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The Multifaceted Ethical Dilemmas of Postdoctoral Researchers: Toward Equitable Policies in International Mobility

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ABSTRACT: *International postdoctoral mobility is framed as a pathway to academic development, career advancement, and global collaboration. However, for many early-career researchers, the decision to pursue a postdoctoral position abroad involves navigating conflicts between competing values: ethical dilemmas. This study identifies and examines ethical dilemmas through 40 in-depth interviews with Israeli postdoctoral researchers in the humanities and social sciences: 20 who pursued postdoctoral training abroad and 20 who remained in Israel. The findings identify recurring ethical dilemmas shaped by tensions between collective and individual values, including family stability versus professional self-fulfillment, community belonging versus professional development, and national or religious identity versus cosmopolitan academic opportunities. By conceptualizing these tensions as ethical dilemmas rather than*

barriers/challenges, the article offers a new lens for understanding inequality in postdoctoral mobility. The study develops a multidimensional model of ethical dilemmas and highlights the need for equitable policies that recognize family, cultural, and social contexts.

Keywords: Ethical Dilemmas, Higher Education, International Academic Mobility, International Students, International Student Mobility, Internationalization, Postdoctoral Research

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INTRODUCTION

International academic mobility, the cross-border movement of students and researchers for the purpose of knowledge acquisition, research collaboration, and human capital development (Yang & Du, 2025), has grown significantly, paralleling the increasing number of mobile graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and academic staff around the world (Shen et al., 2022). These rising numbers have been attributed to the myriad benefits mobility provides to international students (Tokas et al., 2023) and postdoctoral researchers (Ploszaj, 2025). International mobility has been shown to positively influence future career trajectories and human capital development (Potts, 2022) and is widely regarded as a key component of academic career progression (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017). Specifically, postdoctoral mobility may provide advanced, specialized training, expanding methodological and interdisciplinary expertise essential for the transition to independent scholarship (Seeber et al., 2023), while also fostering durable international networks and collaborations that are increasingly vital in a global academic environment (Shen et al., 2022).

At the same time, a growing body of scholarship has begun to critically examine the normalization of international academic mobility as an unquestioned good. Researchers have highlighted the personal and structural challenges associated with mobility, including precarity, family disruption, gender inequalities, and the pressures faced by early-career scholars navigating highly

competitive academic systems (Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2020; Schaer, 2022). Beyond these practical challenges, scholars have also argued that mobility functions as a mechanism through which advantages and inequalities within academia are reproduced (Lomer et al., 2024). In particular, the growing emphasis on international experience is closely linked to the accumulation of cosmopolitan capital, a socially and culturally embedded form of positional advantage reflected in the ability to navigate global academic environments, fluency in English, habitual international exposure, access to transnational networks, and affiliation with prestigious institutions (Bamberger, 2020a; Wu & Tao, 2024). While often framed as a marker of academic excellence, cosmopolitan capital is unevenly distributed, as not all scholars possess equal access to the social, cultural, and financial resources required to pursue international mobility. As a result, mobility expectations may reinforce existing inequalities in academic career trajectories, spurring increasing concern with the ethics of internationalization (Hou, 2025).

Despite this growing body of work, mobility has tended to be understood in terms of structural constraints, access to resources, and practical barriers. While these perspectives have been essential for documenting inequalities in international academic mobility (e.g., Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017; Lomer et al., 2024; Schaer, 2022), they leave relatively underexplored the ways in which such decisions are also experienced as conflicts between competing values. Decisions about postdoctoral mobility often require researchers to weigh professional aspirations against obligations to family, commitments to community and religious life, attachments to national culture, and concerns about children's education and social stability. In such situations, mobility is not only a logistical or career-related decision but also a morally consequential one: an ethical dilemma in which the pursuit of one value entails the compromise of another, without a clear or unambiguously "right" resolution. Reframing mobility through this lens therefore brings into view the moral complexity underlying (im)mobility decisions.

This study examines the ethical dilemmas associated with the growing expectation that PhD graduates pursue international postdoctoral positions and explores the underlying reasons for these dilemmas. The empirical entry point is 40 in-depth interviews with Israeli postdoctoral researchers in the humanities and social sciences (HSS), 20 who pursued postdoctoral training abroad and 20 who remained. Israel provides a particularly illuminating case because international postdoctoral experience is widely regarded as a prerequisite for academic employment in research universities (Yemini, 2017), and Israeli society is characterized by strong family, community, and religious ties (Mitchell, 2016), which may intensify tensions surrounding mobility decisions. While postdoctoral researchers are distinct from students, their mobility represents an advanced stage of the international education continuum, sharing core motivations for training and capital acquisition that are characterized in the student mobility literature.

This study makes three main contributions. First, it introduces an ethical-dilemma lens to the study of postdoctoral mobility, showing that mobility decisions are shaped not only by resources and opportunities but also by conflicts among values. Second, it identifies six recurring ethical dilemmas that structure

how researchers make sense of (im)mobility. Third, it develops a multidimensional model of ethical dilemmas in postdoctoral mobility and uses it to argue for more equitable policies that better account for researchers' family circumstances, social embeddedness, and cultural commitments.

We begin by elaborating on the concept of ethical dilemmas as a lens for understanding international mobility and explain the focus on postdoctoral researchers in the HSS. We then turn to the Israeli context of postdoctoral mobility, followed by the qualitative methodology and the empirical findings. We conclude by discussing the study's contributions and its policy implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical Dilemmas

Unlike decisions framed as right versus wrong, ethical dilemmas arise when individuals must choose between competing values. These are "right versus right" situations involving conflict between two or more moral imperatives and are therefore marked by complexity, ambiguity, and the absence of straightforward solutions (Catacutan & de Guzman, 2016; Ulvik et al., 2017). Such dilemmas emerge when people must weigh deeply held values that shape their judgments and actions (Gat & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2025; Kesberg & Keller, 2018), including moral responsibilities toward others within personal and social relationships (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023).

