

# Toward an integrative theory of identity formation? Three components of the religious identity formation process

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## Research Article

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# Abstract

## Objective

The religious identity formation process plays an important role in some people's lives; however, this identity domain has a lack of research. The aim of this study is to understand the process of religious identity development based on identity formation theory from a temporal integration perspective (Syed and McLean, 2016), which represents the developmental dimension of Erikson theory.

## Methods

Using qualitative methodology, we conducted 158 interviews: 45 semistructured reflective interviews and 113 monthly expressive open interviews over 1.5 years with 20 male emerging adults aged 18–20 years in three religious *Mechina* gap-year programs in Israel.

## Results

Content analysis distinguished three components of religious identity: a conceptual component, a practical component and a collective component, which were found to be dominant in different stages of the religious identity formation process and in a different social context.

## Discussion

The findings that point to two developmental models also relate to the person-society integration perspective (Syed and McLean, 2016), which represents the contextual dimension of Erikson's theory; both the developmental and the contextual dimensions are lacking in Marcia's operationalization of Erikson's theory. These findings also shed light on the necessity to relate all these components in the religious identity domain and have the potential for an integrative view of identity formation, as we discuss below.

## Introduction

Identity is a powerful construct (Vignoles, Schwartz and Luyckx, 2011). It guides life paths and decisions (Kroger, 2007; Schwartz, 2005) and, as a result, relates to numerous important areas of social science research; hence, it is not surprising that identity is one of the most commonly studied constructs in the social sciences (Côté, 2006), becoming one of the fastest-growing areas in the field of social sciences (Vignoles et al., 2011). Research on identity domains is the most important development in the identity research literature (Bell, 2009). One of these domains—ethnic identity—is a good example of rapid growth, while religious identity research has developed slower.

In a review article from 1990, psychologist Jean Phinney examined how ethnic identity has been defined and conceptualized, its measurement indicators and consequent empirical findings. In that article, Phinney (1990) identifies two main bodies of work: conceptualization based on ego identity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980) and the social identity literature (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Phinney found that ethnic identity was not exclusively an intrapsychic developmental construct but also a process embedded in context, which leads to a sense of connection to one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999). Thus, Phinney (1992) describes ethnic identity as an individual self-conception that is derived from one's knowledge of membership in a social group with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. Therefore, the components of ethnic identity are self-identification as a group member, a sense of belonging, and ethnic behaviors and practices (Phinney, 1992). Over three decades, this conceptualization has produced thousands of studies.

Although religious identity is no less central than ethnic identity for many people across the globe, no conceptualization attempts, such as Phinney's ethnic identity conceptualization, were found. Hence, it is not surprising that there is no theoretical conceptualization, no common measure, and fewer studies about religious identity (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat, de Kock, Visser-Vogel, Cok and Barnard, 2019).

Considering the lack of research on religious identity, generally (Bell, 2008; Fulton, 1997, Peek, 2005), and religious identity development, specifically (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Maclean and Riebschleger, 2021), the aim of this study is to understand the process of religious identity development from both a reflective and an expressive viewpoint (Lichtwarck-Aschoff, Van Geert, Bosma, and Kunnen, 2008). The population researched was strictly religious students in religious prearmy gap year programs who were at the start of adulthood before they changed their life conditions, leaving their protective religious environment for the nonreligious environment of army service. This major life transition, from a protective religious environment to a new nonreligious sociocultural context, has the potential to challenge their religious identity since this context does not fit their existing identity commitments (Mitchell et al., 2020; Syed, 2017). This study has the potential to provide a basis for a theoretical conceptualization of religious identity development.

## **Identity Formation**

Erikson (1950, 1968) describes, from a psychosocial viewpoint, the development of the individual person's sense of identity. This is an ongoing process throughout an individual's life, which, according to Erikson (1950), is divided into eight stages. At the center of each stage lies a crisis or conflict that leads to one of two possible outcomes: a positive resolution will strengthen the sense of inner coherence of the self, whereas a negative resolution may lead to distress, deviance, and/or a sense of 'not fitting in'. The fifth stage, identity versus role confusion, takes place during adolescence and the transition to adulthood; adolescents undergo dramatic physical changes, strongly increased sexual urges, and the task of developing a set of skills and beliefs that will help the person to obtain a satisfying and well-paying career.

