	(23%)	(29%)
	Sophomore	(66%)	(47%)
	Junior	(11%)	(6%)
	Senior	--	(18%)
Program of study	English	(7%)	(16%)
	Pre-school	(38%)	(22%)
	Sciences	(11%)	(16%)
	MEd	(15%)	--
	Preparatory	(7%)	(5%)
	Special Ed	(7%)	(11%)
	Other	(15%)	(30%)

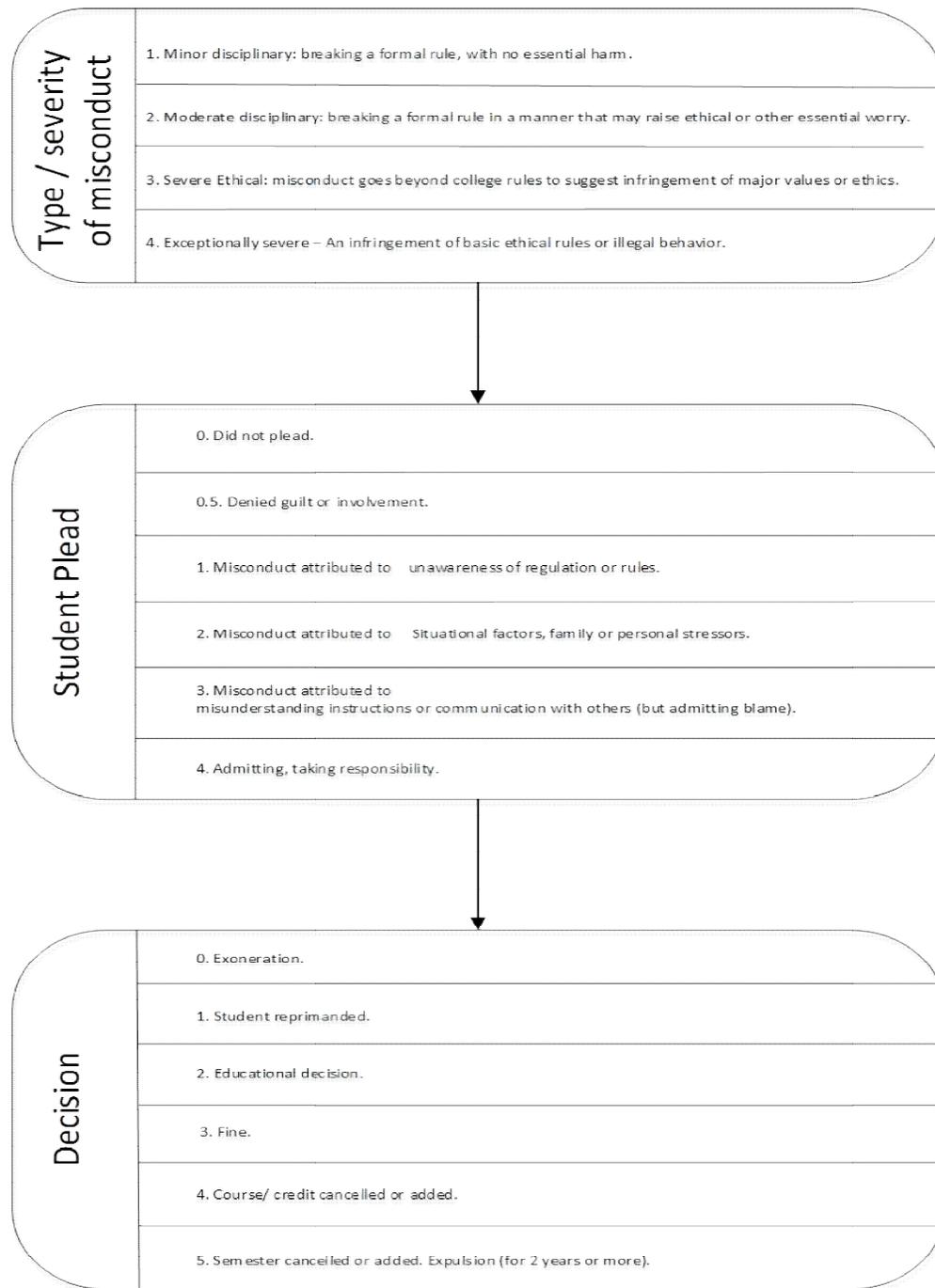


Fig. 1. Coding key for the content units in the study

2.3.4 Decision

The committees' decision as reported in the files was coded for severity of punishment ranging from exoneration to expulsion. The 2 judges used the college regulations to code

the decisions. Categories are depicted in Fig. 1.

2.3.5 Basic demographics

Basic demographics included gender, program of study and year of study, and ethnic background.