Previous research suggests that international mobility for postdoctoral studies may give rise to such value tensions because it places individuals at the intersection of multiple value commitments (Doiron & Asselin, 2015; Honan et al., 2013). Thus, we propose that decisions about studying abroad or remaining in one's home country are rarely simple logistical choices; they are often ethical choices that require prioritizing values. Accordingly, this study adopts the "right versus right" framework to analyze international mobility narratives and identify instances in which pursuing one value necessarily entails compromising another (Catacutan & de Guzman, 2016).

Although previous studies rarely conceptualize mobility challenges as ethical dilemmas, the literature points to three recurring value conflicts in the context of international mobility: (1) career development versus family responsibilities; (2) cultural adaptation versus identity preservation; and (3) global academic participation versus religious and moral commitments.

The first dilemma concerns the tension between professional advancement and family responsibilities (Schaer, 2022). As noted previously, academic mobility is widely associated with the accumulation of human, social, and symbolic capital and is often treated as essential for career progression. However, pursuing mobility may conflict with commitments to partners, children, and family stability, particularly regarding parenting and care responsibilities (Cohen et al., 2020; Nikunen & Lempiäinen, 2020). This tension may be especially salient for women, who often bear a disproportionate share of care work and therefore

experience mobility as a more acute ethical trade-off between professional aspirations and family obligations.

The second dilemma concerns the tension between adapting to a new cultural environment and preserving cultural identity. While relocation offers opportunities for encountering cultural diversity and engaging in new intellectual environments, it may also require individuals and their families to negotiate between cultural assimilation and the preservation of cultural identity (Mizrachi et al., 2022). Adjusting to a new environment often requires substantial personal and professional changes (Antoniadou & Quinlan, 2020), sometimes resulting in a sense of "cultural liminality," in which individuals feel caught between cultural frameworks (Benartzy, 2020). For postdoctoral researchers and their families, this dilemma may extend beyond the individual researcher to questions of children's schooling, language, belonging, and cultural socialization (Mizrachi et al., 2022; Yemini & Maxwell, 2018). While much research focuses on international students (Yang & Du, 2025; Zhang & Ting, 2025), we posit that similar dilemmas arise for postdoctoral researchers.

A third dilemma concerns the tension between participation in global academic life and the maintenance of religious or moral commitments. Research by Mizrachi et al. (2022) on globally mobile religious Jews illustrates that international mobility may create conflicts between integration into professional environments and adherence to religious practices, communal norms, and preferred forms of family life (Mizrachi et al., 2022). Similarly, as Yemini and Maxwell (2018) reveal in their study of globally mobile families in the UK, decisions surrounding postdoctoral mobility may raise ethical questions about how to educate children, sustain religious routines, or maintain a desired home environment while living abroad.

Taken together, these studies suggest that international mobility is shaped by a set of interrelated ethical dilemmas rather than by practical constraints alone. Existing scholarship has examined issues such as family responsibilities, child-rearing, cultural adaptation, identity preservation, and religious commitments, but it has usually treated them as social or logistical challenges rather than as conflicts between legitimate values. Reframing them through a "right versus right" lens helps reveal the moral structure of these decisions and offers a more nuanced understanding of the trade-offs involved in mobility. More broadly, values such as community belonging (Stanley et al., 2012), national identity (Rennick, 2013), professional development (Hanley et al., 2025), self-fulfillment, and cultural continuity (Giménez & Tamajón, 2019) are well established in the wider literature, yet the ethical tensions surrounding them remain underexplored in the context of postdoctoral mobility. Using an ethical dilemma lens, therefore, enables a more holistic account of international mobility, one that captures the values, identities, and obligations that shape how mobility is experienced and negotiated.

Building on this perspective, we focus on postdoctoral researchers in the HSS, as they constitute an especially important yet underexamined site for the study of ethical dilemmas in postdoctoral mobility. Research on international academic mobility has centered on STEM fields (Kahn & Ginther, 2017; Rice et

al., 2020) rather than on the HSS, where postdoctoral training is a more recent and less institutionalized phenomenon (Wang & Main, 2021). This gap matters not only because HSS scholarship is often closely tied to language, culture, interpretation, and context (Galagedarage, 2022) but also because postdoctoral researchers in these fields frequently face more limited funding opportunities and weaker institutional support for mobility. As a result, the pursuit of international postdoctoral experience in the HSS may involve particularly acute tensions between professional aspirations and personal, familial, or cultural commitments. Examining HSS postdoctoral researchers, therefore, sharpens attention to the ethical and value-laden dimensions of mobility decisions.

The Study Context

Israeli society is often described as combining strong individualistic and collectivist orientations (Amzaleg & Masry-Herzallah, 2022). On the one hand, it encourages autonomy, achievement, and personal advancement; on the other hand, it remains deeply rooted in collective values that emphasize family, community, mutual dependence, and social cohesion (Goldfinger et al., 2025). These social dynamics are shaped by the country's ethnic diversity, shared (and contested) historical narratives, and the central role of family, religion, and collective belonging in everyday life.

