Toward an Integrative Theory of Identity Formation; Three Components of the Religious Identity Formation Process

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Abstract

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 & McLean, 2016) which represents the developmental dimension of Erik Erikson's theory. 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, age 18–20 years, in three religious *Mechina* gap year programs in Israel. 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 different social contexts. The findings, which point to two developmental models, relate also to the person-society integration perspective (Syed & McLean, 2016), which represents the contextual dimension of Erikson's theory; both the developmental and the contextual dimensions are lacking in James 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.

Keywords Religious identity · Identity formation · Identity development · Identity components · Modern Orthodox · Gap year

Identity is a powerful construct (Vignoles et al., 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 (Côté, 2006) and fastest-growing areas of research (Vignoles et al., 2011) in social science. Recent findings on identity domains are the most important

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development in identity research literature (Bell, 2009). One of these domains, ethnic identity, is a good example of rapid growth, while religious identity research has developed more slowly.

In her 1990 review, psychologist Jean Phinney examined how ethnic identity has been defined and conceptualized, along with its measurement indicators and consequent empirical findings. The author identified two main bodies of work: conceptualization based on ego identity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980) and social identity literature (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Phinney further found that ethnic identity is not exclusively an intrapsychic developmental construct but is also a process embedded in context, which leads to a sense of connection to one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999). Phinney (1992) described ethnic identity as an individual self-conception derived from one's knowledge of membership in a social group along 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 been the foundation for 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, have been found. Hence, it is not surprising that there is no theoretical conceptualization, no common measure, and few studies on religious identity (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019).

Considering the lack of research on religious identity generally (Bell, 2008; Fulton, 1997; Peek, 2005) and on religious identity development specifically (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; MacLean & 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 et al., 2008). The population researched comprised highly religious students in government-supported Israeli religious pre-army gap year programs. These students are typically at the start of adulthood before joining the program, when they leave their protective religious environment for the nonreligious environment of military 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).

Identity formation

Erik Erikson (1950, 1968) described the development of the individual's sense of identity from a psychosocial viewpoint. This is an ongoing process throughout an individual's life, which, according to Erikson (1950), can be divided into eight stages. At the core of each stage lies a crisis or conflict that leads to one of two possible outcomes: a positive resolution that will strengthen the sense of inner coherence of the self or a negative resolution that will 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, have strongly increased sexual urges, and face the task of developing a set of skills and beliefs that will help them to obtain a satisfying and well-paying career.

James Marcia's identity status model (Marcia, 1966, 1980, 1993), which operationalized Erikson's theory, is the most commonly used model in identity formation research (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2013). According to Marcia's model, identity is a dynamic self-structure that manifests itself as one of four distinct identity statuses. Marcia (1993) described these identity statuses in terms of their position on two complementary dimensions: exploration and commitment. The author defined exploration as the degree to which individuals engage in a personalized search for different values, beliefs, and goals, and he defined commitment as adhering to a specific set of convictions, goals, and beliefs. By crossing these dimensions, Marcia's model 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).

While this was not a developmental model, it pointed to a progressive transition from diffusion toward achievement. However, several researchers pointed to a process based on identity statuses which is not linear but iterative. Marcia and colleagues (Stephen et al., 1992) developed the first model, MAMA (M = moratorium, A = achievement), which described an iterative process with a moratorium period followed by commitment. The second model, FAFA (F = foreclosure, A = achievement), suggested by Pulkkinen and Kokko (2000), described an iterative process of different forms of commitment. The third model, MDMD (M = moratorium, D = diffusion), suggested by Côté and Schwartz (2002), described 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 et al., 2006). Religion is a salient component of ideological identity; hence, it is necessary to explore religiosity in relation to identity (Markstrom-Adams & Smith, 1996). Religion also 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 & Ben Hur, 2019). The use of rites and rituals, together with religious faith, can increase a sense of belonging (Layton et al., 2012; Markstrom-Adams & Smith, 1996). Empirical support for the centrality of religious identity was reported by Rogow and colleagues (1983), who found 85% convergence between religious identity and global identity compared 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, little research has been published on the subject (Bell, 2008; Fulton, 1997; Peek, 2005) and even less on the religious identity formation process (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019; MacLean & Riebschleger, 2021). de Bruin-Wassinkmaat and colleagues (2019) found that, between 1960 and 2017, only 15 studies investigated 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 existing findings since the theoretical perspectives of the studies were published in a variety of disciplines. Even within the central theory of identity formation theory or within the

same population (e.g., Israeli Modern Orthodox youths), there is no consistent body of knowledge due to varying methodologies and measures.

In relation to religious identity development, Cohen-Malayev and colleagues (2009) identified two categories of exploration related to the religious identity formation process, which they defined as "exploration within contextual boundaries" and "radical exploration," similar to the exploration styles of global identity, "in-depth exploration" and "in-breadth exploration," found by Luyckx and colleagues (2006). Halevy and Gross (2019) found two novel styles of exploration in relation to the religious identity formation process: experiential exploration, or trying out different behavioral religious experiences, and directed exploration, or 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 United States. 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

According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (2014), Israel's Modern Orthodox movement in Judaism accounts for 12.5% of the country's Jewish population; however, approximately 22% of the Jewish population identifies with this group (Hermann et al., 2014). This difference seems to be derived mainly from the ethnic descent of this group, which sends their children to religious public schools (Halevy & Gross, 2022).