Marcia's identity status model (Marcia, 1966, 1980, 1993), which operationalized Erikson's theory, is the most useful model in identity formation research according to several researchers (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2021). According to this model, identity is a dynamic self-structure that manifests itself as one of four distinct identity statuses. Marcia described these identity statuses in terms of their position on two complementary dimensions: exploration and commitment. Marcia defined exploration as the degree to which individuals engage in a personalized search for different values, beliefs, and goals; commitment was defined as adhering to a specific set of convictions, goals, and beliefs. By crossing these dimensions, Marcia recognized four distinct identity statuses: achievement (characterized by making commitments after a period of exploration), foreclosure (characterized by making commitments without a period of prior exploration), moratorium (characterized by being in an exploratory state without settling into steady commitments yet), and diffusion (characterized by a lack of both exploration and commitment).

Marcia's model does not provide a developmental model but points to a progressive transition from diffusion toward achievement. However, several researchers point to a process based on identity statuses, which is not linear but iterative. Marcia and his colleagues developed the first model, MAMA (M=moratorium, A=achievement), which describes an iterative process with a moratorium period followed by commitment (Stephen et al., 1992). The second model, FAFA (F=foreclosure, A=achievement), suggested by Pulkkinen and Kokko (2000), describes an iterative process of different forms of commitment. The third model, MDMD (M=moratorium, D=diffusion), suggested by Côté and Schwartz (2002), describes an iterative process with a moratorium period that leads to diffusion.

## **Religious Identity Formation**

Social scientists agree that religious identity plays an important role in some people's lives (Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery and Colwell, 2006). Religion is a salient component of ideological identity; hence, it is necessary to explore religiosity in relation to identity (Markstrom-Adams and Smith, 1996). Religion provides answers to complex issues of existence and has the potential to link individual history to societal history, hence elevating feelings of importance and increasing a sense of purpose in life (Schachter and Ben Hur, 2019). The use of rites and rituals, together with faith in religion, can increase a sense of belonging (Markstrom-Adams and Smith, 1996; Layton, Hardy and Dollahite, 2012). Empirical support for the centrality of religious identity was reported by Rogow, Marcia, and Slugoski (1983), who found 85% convergence between religious identity and global identity in comparison to 59% convergence between occupation identity and global identity, and by Fisherman (2004), who found a positive and significant relationship between religious belief and global identity.

Despite the importance of religious identity, researchers over the past decades have found that there has been little research on religious identity (Bell, 2008; Fulton, 1997, Peek, 2005) and even less on the religious identity formation process (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Maclean and Riebschleger, 2021). de Bruin-Wassinkmaat and colleagues (2019) found that between 1960 and 2017, only fifteen studies dealt with the religious identity development of strictly religious adolescents, and their findings

point to the fact that there is no common clear definition of religious identity. There is a lack of common language between the findings since the theoretical perspectives of the studies are from a variety of disciplines, and even within the central theory, identity formation theory, and even within the same population (Israeli Modern Orthodox youths), there is no consistent body of knowledge due to different methodologies and measures.

In relation to religious identity development, Cohen-Malayev and colleagues (Cohen-Malayev, Assor and Kaplan, 2009) found two kinds of exploration related to the religious identity formation process, which they defined as "exploration within contextual boundaries" and "radical exploration", which are similar to the exploration styles of global identity, "in-depth exploration" and "in-breadth exploration", which were found by Luyckx and his colleagues (2006). Halevy and Gross (2019) found two novel styles of exploration in relation to the religious identity formation process: experiential exploration, trying out different behavioral religious experiences, and directed exploration, religious identity seeking directed by educators toward one well-recognized alternative. These two novel styles are embedded with exploration in breadth and exploration in depth and produce various different processes of religious identity formation.

Peek (2005) found a three-stage process of religious identity development among Muslim students in the US: during the first stage, the individual's identity is defined as "ascribed identity", which is derived from taking religion for granted as part of their everyday lives. During the second stage, the individual's religious identity becomes a "chosen identity" after a period of asking questions about religion. During the third stage, the individual's identity is defined as a "declared identity", which is derived from their collective belonging.

### **Modern-Orthodox gap year programs**

The Modern-Orthodox movement in Judaism is one stream in the Israeli population that, according to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (2014), accounts for 12.5% of the Jewish population; however, approximately 22% of the Jewish population identifies with this group (Hermann et al., 2014). This gap apparently derives mainly from the ethnic descent of this group, which sends their children to religious public schools (see Halevy and Gross, 2022).