Israel's higher education system operates within this broader societal context. It is widely regarded as academically strong, with Israeli universities performing well in international rankings and the country achieving notable success in highly competitive schemes such as European Research Council (ERC) grants (Weinreb & Yemini, 2023; Yemini, 2017). At the same time, the system is characterized by a particular form of internationalization: it is considered highly internationalized in faculty research orientation and global academic ties, but much less so in student mobility and the recruitment of international students (Bamberger, 2020b; Weinreb & Bamberger, 2025).

Within Israeli academia, international mobility is closely tied to academic prestige and career progression. Researchers are expected not only to publish internationally and compete for prestigious grants but also to accumulate international experience and collaboration, especially at early career stages (Yemini, 2017). In many disciplines, completing a postdoctoral fellowship abroad, often in the United States or the United Kingdom, is treated as a *de facto* requirement for securing research and teaching positions in Israeli universities (Israel & Cohen, 2022; Yemini, 2017). This expectation is reflected both in formal job criteria and in broader academic norms. Indeed, relative to its population size, Israel sends an exceptionally high number of postdoctoral researchers to the United States (Ben-David, 2019).

However, in Israeli society, where there are commitments to family life, community, religion, children's education, and other forms of social belonging (Mitchell, 2016), the expectation to relocate abroad may collide with these deep commitments for many Israeli PhD graduates. Although some scholars pursue postdoctoral training within Israel, the academic norm continues to privilege

mobility abroad. As a result, early-career researchers may face tensions between the individualizing demands of the global academic market and the collective commitments embedded in Israeli social life. It is precisely this intersection that makes postdoctoral mobility in Israel a particularly fruitful setting for examining ethical dilemmas.

These dilemmas may be even more pronounced for members of underrepresented groups. Israeli higher education has expanded access for a range of marginalized populations, including students from the geographic periphery, Arab citizens, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Ethiopian Jews (CHE, 2024). However, gains in student participation have not translated into equivalent representation among academic faculty. Despite ongoing efforts by the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) to diversify academic staff, progress has remained limited (PBC, 2023). This gap suggests that barriers to academic advancement persist beyond initial access to higher education and may be particularly acute at later career stages, including the postdoctoral phase; it may point to a deeper, systemic issue within the higher education system that requires renewed policy attention, particularly given the broader implications for equity and inclusion.

Against this backdrop, Israel offers a revealing case for examining how ethical dilemmas shape postdoctoral mobility decisions, particularly in the HSS, where international mobility may be highly valued yet difficult to reconcile with personal, cultural, and communal commitments. More broadly, the Israeli case may illuminate how mobility decisions are shaped by values rooted in social identity, religion, family life, and national context. Since little is known about Israeli postdoctoral researchers, whether those who remain in Israel or those who go abroad, especially in the HSS, this study addresses an important empirical and conceptual gap.

METHOD

We employ a qualitative research method grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes a holistic understanding of phenomena and the importance of context in their interpretation (Pilarska, 2021). The study included 40 Israeli postdoctoral researchers in the HSS who were either currently engaged in postdoctoral research or had recently completed it. Twenty participants conducted postdoctoral research in Israel and twenty abroad. The participants reflected the demographic diversity of Israeli society and represented several HSS disciplines. Furthermore, all participants in the study were married and were parents at the time of the interviews. Detailed demographic information appears in Table 1.

Table 1: List of Participants in the Study

Researchers who conducted postdoctoral studies abroad							
	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sector	Religious affiliation	Field of study	Postdoctoral location
1	Alon	49	Male	Jewish	Secular	Education	U.S
2	Avi	42	Male	Jewish	Secular	Social sciences	U.S
3	Chani	44	Female	Jewish	Ultra-Orthodox	Social sciences	U.S
4	Dana	45	Female	Jewish	Orthodox	Social sciences	U.S
5	Daniela	40	Female	Jewish	Secular	Education	U.S
6	Eli	40	Male	Jewish	Secular	Education	U.S
7	Gal	42	Female	Jewish	Secular	Social sciences	U.S
8	Maor	39	Male	Jewish	Orthodox	Humanities	U.S
9	Mor	36	Female	Jewish	Secular	Education	U.S
10	Noor	43	Female	Arabic	Christian	Education	U.S
11	Orna	35	Female	Jewish	Secular	Social sciences	U.S
12	Sara	42	Female	Jewish	Secular	Social science	U.S
13	Udi	36	Male	Jewish	Secular	Political science	U.S
14	Tova	37	Female	Jewish	Secular	Humanities	U.S
15	David	41	Male	Jewish	Secular	Social sciences	England
16	Ilan	37	Male	Jewish	Secular	Humanities	England
17	Iman	38	Female	Arabic Bedouin	Secular	Social sciences	England
18	Ronit	40	Female	Jewish	Secular	Humanities	England
19	Tamar	38	Female	Jewish	Secular	Political science	England
20	Moshe	36	Male	Jewish	Orthodox	Social science	Netherlands
Researchers who conducted postdoctoral studies in Israel							
	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sector	Religious affiliation	Field of study	Institution
1	Anat	43	Female	Jewish	Secular	Social sciences	University
2	Dima	39	Female	Arabic	Christian	Education	University
3	Hadas	39	Female	Jewish	Orthodox	Humanities	University
4	Keren	40	Female	Jewish	Secular	Political science	University
5	Liron	49	Female	Jewish	Secular	Political science	University
6	Maya	48	Female	Jewish	Secular	Education	University
7	Nava	49	Female	Jewish	Orthodox	Political science	University