2.4 Procedure

Data was extracted from the College’s files. Anonymity was ensured throughout the process and the data never included any identifiers. Verbal information on files was coded as detailed above. Analyses were conducted in SPSS v.21.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We set out to study the existence of culture bias in academic misconduct patterns, comparing College students of Jewish and Arab cultural backgrounds on types of misconduct, the way the students responded to the charges and the decisions made by the disciplinary committee.

3.1 Types of Misconduct

Prior to testing our research question we examined the distribution of our main

variables. Table 2 provides a summary of these results.

3.2 Testing Our Research Question

To test for culture differences in our focal measures of misconduct and its mitigation, we calculated Chi-square statistics to compare both groups (Arabs/ Jews) on the distribution of the above variables. We also looked at the general representation of both groups compared to their distribution in the whole College, and used the Z-statistics for proportions to test for differences or biases.

For simplicity of presentation, we present the results of this comparison graphically, as shown in Figs. 2-3.

The comparison did not find significant difference in type of misconduct among the two groups.

We then proceeded to compare the type of plea student submitted in their hearings.

Table 2. Distributions of the focal variables (n=90)

Variable	Categories	%
Type of Misconduct	1- Minor disciplinary: breaking a formal rule, with no essential harm.	1.5%
	2- Moderate disciplinary: breaking a formal rule in a manner that may raise ethical or other essential worry.	25%
	3- Severe ethical misconduct: goes beyond college rules to suggest infringement of major values or ethics.	65%
	4- Exceptionally severe – An infringement of basic ethical rules or illegal behavior.	8.5%
Plead	1- Did not plead.	2%
	2- Denied guilt or involvement.	31%
	3- Misconduct attributed to unawareness of regulation or rules.	26%
	4- Misconduct attributed to Situational factors, family or personal stressors.	12%
	5- Misconduct attributed to misunderstanding instructions or communication with others (but admitting blame).	3.5%
	6- Admitting, taking responsibility.	25.5%
Decision	0- Exoneration.	9.5%
	1- Student reprimanded.	12.5%
	2- Educational decision.	14%
	3- Fine.	5%
	4- Course/ credit cancelled or added.	44%
	5- Semester cancelled or added.	9.5%
6- Expulsion (for 2 years or more).	5.5%	