Since religious identity formation is an aim that religious Jewish-Israeli youths set for themselves when they choose their after-school program (Rosman-Stolman, 2006), we decided to explore the religious identity formation process among students in one of these programs, religious gap year programs. This case was expected to elucidate adolescents' religious identity formation process during this period. The present longitudinal study qualitatively examined this population's dynamic religious identity formation process over a 1.5-year period with the aim of enabling the investigation of identity formation as an ongoing process (Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008), as we will show by the research method.

The Modern-Orthodox gap year programs in Israel offer an interesting context to study the religious identity formation process due to the unique case of adolescents' transition from the modern-orthodox

sociocultural context to the unfamiliar nonreligious context of the Israeli Defense Forces.

The study joins the research about this group from Eriksonian and neo-Eriksonian perspectives, which is pretty developed (e.g., Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009, 2014; Fisherman, 2004, 2016; Halevy and Gross, 2019, 2022; Schachter, 2004; Schachter and Ben Hur, 2019).

## **Current Study Design**

Erikson (Côté and Levine, 2002) and Marcia (Kroger and Marcia, 2011) expressed concern about the compatibility of quantitative methods with their theories. When summarizing prior work in the identity research field, Lichtwarck-Aschoff and colleagues (2008), who review prior work in the identity research field, found insufficient research focusing on the process of identity formation and called for further reflective and, more importantly, expressive investigation of this process. Reflective research refers to a retrospective study of the dynamics of one's past identity formation process, while expressive research refers to the current study of the dynamics of one's ongoing process. Thus, we undertook numerous interviews with each participant to provide both reflective and expressive viewpoints.

Research question:

How does the religious identity of gap year students develop from childhood to the end of the gap year program?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The *gap year programs* were established to provide an opportunity for religious graduates to prepare for a full three-year army service in which they will meet an intense, new, nonreligious world. This preparation includes courses on religious faith and the ways to cope with the religious challenges in a nonreligious army. The students' ages are 18-19, a period at the beginning of adulthood that involves significant cognitive, academic, and social changes (Lowe and Dotterer, 2018) and, as a result, is appropriate for dealing with identity (Arnett, 2011). Since the gap year program is typically an Orthodox institution, the programs used for this study are gender-segregated and only accept men. The sample comprised 20 adolescents who attended one of three Modern-Orthodox gap year programs in Israel immediately after high school.

The program lasts 10 months, with the option of an additional six months of study after deferring army service. Students could leave the program at any time to begin their army service, transfer to another program, or enter a Modern-Orthodox Jewish seminary (*yeshiva*) for more intense Torah study.

### **Data collection tools**

Two different styles of interviews were conducted: monthly expressive interviews and reflective interviews.

**Monthly expressive interviews:** As recommended by Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al. (2008), an expressive viewpoint of one's identity formation process provides insights into the dynamics of one's ongoing process. Thus, informal open interviews (5 to 45 minutes) were conducted with participants monthly during their gap year attendance. Participants were asked about what happened to them in relation to religion over the last month. The length of the interviews varied within and between participants, depending on the interviewee's responses.

**Reflective interviews:** Semistructured interviews (20 minutes to 1 hour) were conducted with students at three time intervals coinciding with the academic calendar to investigate identity formation as an ongoing process: at the start of Year 1 (REF1), at the end of Year 1 (REF2), and only for the 7 students who continued for an extra six months, at the end of the first semester of Year 2 (REF3). The interviews were conducted using guiding questions such as the following: From your viewpoint, what does it mean to be religious? What affected your religious development? Which model of a religious person do your parents represent? Which model of a religious person did your school represent? Which model of a religious person did the gap year program represent (asked at REF2 and REF3 only)? These questions enabled comparisons between the time intervals and between participants. As recommended by Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al. (2008), the reflective viewpoint concerning one's identity formation process gives insight into the process in which participants engaged earlier.

These two kinds of interviews will provide Syed and McLean's (2016) second identity integration dimension, temporal integration, which describes identity continuity over time and the connections between one's past, present, and future selves.