8	Natan	45	Male	Jewish	Ultra-Orthodox	Political science	University
9	Ofir	46	Male	Jewish	Secular	Social sciences	University
10	Or	49	Male	Jewish	Secular	Social sciences	University
11	Ora	52	Female	Jewish	Orthodox	Political science	University
12	Oren	48	Male	Jewish	Secular	Social sciences	University
13	Yael	48	Female	Jewish	Ultra-Orthodox	Political science	University
14	Adi	40	Female	Jewish	Secular	Education	Teacher training college
15	Aisha	57	Female	Arabic	Moslem	Education	Teacher training college
16	Aya	34	Female	Arabic	Moslem	Education	Teacher training college
17	Miriam	42	Female	Jewish	Orthodox	Education	Teacher training college
18	Orit	38	Female	Jewish	Secular	Education	Teacher training college
19	Ortal	36	Female	Jewish	Orthodox	Political science	Teacher training college
20	Sakhnin	40	Female	Arabic	Moslem	Education	Teacher training college

We selected participants from diverse cultural, religious, and social backgrounds based on their representation in higher education in the HSS because the research of Doiron and Asselin (2015) suggests that social identities influence the emergence of ethical dilemmas. We began with convenience sampling by contacting postdoctoral researchers known to the authors, followed by snowball sampling. Participants were also recruited through social networks and online platforms to broaden the sample. Each participant took part in a semistructured interview exploring experiences and dilemmas related to international mobility in postdoctoral studies. While many themes emerged from the interview analysis, this paper focuses on ethical dilemmas related to the decision to pursue postdoctoral studies abroad or in Israel, as well as those experienced during the postdoctoral period. The interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the authors' university.

Data were analyzed using an inductive approach (Azungah, 2018) in three stages. The first stage involved open coding, in which interview narratives were coded and grouped into subcategories based on shared characteristics. The second stage involved axial coding, organizing subcategories into core categories by examining their relationships and identifying dominant themes. The third stage, selective coding, integrated the core categories into an overarching category (Khandkar, 2009).

During analysis, the “ethical dilemma lens” was operationalized by coding for value conflicts. Rather than coding logistical or cultural challenges, coders identified narratives describing tensions between incompatible values (Ulvik et al., 2017). A segment was classified as an ethical dilemma when the pursuit of one course of action entailed compromising another strongly held value (Catacutan & de Guzman, 2016). The analysis then compared participants who remained in Israel with those who went abroad, using value conflicts to organize the findings. The identification of values was primarily deductive, drawing on the literature reviewed above, while remaining open to inductive themes that emerged from the data.

To enhance credibility and reliability, we compared codes to establish intercoder agreement and refined categories through iterative discussion until consensus was reached. An audit trail documenting methodological decisions, memos, and category development was maintained, and peer debriefing with colleagues outside the research team was used to interrogate emerging interpretations. Reflexive engagement with our positionality was maintained throughout the analysis to ensure transparency and minimize projection (Noble & Smith, 2025). As Israeli HSS researchers, we occupied an insider position relative to the participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), which facilitated access and enabled open dialog around issues such as family expectations, religious obligations, and national identity. At the same time, we remained alert to the risks of overidentification and analytic bias arising from this familiarity. To mitigate these risks, we sought to maintain a clear distinction between participants’ accounts and our own assumptions, grounding our interpretations closely in the data.

The number of narratives in each ethical dilemma indicates the frequency with which participants referred to the issues represented by the dilemma and facilitated comparisons between them. The dominance of a category was determined by the number of narratives it contained relative to other categories. Importantly, this quantification served an analytical rather than statistical purpose, indicating the salience of ethical dilemmas in participants’ discourse. Each interviewee could present more than one narrative per category.

FINDINGS

The findings reveal a set of six ethical dilemmas through which participants made sense of postdoctoral mobility decisions. Across the interviews, these dilemmas were structured by tensions between collective and individual values that are particularly salient in the Israeli context. Following Goldfinger et al. (2025), collective values refer to commitments associated with social order, strong

interpersonal ties, and the primacy of the group, whereas individual values emphasize personal goals, self-interest, independence, and self-realization. The dilemmas identified in the data emerged from conflicts between these value orientations, although in practice, they were often deeply intertwined.

The findings are organized according to the six most salient ethical dilemmas identified in the interviews, presented in descending order of frequency. For each dilemma, we distinguish between participants who pursued postdoctoral studies abroad and those who remained in Israel, as the tensions were often articulated differently across these two groups. This comparative structure allows us to show not only which value conflicts emerged but also how participants resolved or prioritized them in different mobility trajectories.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the six ethical dilemmas and their distribution across the interview data, indicating their thematic salience rather than statistical frequency. Figure 2 presents the multidimensional model developed from the findings, which conceptualizes postdoctoral mobility as shaped by interrelated value conflicts across family, community, national, cultural, educational, and religious domains.