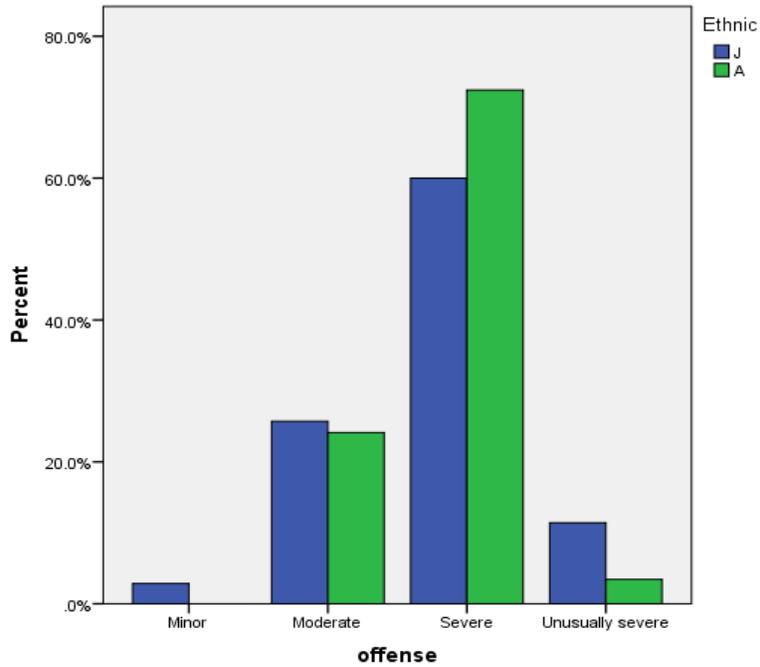


Fig. 2. Type of misconduct by cultural group
Chi square = 2.31 (df=3) p=.27

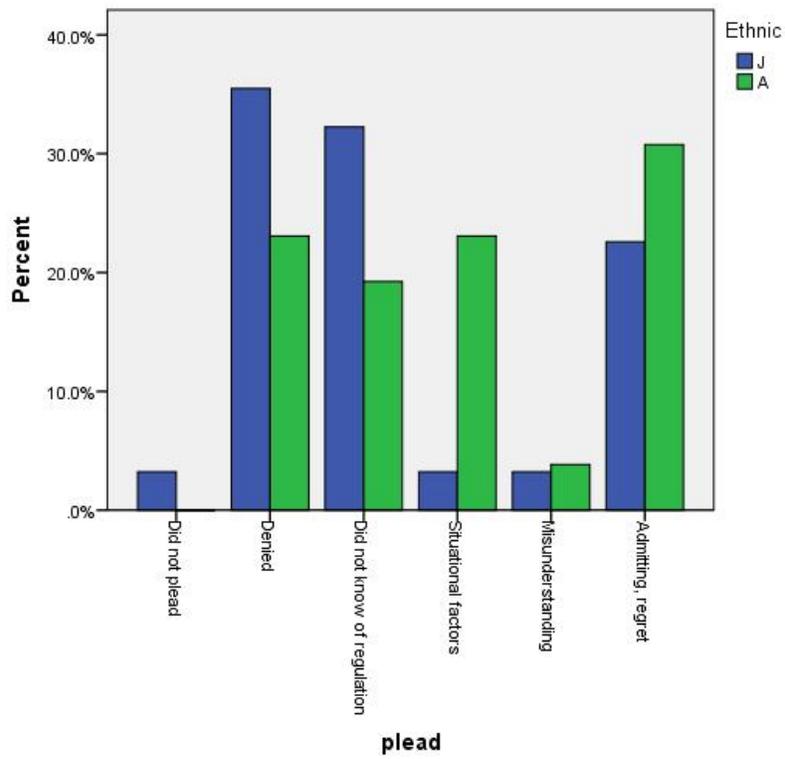


Fig. 3. Type of plea by cultural group
Chi square = 7.36 (df=5) p>.05 (p=.08)

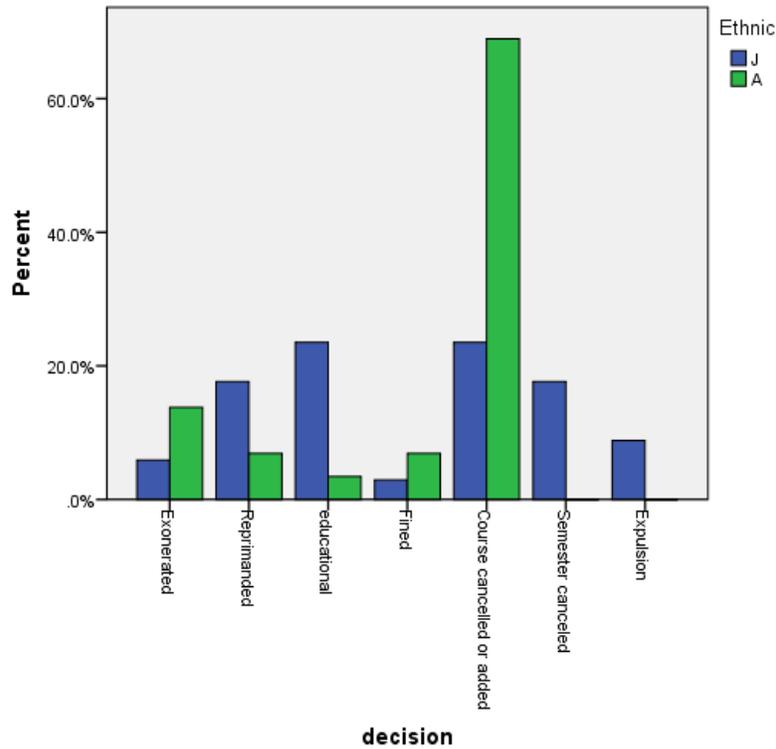


Fig. 4. Type of disciplinary decision by cultural group

Chi-square = 22.34 (df=6) p<.01

The results though showing minor differences in distribution were not significant. However, since some of the differences showed near-significant trends it is worth observing that Jewish students tended to deny or claim lack of knowledge of regulations while Arab students tended more toward external reasons (family crisis, financial hardships) to account for the deeds as well as admit and accept the blame.

We then examined the distribution of decisions across the two groups in Fig. 4 above.

Here the comparison reveals significant differences in the disciplinary decision patterns: The committees tended to exonerate Arab students a little bit more than Jews and to cancel academic credit (which means the students had to re-take the course or an equivalent course) more often for Arabs than for Jews. On the other hand the committee tended to handle harsher punishment (expulsion or academic penalties) to Jews.

Lastly we compared the proportions of Arabs and Jews in the sample against the distribution of both groups in the College’s student population

(extract from the College’s files). The overall proportion of Arab students among the group of students charged with misconduct (44%) was significantly higher than their actual proportion in the College’s student body, according to the College’s registration records for the year 2013-14. (22.50%; Z=2.13; p=.02).