## **Procedure**

The research was carried out between September 2009 and February 2011. Approval for the study was obtained from the School of Education ethics committee at XXX University. Of the sixteen Modern-Orthodox *gap year programs* in Israel, we selected three mainstream programs after consultation with several rabbis who are very familiar with this field. Eight randomly selected students per program were chosen to participate, and no one refused. After two months, four students left the gap year programs; hence, we disregarded their interviews since they did not enable longitudinal research and they did not represent a different voice. Twenty students remained. During the second semester, two students partially left the B program; we included their interviews. Only seven students finished the extra semester in the second year.

Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to explore identity formation processes. They received no incentives to participate. Confidentiality was discussed, and participants were assured in particular that their interviews would not be shared with the rabbis or other gap year staff. All participants gave consent for material from their interviews to be published under pseudonyms.

Interviews were held monthly at each program during the 1.5-year research period, sampling all participants who were present in the program on the interview days. We collected 158 interviews with the 20 participants: 45 semistructured reflective interviews (two or three each participant), 20-60 minutes each (mean=40 minutes), 113 monthly expressive open interviews (between three to nine each participant), and 5-60 minutes each (mean=20 minutes). Since students have the freedom to come and go at any time, which is part of the ideology of the gap year program, there were fewer monthly expressive open interviews than was expected.

Interviews were conducted in Hebrew and translated by the first author with the help of a native English language speaker. We tried to reflect the authentic meaning of the interviewees as well as their unique slang.

## **Data Analysis**

Content analysis was conducted separately by the first author, a Modern-Orthodox man, who conducted all the interviews as part of his doctoral dissertation, and the second author, a Modern-Orthodox woman with expertise in qualitative research analysis, and was discussed by the authors three times during the process of data analysis. Content analysis was based on Strauss and Corbin (1994) and Gross (1995). After reading all the transcribed interviews twice chronologically, we started the data analysis, which included four steps: 1. Identification of keywords (e.g., questions, doubts, answers, belief, practice, Shabbat, prayer, define, belonging, society), 2. Categorization into three main categories (i.e., conceptual, practice, collective), 3. Connections between categories, and 4. Creation of a theoretical model (Gross, 1995).

## **Findings**

Although all the participants came from religious families, not all of them came from the same religious background. Of the 20 participants, 17 were born into the same religious group, and within this group, these participants reported a wide range of religiosity among their families. The other three participants grew up in traditional<sup>[1]</sup> families. Nevertheless, religious identity was common to all the participants since they related to this identity throughout the interviews in relation to the past, present, and future.

The findings point to three categories, which we named identity components:

- a. Conceptual component – relates to religious beliefs and ideologies such as the existence of God or which religious beliefs are correct.
- b. Practical component – relates to religious practices, such as praying.
- c. Collective component – relates to belonging and affiliation to a religious group.

The findings revealed that these three components are also stages within the religious identity formation process since each of these components appeared at different stages of the participants' identity

formation process as dominant. The order of these stages differed across participants and/or contexts, as will be shown. We recognized two main models: Model A (Figure 1) refers to participants who come from Modern-Orthodox families (n=17), and Model B (Figure 2) refers to participants who come from other families (n=3), which apparently represents the gap of 9.5% between people who belong to the Modern-Orthodox group and people who identify partially with this group.

Model A: participants from Modern-Orthodox families

### **Stage 1: Collective component (approximately until middle school age). Religiosity is taken for granted.**

The common denominator of the majority of the participants is belonging to the same religious collective; hence, they underwent similar socialization at home, especially at religious schools and at religious youth groups, as expressed by Erez and Moshe:

*Erez: I went to religious institutions since my early childhood, and I have two brothers who also went to religious institutions. Until middle school I had no questions about religion because it was not something... I use to take religion for granted.*

This stage is characterized by seeing oneself as one of a group, "I'm like everyone else", seen in Erez's description in relation to his two big brothers. Moshe provides a similar description in relation to his friends.

*Moshe: Oh, regular religious education (he is surprised by the question), I mean, I learnt in a religious-state school, then I went to Yeshiva high school where all of my friends went.*

The collective component relates to the sense of belonging to a religious group or community. For participants who grew up in religious families, were educated in religious schools, and belonged to the same religious group, religion was taken for granted during childhood. In Marcia's terms, it is a foreclosure; however, none of this model's participants spoke about beliefs and practices in this age period. It is reasonable to say that at these ages, if they say that they believe in religious beliefs or do religious practices, it is because of the collective component as Erez will express in stage 2.