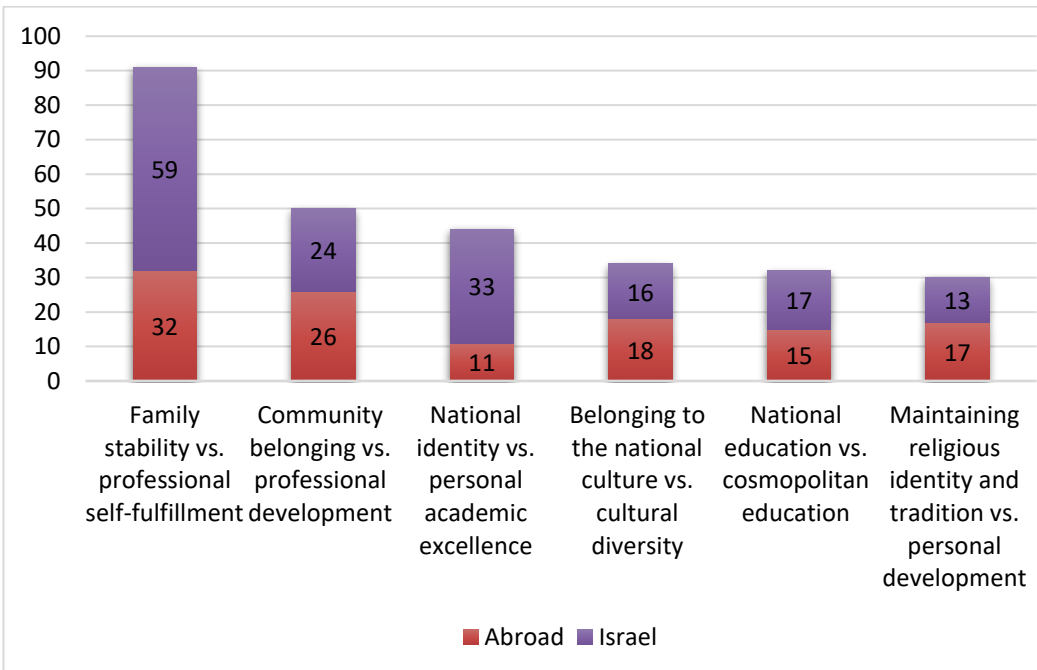


Figure 1: Thematic Salience of Ethical Dilemmas Across Participant Narratives



Figure 2: A Multidimensional Model of Ethical Dilemmas of Postdoctoral Researchers

The remainder of this section examines each dilemma in turn, highlighting how it was articulated by participants who went abroad and by those who remained in Israel.

Family Stability Versus Professional Self-Fulfillment (91 Narratives)

The central dilemma that emerged centers on the tension between the value of family stability and the aspiration for professional self-fulfillment. Family stability reflects the importance of maintaining a balanced and supportive family life, often seen as a core moral and social value that enhances one’s sense of belonging and purpose. However, professional self-fulfillment enhances one’s self-identity, pride, and recognition. While these two values are not mutually exclusive in principle, the specific exigencies of international relocation place them in competition. For the participants, professional self-fulfillment is inextricably linked to mobility, yet the act of moving abroad often undermines the pillars of family stability, such as economic security, spousal employment, and support from extended kin. Consequently, individuals feel torn between prioritizing collective family obligations and striving for individual personal

success. This dilemma is especially relevant for Israelis pursuing postdoctoral studies, who are typically in their 30s or 40s, a critical decade when many confront ethical dilemmas related to advancing their careers while preserving family stability. The dilemma is gendered and pronounced among women, who often continue to bear primary responsibility for child-rearing and household management.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies Abroad (32 Narratives)

The value of family stability is expressed in several ways among this group. First, prolonged physical and emotional distance from a spouse, children, parents, in-laws, and siblings, or the separation of children from their extended family due to extended time abroad, can undermine family stability. Daniela, 40, who conducted postdoctoral research in education at a university in the US, shared:

It was hard for my parents and my husband's parents. For my parents, I am the only one here in Israel, and for my husband's parents, he is the youngest and takes care of them. It was difficult, but we promised that we would return, and it is only temporary.

Second, economic uncertainty can impact family stability among postdoctoral researchers, as many face limited research funding. The participants noted that this uncertainty is particularly pronounced in HSS, where funding is more restricted than in STEM. Moreover, living abroad demands substantial financial resources for health insurance, rent, children's tuition, and additional expenses that may exceed available scholarships or salaries, posing a potential challenge to the family's economic stability. Ronit, 40, who conducted postdoctoral research in the humanities at a university in England, added:

It is very expensive [...] every few years, you need to renew the residency visa, which costs a lot of money [...] when children are born, you have to pay for their residency visa.

Third, raising children in a foreign environment for an extended period can be challenging and may undermine family stability. Sara, 42, who conducted postdoctoral research in social sciences at a university in the US, shared:

Our youngest daughter was in a kindergarten where they spoke English; for the first four months, she was silent. I was very stressed [...] I was constantly worried and could not focus on my research.

Raising children in an unfamiliar setting was viewed as undermining children's stability, especially during adolescence. Furthermore, the demands of academic responsibilities were often viewed as coming at the expense of time dedicated to parenting.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies in Their Country of Origin (59 Narratives)

While sharing similar concerns with their mobile counterparts, for those who conducted their postdoctoral research in Israel, the anticipated impact of international mobility on family stability was perceived as a red line. Concerns regarding physical and emotional distance, financial instability, and raising children in a foreign environment were ultimately deemed too severe a toll on their family's well-being. Consequently, these family values outweighed the value for professional self-fulfillment, causing them to forgo postdoctoral research abroad. Keren, 40, who conducted postdoctoral research in political science at a university in Israel, stated:

I am in a decade during which the most critical things in life happen, finding a partner, parenting, establishing a career, reaching joint life decisions [...]. Although I truly wanted to conduct my postdoctoral research in the US, I ultimately realized that raising my children abroad would be too costly and harmful for them.

Regarding the challenge of physical and emotional distance from the children, Liron, 49, who conducted postdoctoral research in political science at a university in Israel, noted:

Even though I deeply wanted to do a postdoc abroad and fulfill myself professionally, and even though my children were older, I was emotionally unable to separate from them for a year.