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored a seldom-addressed aspect of culture’s role in academic misconduct in College: We focused on a sample of students indicted with academic misconduct (unlike most of the literature surveying general student samples for the plausibility of misconduct), examined the types of offense, how the students pleaded in their defense and what decision was eventually achieved by the college’s authorities, emphasizing the potential role of cultural background, stressing the differences between majority/ minority students. In this respect our data represents a process rather than a single point in time (e.g.: types of misconduct or correlates of perceptions of misconduct by students or faculty); and (b) indirectly examining the role of culture as a ‘double edged sword’ in

this intricate system in which individuals from various cultural backgrounds, students and faculty, meet.

In this case we focused on two distinct Israeli cultural sub-groups, one a majority and the second a cultural minority often meeting in College, namely Jews and Arabs. This cultural meeting-place may broaden students' horizons, learning and development but at the same time it can be a breeding ground for culturally- based conflicts. In addition, this kind of meeting between Jewish and Arabs is not necessarily taking place on equal terms. Campus reality indicates that the vast majority of classes and assignments are given in Hebrew, the official Language of Israel. Jewish students are therefore at an advantage in relation to their Arabic speaking peers. Such language differences might account for some of the misunderstandings of local norms, values and their enforcement and hence may result in what the College authorities may interpret as misconduct. In a review of the literature, although we did find evidence linking culture and ethnicity with the likelihood of misconduct on campus, we did not find any empirical attempts to directly explore the role of culture in this respect. Therefore our findings may be first-of-their-kind, and they are intriguing: While no differences were found in general patterns of misconduct (that is- Jews and Arabs conducted similar offenses), marginal (yet not statistically significant) differences emerged in how defendants pleaded: While Jewish defendants tended to deny or claim not knowing the regulations in their defense, Arabs tended to use external factors (e.g.: issues at home, work overload etc.) as reasons for misconduct and also tended to admit guilt more often than Jews. This marginal result may indicate cultural differences in how students perceive their behavior and the way they took responsibility for these behaviors. The cultural psychology literature suggests that communal cultures (the Arab society being one; see, for example: [26]) tend to show an external locus of control (i.e.: the belief that events are controlled by external factors such as luck, God etc. rather than themselves). This may account for the tendency to explain or justify misconduct by external events.

Our third finding indicates a significant difference in the type and severity of the committee's decision: A complex pattern emerged. The committees tended to either exonerate or cancel

course credit for students of Arab background while the more severe punishments (Expulsion or cancellation of a whole semester or more) were more often applied for Jewish students. While the committees' verdicts are set in hierarchy in our analysis, the results do not reveal any linear effect: It cannot be determined whether the committee was more lenient or harsh on either of the cultural groups in general, however the differences in decision patterns are notable. This along with the suggested differences in pleading patterns may suggest a 'double-blind' cultural encounter- on one hand Jews and Arabs used slightly different justifications for their deeds, while the committee used different sets of criteria to reach verdicts and punishment: A few explanations may account for these differences. One suggests that the patterns reflect a 'pedagogical' bias: Arab students are perceived as lacking knowledge and understanding of the local culture (and therefore are often required to repeat a course or add to their courses as means of 'atoning' for their misconduct). Jewish students on the other hand are assumed to be familiar with the local norms and expectations, and might therefore be more severely 'punished'. Another explanation may suggest that the committees are more hesitant to severely punish cultural minority students (in fear of appearing 'racist' or bigots). The fact that the misconduct patterns were not different across groups only validates the interpretation of this decision pattern as one that reflects biases inherent in the committees' reasoning and perceptions of the students' behavior based on their cultural background.

5. LIMITATIONS, POINTS FOR FUTURE THOUGHT AND RESEARCH

This effort addresses a rarely considered question, but it is merely a first step in the direction pointed to by our results. Our study had inherent limitations, such as a moderate sample size, a limited scope of generalizability imposed by sampling from a single college environment and cultural settings. Moreover it should be stated that even the very general distinctions between minority and majority groups, or Jewish and Arabs should be treated with care as Jews and Arabs in various countries and context may hold different belief systems and represent slightly varying cultures. The use of a single college sample, though quite representative of the teacher-training system in Israel, is limited and thus calls for further studies in this venue representing broader sampling of educational

systems, regulations and enforcement mechanisms.

Future research may wish, in light of the above findings and limitations, to examine students and disciplinary committees' motives by means of qualitative exploration, test for culture differences in more diverse settings (more ethnic-cultural groups) and use prospective design – that will allow more effective data mining and analyses.

That being said we believe the literature and evidence presented here shed new light on a phenomenon that received too little attention in education, legal and psychological circles. A better understanding of the dynamics behind such complex phenomena is key to germinating change. Such change may help bring about a more just and more effective enforcement of norms and rules in the pursuit for social and ethical justice.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

All authors hereby declare that all experiments have been examined and approved by the appropriate ethics committee and have therefore been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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