### **Stage 2: Practical component (approximately between middle school and high school age) – changes in relation to religious practices.**

Religion is taken for granted until middle school, and religious practices exist as a result of social expectations, habits, or external forcing. However, during adolescence, changes in religious behavior and practices (practical component) start to appear. Erez's story exemplifies the centrality of this component among most of the participants. Erez discusses the high school period, which is characterized by changes in religious practice. In the beginning, the change was expressed by an increase in religious practices, but after a few months, these religious practices ceased.

*Erez: in middle school what I did... I continued to put on Phylacteries since my Bar Mitzvah until class 10, but everything that I did was forced upon me. I did not do anything because I felt it was lacking in my life, but because society told me and expected me to do it. At the start of class 10 in the Yeshiva high school, at the time of the days of repentance after a period of partying, girlfriends, etc., I felt a need to do something deeper, I wore fringes (a Jewish ritual: four-cornered garment to which fringes are attached), something that previously I hadn't done, I wore my fringes so that people could see, it was important for me to show people how much I keep... it was quite a short period, there was no dramatic reason which made me return to who I was before, I mean without the external practice: without prayers, without blessing before and after a meal...it continued like that until the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Maybe I can say I had some religious crisis because I stopped wearing head covering...but I did not define myself as "secular". I felt comfortable to be in a secular society...just not to define myself as "religious", not to be committed...even though, consciously, I always knew that I want to be a religious person, it was just a period.*

In this case, Erez does not change everyday practices as a result of a cognitive process that addresses conceptual questions. At this stage, he does not want to be committed to religious practices, even though he knows that he wants to be a religious man in the future. The practical component here was not a product of commitment to religious values and faith—it was the main issue. Erez decided to go to the gap year program when he had already decided that he wanted to be religious, but he does not know how religious he wants to be or what form that might take. Erez does not want to be religious without thinking but to make decisions after thorough exploration.

*Erez: I do not know to say who I want to be like because this is exactly the reason, I came to the gap year program, to investigate who I want to be. Maybe I want to be someone different from my parents and different from the Yeshiva Rabbies and different from all the people I have met to date. I will be happy to find that all I'm doing on the way (religious practices) is not "red cow" (Jewish practice from the Torah which is the extreme example of practice which has no clear reason) but things that I learnt about them and decided to do or not to do them...however this model I want to investigate and build by myself.*

However, unlike the classical definition of exploration (a personalized search for different values, beliefs, and goals), which relates to the conceptual component, Erez looks to investigate the practical component: for example, why and how much to keep religious practices.

### **Stage 3: Conceptual component (approximately between high school and the gap year period) – dealing with religious beliefs.**

The conceptual component relates in this study to questions and doubts about religious beliefs, for example, the question about the existence of God. Oren grew up in a mixed settlement of Modern-Orthodox and secular Jews, founded on the ideology of a mixed society. As opposed to most of the participants, during high school, he started asking questions about religious faith. Oren described, in a reflective fashion, this period.

Oren: *...all of a sudden, I had thoughts about why I need it (religion), if it is good, and if I truly believe in it or if it is because of my parents' belief or the society in which I live.*

In Marcia's terms, Oren describes a transition from foreclosure status into moratorium status.

Lior grew up in a religious settlement, but according to what he said, his father is not very religious. Until the end of high school, Lior had no interest in his religious identity (similar to *carefree diffusion*, Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx and Meeus, 2008). He decided to go to the program to explore his religious identity, but during his first semester, he did not pursue this issue actively. After six months, Lior decided that he wanted to learn more and explore his religious faith. The first step that Lior took was to change classes because, in his opinion, his current Rabbi dealt with the practical component of religion, whereas he wanted to deal with the conceptual component of religion.

Interviewer: *What's happening with you in the last month?*

Lior: *I do not know. I started to think.*

Interviewer: *About what?*

Lior: *I decided to act and moved class. I did it because... I cannot connect to the lessons in my class. Today, after the class, I went to the teacher and told him: listen, I'm fed up being in this class. He asked me why. In short, I spoke with him and eventually he said that he truly thinks it is better for me to move to the other class...because he does not deal with things...painful things, that I want to know.*

Interviewer: *Like what?*

Lior: *I do not know what. Faith and things like that. You know, there are things which bother me. Come on, he is teaching me Halakha (orthodox rules of practice...what do I have to learn this Halakha for now? It is boring. There are things like, you know, why we are here? What is our purpose? Who are we? Why should we do exactly what God commands? All of these things he hardly deals with. Do you understand? And the other Rabbi, I was in a few of his classes, and he did deal with these things.*

Toward the end of the year, Lior felt that he had reached the point in which he believed in God, but now the problem was religious practices, emphasizing the idea that a commitment to the conceptual component does not necessarily lead to a commitment to the practical component.