Community Belonging Versus Professional Development (50 Narratives)

The participants highlighted a dilemma between the values of community belonging and professional development. The community provides a vital sense of belonging and emotional support, especially for individuals from religious, ultra-Orthodox, and Arab communities, which are often rooted in close-knit social structures where relationships reinforce both cultural and personal identity. Such communal ties are also present among secular individuals. However, the value of professional development is essential for advancing one's career and achieving academic and research goals, often requiring exposure to global networks and innovative practices. When the pursuit of professional growth demands physical and emotional distance from one's community, the tension between these values can create a profound dilemma, as individuals are forced to balance a sense of communal belonging with their career aspirations. Here, inherent conflict arises because deep community belonging relies on physical proximity and continuity, whereas professional development in the current academic climate demands detachment and mobility to access global networks. This tension stems not from an inability to form new connections but from a deep attachment to existing communities.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies Abroad (26 Narratives)

Israeli researchers pursuing postdoctoral studies abroad emphasized that international mobility often leads to loneliness due to the lack of community ties. Conversely, international mobility significantly enhances a researcher's professional development by exposing them to innovative methodologies and integrating them into international research. Gal, 42, who conducted postdoctoral research in social sciences at a university in the US, noted:

It was very difficult to form friendships, and I felt lonely, primarily due to the language barrier [...] There's nothing like being with familiar friends who have known you for years [...] I felt that international research was essential for professional growth. Israel is not an international country; we think and speak in Hebrew, and a postdoctoral abroad provides the opportunity to engage in English.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies in Their Country of Origin (24 Narratives)

For many postdoctoral researchers who remained in Israel, strong community ties outweighed the desire for professional development through international mobility. This tension was most acutely felt by those from traditional backgrounds, such as the Arab or ultra-Orthodox communities; however, all participants who relinquished international mobility regretted the lack of professional development resulting from their decision. Aya, 34, an Arab woman who conducted postdoctoral research in education at a teacher training college in Israel, stated:

I belong to a traditional society [...] that is socially cohesive, and traveling abroad isolates individuals with a strong sense of belonging to their community [...] In the end, we were left with our original outlook [...] we did not break paradigms or gain exposure to another world.

National Identity Versus Personal Academic Excellence (43 Narratives)

One of the central ethical dilemmas facing postdoctoral researchers in relation to international mobility concerns the tension between national belonging and academic excellence. On the one hand, national identity may be experienced as a deeply held commitment tied to belonging, collective loyalty, and contribution to one's home society. On the other hand, academic excellence is increasingly defined through the norms of a globalized academic field, in which international mobility, collaboration, and institutional prestige are treated as markers of professional success. As a result, researchers may experience mobility decisions not simply as career choices but as value-laden decisions between remaining close to the national context with which they identify and pursuing opportunities abroad

that may enhance their academic development. This tension does not necessarily constitute a fixed opposition between the nation-state and internationalization; rather, it reflects the way contemporary academic structures can place commitments to local belonging and global professional advancement in uneasy relation to one another.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies Abroad (11 Narratives)

Participants described the tension between national belonging and academic excellence as a lived trade-off. These participants often portrayed international mobility as professionally valuable, while also experiencing distance from their home country as a personal and moral cost. Ronit explained:

Moving abroad for my postdoc made me feel distant from my national identity; this is significant to me; however, the international collaborations I have established here clearly advance my research. At times, it feels like a personal cost I pay for academic excellence.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies in Their Country of Origin (32 Narratives)

Participants who remained in Israel engaged with the same tension but articulated a different resolution to it. Rather than viewing academic excellence as attainable only through physical mobility, they emphasized the possibility of remaining nationally and socially rooted while still participating in high-quality internationalized research. In these accounts, staying in Israel was framed not as a rejection of excellence but as a way of reconciling professional aspirations with a sense of national commitment. As Orit, 38, who conducted postdoctoral research in education at a teacher training college in Israel, noted:

Opportunities abroad are tempting, but I felt a strong responsibility to stay. I believe my contribution is greater when I stay connected to the country [...] As for the pursuit of academic excellence, my postdoc supervisor in Israel is international in his field and well-known globally, and he guides me at the highest level.

National Culture versus Cultural Diversity (34 Narratives)

Another ethical dilemma concerned the tension between attachment to one's national-cultural environment and openness to cultural difference. For many Jewish Israeli researchers, national culture was associated with familiarity, belonging, emotional comfort, and connection through everyday practices such as language, food, holidays, and social rhythms. At the same time, international mobility exposed them to the value of cultural openness, including adaptation to unfamiliar settings, engagement with difference, and the possibility of personal growth through new cultural experiences. The dilemma, then, was how to

negotiate the pull of cultural familiarity alongside the transformative potential of living in a more diverse or unfamiliar environment.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies Abroad (18 Narratives)

Among participants who went abroad, this tension was often experienced directly in everyday life. They described feelings of dislocation from familiar cultural practices and social environments while also recognizing that exposure to a different cultural setting could broaden perspectives and create new forms of family or personal experience. Orna, 35, who conducted postdoctoral research in social sciences at a university in the US, noted:

We were in an area with no community, so I felt disconnected from the familiar culture, food, holidays, and everything else felt foreign. Moreover, we were in a very Christian environment, which added to the feelings of isolation and alienation [...] On the other hand, in the US, the culture allows you to have long weekends and travel, which brought us together as a family.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies in Their Country of Origin (16 Narratives)

Participants who remained in Israel engaged with this tension differently. In these accounts, attachment to the national-cultural environment was often given greater weight than the perceived benefits of immersion in another culture. Staying in Israel was therefore framed as a way of maintaining continuity, familiarity, and cultural rootedness, even when participants acknowledged that mobility abroad might offer exposure to diversity. This was particularly evident among those who had already spent time abroad during earlier stages of their studies and now wished to reanchor themselves in their home cultural environment. As Adi, 40, who conducted postdoctoral research in education at a teacher training college in Israel, noted:

I prefer to stay here. I am more connected to our culture than to other cultures that are foreign. I have no interest in learning about other cultures. For me, it is not a dilemma.

National Education Versus Cosmopolitan Education (32 Narratives)

Another ethical dilemma concerned children's education. Across the narratives, participants described tension between the value of national education and the value of cosmopolitan education. In the Israeli context, national education was often associated with continuity in language, cultural and religious socialization,

and transmission of national belonging. Cosmopolitan education, by contrast, was associated with exposure to diversity, English-language learning, and preparation for participation in a more global environment. For parents considering postdoctoral mobility, this tension became an ethical dilemma because decisions about relocation were also decisions about the kind of educational and value framework in which their children would be raised. Choosing one path often meant, at least temporarily, prioritizing one set of educational values over another.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies Abroad (15 Narratives)

Among these participants, this dilemma was often framed as a tension between preserving children's connection to Israeli and Jewish culture and recognizing the developmental advantages of education in an international setting. These participants did not reject national education; rather, they weighed concerns about cultural continuity against the perceived benefits of English acquisition, intercultural exposure, and adaptation to diverse educational environments. Dana, 45, who conducted postdoctoral research in social sciences at a university in the US, articulated this tension:

The values and history we have here in Israel are too important to be overlooked. I do not want my children to lose their connection to our local culture just because they are studying in a foreign country [...] Ultimately, we concluded that there are also advantages to an education abroad. It provides children with valuable experiences and skills, particularly learning English and interacting with children from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies in Their Country of Origin (17 Narratives)

Participants who remained in Israel articulated the same dilemma but tended to assign greater weight to continuity in national, religious, and educational frameworks. In these accounts, the issue was not only the content of schooling but also children's broader social and emotional stability. This was particularly salient among participants whose children were already embedded in the Israeli school system, especially those in middle or high school, with established friendships and ongoing matriculation requirements. For these parents, remaining in Israel was often framed as a moral responsibility to preserve educational continuity and avoid disrupting their children's academic and social trajectories. Hadas, 39, who conducted postdoctoral research in the humanities at a university in Israel, noted:

I want my children to learn Jewish values, and I do not want them to attend a public school [abroad]. Therefore, I wondered where I could find such a school [...] My two children are in high school and taking their matriculation exams. I do not want to disrupt their studies, and I

want them to complete their matriculation certificate here in Israel, especially since they have already taken some of the exams. If I transfer them abroad, that will not happen [...] I do see value in the cosmopolitan experience. If we moved abroad, they would be exposed to different cultures and educational systems, which could enrich their lives and broaden their perspective.

Some participants discussed the impact of relocation on their children and voiced concerns that moving abroad could hinder their social adaptation.

Maintaining Religious Identity and Tradition Versus Personal Development (30 Narratives)

This ethical dilemma was articulated only by Jewish participants and concerned the tension between maintaining Jewish identity and tradition, on the one hand, and pursuing personal development through international mobility, on the other. For participants, religious continuity was not limited to formal observance; it also encompassed everyday practices, cultural familiarity, and a sense of connection to a Jewish social and moral environment. Personal development, by contrast, was associated with the opportunities that mobility could provide for self-expansion, intellectual growth, and exposure to new perspectives. The dilemma thus arose when researchers experienced mobility as potentially enriching and transformative while also perceiving it as distancing them from religious routines, communal belonging, or valued forms of Jewish life. Notably, this tension appeared not only among participants who defined themselves as religious but also among those who did not identify as strictly observant yet still attached significance to Jewish identity and practice.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies Abroad (17 Narratives)

Tova, 37, who conducted postdoctoral research in humanities at a university in the US, shared:

I remember searching where to buy matzah (a kosher bread for Passover); it was quite a project, whereas here it's a given [...] I'm not traditional, but I do realize how hard it is to be Jewish [...] Nonetheless, I gained a lot on a personal level, I was exposed to things I did not know before. It helped me expand my knowledge.

Researchers Pursuing Postdoctoral Studies in Their Country of Origin (13 Narratives)

Participants who remained in Israel described staying as a way to preserve religious continuity and a familiar communal environment, even as some acknowledged that foregoing mobility also carried a personal cost, including a sense of missed growth or unrealized development. Natan, 45, who conducted postdoctoral research in political science at a university in Israel, explained:

If I were in a place like New York or London, I would be fine. Places with a high concentration of religious individuals, but not other places [...] You know, every decision comes at a price, sometimes I have a feeling of failure, I stayed here, I did not develop, I stayed the same on a personal level.

He further reflected:

For me, staying in Israel was about preserving my faith. Abroad, I was concerned that exposure to different perspectives might challenge my religious beliefs.

DISCUSSION

This study examined postdoctoral mobility through the lens of ethical dilemmas, showing that decisions about whether to pursue postdoctoral training abroad are not shaped solely by opportunity structures, career incentives, or practical constraints. Rather, they are also experienced as conflicts between competing values. Drawing on interviews with Israeli postdoctoral researchers in the HSS, the study makes an empirical contribution by identifying six recurring ethical dilemmas that structured participants' mobility decisions and experiences: family stability versus professional self-fulfillment; community belonging versus professional development; national identity versus academic excellence; national-cultural belonging versus cultural openness; national education versus cosmopolitan education; and religious continuity versus personal development. Taken together, these findings suggest that postdoctoral mobility is a morally charged process in which researchers negotiate the competing demands of career, family, identity, community, and belonging.