Lior: *Listen, I believe in one God. I mean I believe in the God of the Jews. I believe that the Jewish religion is the right religion without a doubt. I can refute all the other religions. However, my problem is carrying out commandments.*

In the last interview, Lior talked about the necessity for the exploration of religious faith. In his opinion, without this component, one cannot define oneself as a religious person.

Lior: *Nobody can define himself as religious, not until he has truly gone and researched religion. A person who explores the religion, learns, and reaches the conclusion that the religion is true has to go accordingly, and he is going accordingly and that's the way he lives. This is a religious person.*

Interviewer: *Cannot he be religious because his father is religious?*

Lior: *I do not think he is a religious person. He cannot call himself religious. He cannot, it is like a person who knows to play the piano because he is sitting by the piano and his father tells him: "press here, press there". Therefore, he can play some simple tunes. It is like a person who observes the Sabbath or lays Phylacteries, and he says that he is religious. On the other hand, if he learns the theory behind, learns the musical notes, learns what every note means, learns how everything joins, and now looks at the difference between them.*

Lior's standpoint about the importance of exploration to religious identity relates to the achievement status in Marcia's model. His story raises the following questions:

Can a commitment to conceptual components following exploration without commitment to practical components be defined as an achievement? Lior expresses here a diffusion status in relation to the practical component. Is it possible to be in a diffusion status in relation to the practical component and in an achievement status in relation to the conceptual component?

Lior's story strengthens the importance of relating separately to these two kinds of commitments; however, all the stories raise the option that one can be in a different status in relation to each religious component. For example, one can be in moratorium status in the conceptual component, in diffusion in the practical component, and in foreclosure in the collective component.

Model B: participants from other families

**Stage 1: Practical-conceptual component (until gap year) – religious faith with a partial religious practice.**

During the first interview, Ran describes from a reflective perspective his childhood as a gap between his secular nuclear family and his willingness to be religious.

*Ok, I was, I come from a family that was secular at first. My parents were religious, but when they were younger, they decided to be secular, so at the start as a family we were not religious, we were secular. Since then, my parents told me that I wanted to be religious, I dragged my father to the Synagogue, and I remember that once I unplugged all the televisions in the house, and I told them that the televisions do not work, that was in order to keep the Shabbat.*

This gap was a result of his choice to be a religious child following the connection with his broad family. During his late childhood, his father became more religious; however, Ran used to be educated in a secular school until the end of high school. The conceptual component is not "on the table" in this part of the story; however, all the participants in this model expressed taking religious beliefs for granted. It is a familiar phenomenon among traditional Jews in Israel.

Ran comes to the program with the willingness to become a religious man. He describes his status in the first interview as a person without any doubt in religious beliefs; however, he does not maintain many basic religious practices.

*Interviewer: O.k., you were strong enough from home to be in secular education stream all your life, what stopped you from continuing to the army, since you are strong enough, you can cope. Why did you come to the program?*

*Ran: it's the continuation of the previous question, like, to make the move from nearly completely secular life to a religious life. Why did I not go with a kippa, then also I did not put on Phylacteries every day, I only put on special occasions, new month, or something like that. Therefore, it is something, because I was used to... I was religious, but on weekdays I did not practice religion, apart from Shabbat. So I wanted, I do not know if you can call it to get used to, but I wanted to get myself used to moving to a religious life, do you understand? I thought a year in the program will give me answers to questions that I hadn't found answers to yet and make me stronger religiously, maybe I can say will make me religious officially. Do you understand? I had always the awareness that I'm going to be religious all my life, even with everyday practices, I can say.*

Ran arrives at the program mainly to broaden religious practices but also to obtain answers to a few questions on religious faith, although these questions do not threaten his commitment to religion. In terms of Marcia's model, Ran describes a commitment to religious faith without any exploration (foreclosure); however, he is not committed yet to all religious practices even though he is motivated to commit without any exploration period. We can claim that Ran is in foreclosure status, but it is not enough for him to truly perform religious practices every day.

**Stage 2: Collective component (gap year) – "Now I'm live in a religious society, I'm a complete religious".**

As opposed to most participants, in the case of the participants who were not born into this religious group, the collective component expresses itself in a later period. Ran studied in secular high school as

opposed to the other participants who studied in religious high school. After one month in the program, in the first open interview, Ran was asked for an update.

*Ran: (there is) development, (I) start to feel belonging.*

A month later, when he was again asked for an update, Ran used the first-person plural, demonstrating affiliation with his newly acquired group, in a way that is reminiscent of social identity theory in general and the depersonalization phenomenon (Turner, 1991), specifically.

*Ran: This month we developed. We continued developing. We are seriously thinking about a second year. We started to take upon ourselves many tasks, not only to develop in the personal sense, not only in a religious sense but also in a personal sense, I mean volunteering, and not only personally, but as a group.*

Ran talks about the collective component from an expressive viewpoint, since he grew up in a secular society, and the gap year program is his first opportunity to feel affiliated with the Modern-Orthodox community. The case of Ran and the importance of a sense of belonging for him exemplifies a challenge to Marcia's theory, which did not relate to the collective component of identity formation as a separate component of religious identity. We found Marcia's model less useful for analyzing this stage of the identity formation process.

Ran said that he started recently to keep religious practices that he did not keep previously. An attempt to understand the reason for his decision to keep these religious practices led him to talk about both conceptual and collective components.

*Ran:...I start to understand more. I mean, I did not use to read many books about religion, I told you, I was not so religious...now I'm reading much more books, going to lessons more, and understanding more*

*Interviewer: What is the purpose of reading these books?*

*Ran: to become wise, (smiling). I think so. If you read a book you want to, I mean I'm more, I'm...*

*Interviewer: Give me an example of which books you...*

*Ran: Tora books, lessons, everything. There is nothing to do, the society, after all, has influence. There is nothing to do with that. I mean until now I used to live in a secular society, I was, let us say, a half secular a half religious. Now I'm live in a religious society, I'm a completely religious.*

The conceptual component did not change Ran's religious identity; it was the collective component that changed him from "half secular half religious" to "completely religious". These findings suggest that the collective component could be key during childhood as described by Erez and Moshe, as well as during emerging adulthood as described by Ran. It is possible that, in light of Syed and McLean's (2016) fourth identity integration dimension, person-society integration, which describes the degree to which individuals' identities are consistent with their sociocultural context, the collective component will be

central again in the continued life of Erez and Moshe when they will think, in light of their commitments to the other two components, to which religious groups they want to commit.

This finding points to the understanding that the collective component could appear as a first stage in the religious identity formation process, which is called "ascribed identity" (Peek, 2005) from the perspective of identity theory (Stryker, 1980) or "assigned identity" (Grotevant, 1992), which is rooted in the Eriksonian perspective. However, the collective component could appear as a developmental stage, following a period of religious exploration, which Peek (2005) called "declared identity" in relation to Muslim students in the United States of America after 11/9, or as a complementary stage, as Ran expresses.

[1] In this context, as the participants described their families, traditional means less strictly religious and a lack of a sense of belonging to the Modern Orthodox stream.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the religious identity formation process of students in gap year programs considering the lack of religious identity development research (Bell, 2008; de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; Fulton, 1997; Lopez et al., 2011; Peek, 2005). The findings point to three religious identity components: conceptual, practical, and collective.

This finding looks similar to Visser-Vogel (2015), who found three important themes in a study of Muslim adolescents in the Netherlands: acquiring knowledge (conceptual component), participating in and being involved with their own communities (collective component), and following the commandments of Allah (practical component). These components also appear by de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. (2021) in the context of religious identity commitment.

Like several previous researchers, we found it difficult to explain our findings from one of the theoretical perspectives relating to identify. Peek's findings could not be explained by her base theory, identity theory (Stryker, 1980). She uses Erikson's (1968) identity formation theory to explain the second stage and Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory to explain the third stage. However, she does not discuss the practical component separately, even though it does play a role in Islam, for example, in food restrictions and prayers. Similarly, in a quantitative study, Lopez et al. (2011) found that at different stages of the identity formation process, their subjects expressed different components as dominant: they found stability in religious identity, which they defined as the individual's knowledge that they belong to a religious community (collective component) but a decline in religious participation (practical component). One of their explanations, based on Erikson's theory, was that the researchers stated that the decline of religious participation is that, at that age, participants start to explore abstract concepts (conceptual component).