The study's main contribution is its conceptual lens: it reframes challenges associated with international postdoctoral mobility as ethical dilemmas of "right versus right" conflicts between deeply held values (Catacutan & de Guzman, 2016; Ulvik et al., 2017). This lens adds an important dimension to existing scholarship on mobility and inequality (see Carlson et al., 2025). Research on international academic mobility has convincingly shown that mobility is shaped by structural constraints (Schaer, 2022), unequal resources (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017), and the uneven distribution of cosmopolitan capital

(Wu & Tao, 2024). However, our findings suggest that researchers may also refrain from mobility because it may require them to compromise values they consider morally significant.

More specifically, these dilemmas are often organized around tensions between collective and individual values (Goldfinger et al., 2025). Across the interviews, participants described mobility decisions as involving friction between values associated with social embeddedness, family commitment, community belonging, national attachment, religious continuity, and children's educational stability and values associated with academic individualization, such as self-fulfillment, professional advancement, academic excellence, and cosmopolitan development. In this sense, the findings speak to broader debates on the ethics of internationalization and specifically the need to account for diverse cultural paradigms (Hou, 2025). They provide further evidence that the global academic system tends to normalize a model of excellence built around mobility, self-expansion, and detachment from place (Bojica et al., 2023), while paying insufficient attention to forms of life in which obligations to family, community, religion, or locality are central values. Viewing mobility decisions through this lens illustrates the human costs of a system that assumes high mobility and, importantly, reveals a layer of meaning that is obscured when *immobility* is treated primarily as a deficit; it highlights that 'failing' to pursue international mobility may not be an inability to compete or adapt (Antoniadou & Quinlan, 2020; Zhang & Ting, 2025) but rather an ethical choice.

Building on these insights, the multidimensional model proposed in Figure 2 conceptualizes postdoctoral mobility as shaped by interrelated value tensions across familial, communal, national, cultural, educational, and religious domains. The model highlights that these dilemmas do not operate in isolation. Rather, mobility decisions are often made at the intersection of overlapping values, which may reinforce one another or intensify the overall sense of conflict (e.g., values related to community belonging, national culture, and religious identity may overlap, creating compounding value conflict with professional self-fulfillment and academic excellence). Conceptualizing mobility in this way offers a fuller account of why international postdoctoral mobility may be experienced as difficult, even by researchers who are highly qualified, internationally oriented, and professionally ambitious.

Importantly, the findings also suggest that support for postdoctoral mobility should not be based solely on broad identity categories (e.g., ultra-Orthodox; Arab). Although social location clearly shaped the kinds of dilemmas participants described, no single identity marker determined whether a researcher would remain in Israel or go abroad. Within the same gender, religious, and national groups, participants made different decisions and justified them in different ways. Therefore, a uniform funding policy based strictly on (group) identity is likely ineffective, and this suggests that more equitable support frameworks would need to remain attentive to individual circumstances and the specific constellations of values that mobility brings into tension.

Implications

Based on the conclusion that support should be tailored to individual circumstances rather than broad identity categories, we propose targeted interventions. At the governmental or funding level, the dilemma of family stability versus professional self-fulfillment points to the importance of more generous and flexible financial support, particularly for researchers relocating with partners and children. Support for housing, schooling, childcare, health insurance, and family accompaniment may reduce the extent to which mobility is experienced as a threat to family stability. Likewise, the dilemmas of community belonging versus professional development and national identity versus academic excellence suggest the value of hybrid, short-term, or split-site mobility models that allow researchers to access international academic networks without requiring prolonged separation from local communities or national contexts.

At the institutional level, universities may be able to respond more directly to dilemmas related to national education versus cosmopolitan education, national-cultural belonging versus cultural openness, and religious continuity versus personal development. Practical support around children's schooling, childcare, and family relocation may help researchers navigate educational dilemmas, while mentoring and predeparture guidance from others who have managed similar tensions may ease concerns related to cultural adjustment, community integration, and religious life abroad. Universities may also be able to foster forms of community building for visiting researchers and their families, helping reduce the isolation described by participants who experienced mobility as socially and culturally dislocating.

At a broader systemic level, the findings also raise questions about how academic excellence is defined and rewarded. When prolonged international mobility functions as a proxy for merit, researchers whose values or circumstances make relocation difficult may be disadvantaged even when they remain academically strong. Recognizing multiple pathways to internationalization, including international collaboration, short-term exchange, and digitally mediated participation, may allow systems to support excellence without presuming that one model of mobility fits all. Collectively, these measures could contribute to equity and participation in international postdoctoral mobility without undermining core values such as family stability, national culture, and community. Building on the multidimensional model (Figure 2), these insights can inform the development of more equitable policies to increase participation in international postdoctoral programs, particularly in countries seeking to diversify their academic staff and in which international academic experience is needed.

This study should be read in light of its scope. The analysis is grounded in the Israeli context, a setting in which postdoctoral mobility is highly valued, while family, community, religious, and national ties remain especially salient. Although these features make Israel a particularly revealing case for examining ethical dilemmas, the specific configuration of dilemmas identified here may vary across national settings. In addition, the study focuses on postdoctoral researchers

in the humanities and social sciences, where mobility pathways, funding structures, and professional expectations may differ from those in other fields. Future research could usefully extend this framework comparatively across countries, disciplines, and social groups, as well as examine how institutional and governmental policies shape researchers' capacity to navigate these dilemmas. Even so, the study offers a valuable contribution by showing how international mobility is shaped by conflicts between values and by proposing a multidimensional account of the ethical tensions embedded in postdoctoral mobility.

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This article incorporates content generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools. The sections where AI tools were employed for minimal editing are the introduction and the literature review. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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