As shown, the findings indicate that people at different stages of the identity formation process expressed different components as dominant. For example, the majority of participants expressed that the collective component was dominant during elementary school: the individual is religious because

they are part of a religious group or community. During high school, the practical component was seen to be dominant: there are changes within religious practices, and during the gap year period, the conceptual component was expressed as dominant: the individual asks questions about religious beliefs. We also found that people from different sociocultural backgrounds each expressed different components as the dominant component. For example, Ran, who came from a different background (traditional family, secular high school), expressed the collective component as dominant during the gap year period. These three identity components have not appeared in our theoretical framework as separate components. Marcia's model does not relate separately to these components; the exploration and commitment dimensions are usually interpreted in relation to values, beliefs, and goals, and with connection to religious identity, it is referred to as beliefs and practices as a single unit (e.g., Bell, 2009: 121). The finding that people from different sociocultural backgrounds each expressed different components as the dominant component in different stages of their religious identity formation process points to the collective component perhaps lacking in Marcia's model, and this point may strengthen the criticism that Marcia's model ignores the contextual dimension of Erikson's theory (e.g., Côté and Levine, 2002; Kerpelman and Pittman, 2018, Schachter, 2005). This component was found to be dominant by Kira and Shuwiekh (2021) in the context of Christians in Egypt and by Kira and colleagues (Kira et al., 2011) in the context of Palestinian adolescents, pointing to the centrality of this component in other religions as well.

In addition, these three components look similar to the three ethnic identity components (Phinney, 1990, 1992). The first, derived from Eriksonian and neo-Eriksonian perspectives, relates to the cognitive aspect of ethnic identity: knowledge about the ethnic group's history, tradition, and customs; the understanding of the meaning of this knowledge; and the existence of a clear consciousness of this knowledge and meaning after exploration (parallel to the conceptual component). The second, derived from Tajfel and Turner's theory, relates to the sense of belonging to the ethnic group (parallel to the collective component). The third component relates to the behavioral aspect of ethnic identity: special food, music, and customs (practical component).

The fact that the same three components are relevant to religious identity and ethnic identity points to the possibility that the three identity components have the potential to integrate between identity theories or at least offer a common language for researchers from a variety of disciplines.

Finally, our findings indicate the option that Marcia's model should relate separately to the three components such that one will be in a different status in relation to each component. A new measure, based on Bell's (2009) measure, could check this option in wide sociocultural contexts and will confirm or refute this option.

## **Limitations and recommendations**

This research retrospectively examined students' narratives relating to childhood and adolescence up to the end of the gap year program at approximately 20 years of age. Our research was carried out using

qualitative methodology on a small sample of a very specific population. This is a good reason for skepticism about the two models of religious identity formation found in this study. However, in contrast to the identity status literature, which seeks evidence for a predictable process through Marcia's statuses (see Meeus, 2018), our findings propose two stage-based models with a dominant component in each step and propose a complicated integrative theory that denies a uniform process; these three components could likely produce other models in different sociocultural contexts (see also Schachter, 2004).

Due to the nature of qualitative methodology, which does not enable us to generalize the findings to a wide population, to establish these findings, future research should be carried out on a larger sample and a wider population. For example, based on the integrative theory of self-identity and identity stressors and traumas (Kira, 2019), it will be interesting to explore the development of religious identity among people who experience trauma, such as sexual assault, within their religious community.

Our findings point to the need to quantitatively measure the status of religious identity separately for each of the three components to obtain a better picture of the religious identity of individuals. The classic measure of Marcia's model (Adams, 1999) and its extension of the religious part by Bell (2009) does not provide such a picture. It is possible to confirm or refute this thesis by expanding Bell's questionnaire to measure each component of Marcia's model's four statuses separately: moderate correlations between each status in the three components, differences between these correlations among different religious communities, and differences between these correlations in various ages could confirm this thesis.

## Declarations

1. **Conflicts of interest** - The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.
2. **Consent to participate** - Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.
3. **Data availability statement** - The data that support the findings of this study are available in Hebrew from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## Figures



Figure 1

Model A – students from Modern-Orthodox homes



Figure 2

Model B – students from traditional homes