Modern Orthodox gap year programs in Israel offer a new context for studying 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.

Since religious identity formation is one goal that religious Jewish-Israeli youths can set for themselves when they choose their gap year program (Rosman-Stolman, 2006), we decided to explore the religious identity formation process among students in one of these programs, context of religious gap year programs. We expected this case 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 18 months to investigate the ongoing process of identity formation (Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008).

This study aligns with similar research from Eriksonian and neo-Eriksonian perspectives, which is already well developed (e.g., Cohen-Malayev et al., 2009, 2014; Fisherman, 2004, 2016; Halevy & Gross, 2019, 2022; Schachter, 2004; Schachter & Ben Hur, 2019).

Study design

Erikson (Côté & Levine, 2002) and Marcia (Kroger & 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) review of existing findings in identity research revealed a lack of novel literature 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 to answer the following research question:

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

Method

Participants

The Israeli gap year programs were established to provide an opportunity for strictly religious graduates to prepare for their three-year military service in which they will meet an intense, new, nonreligious world. This preparation includes courses on religious faith and ways to cope with the religious challenges in a nonreligious army. Students' ages are typically 18 to 19 years, i.e., the beginning of adulthood and a time that involves significant cognitive, academic, and social changes (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018), which as a result is appropriate for dealing with identity (Arnett, 2011). Since the gap year program is an Orthodox institution, the programs used for this study are gender segregated and only accept males. Hence, our sample comprised 20 male 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 can exit 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 scripture study.

Data collection

Two different styles of interviews were conducted: monthly expressive interviews and reflective interviews. These two kinds of interviews address 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.

Monthly expressive interviews

According to 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, monthly informal open interviews (5–45 min) were conducted with gap year participants.

Participants were asked about changes in their religion since the last interview. Interview length varied within and between participants, depending on the interviewees' responses.

Reflective interviews

Semistructured interviews (20–60 min) were conducted with participants at three time points 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 (for the seven 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 time intervals and 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 one had engaged earlier.

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 of Bar-Ilan University. Of the 16 Modern Orthodox gap year programs in Israel, we selected three mainstream programs after consultation with several rabbis familiar with this field. Eight randomly selected students per program were offered the opportunity to participate, and all accepted. After two months, four students left their gap year program; hence, we disregarded their interviews since they did not enable longitudinal research. Thus, 20 students remained. During the second semester, two students switched from full-time to part-time attendance; 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 that their interviews would not be shared with rabbis or other gap year staff. All participants gave consent for the material from their interviews to be published under pseudonyms.

Interviews were held monthly at each program during the 18-month research period, sampling all participants who were present in the program on the interview days. Overall, we collected 158 interviews from 20 participants: 45 semistructured reflective interviews (two to three per participant), 20–60 min each ($M = 40$ min), and 113 monthly expressive open interviews (three to nine per participant), 5–60 min each ($M = 20$ min). Since students had 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 expected.

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

Fig. 1 Model A – students from modern orthodox homes

Data analysis

Content analysis was completed solely by the first author, who also conducted all interviews as part of his doctoral dissertation. The first author then discussed the findings three times during the process of data analysis with the second author, who has extensive expertise in qualitative research analysis. Content analysis was inspired by Strauss and Corbin (1994) and Gross (1995). After reading all transcribed interviews twice chronologically, we started the four-step data analysis according to Gross (1995): (1) identifying keywords (e.g., questions, doubts, answers, belief, practice, Shabbat, prayer, define, belonging, society), (2) assigning content to one of the three main categories (i.e., conceptual, practice, collective), (3) revealing connections between categories, and (4) building a theoretical model.

Results

Although all participants came from religious families, not all shared the same religious background. Of the 20 participants, 17 were born into the same religious group and reported a wide range of religiosity among their families. The remaining 3 participants grew up in traditional[1] families. Nevertheless, religious identity was common to all participants since they related to this identity throughout the interviews when discussing the past, present, and future. Our findings pointed to three categories, which we termed identity components:

1. the conceptual component, which relates to religious beliefs and ideologies, such as the existence of God or which religious beliefs are correct;
2. the practical component, which relates to religious practices such as praying and observation of the Sabbath; and
3. the collective component, which relates to belonging to and affiliation with 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 dominant at different stages of the participants' identity formation process. The order of these stages differed across participants and/or contexts, as will be shown. We recognized two main models: Model A (Fig. 1) refers to participants who come from Modern Orthodox families ($n = 17$), and Model B (Fig. 2) refers to participants who come from other families ($n = 3$), which represents the previously mentioned gap of 9.5 percentage points between people who belong to the Modern Orthodox group and people who identify partially with this group.

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

Fig. 2 Model B – students from traditional homes
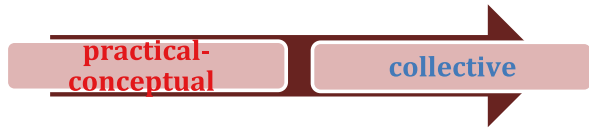
Model A, stage 1: collective component (up to middle school age) – religiosity is taken for granted

The common denominator of the majority of participants was their belonging to the same religious collective. Hence, they underwent similar socialization at home, at religious schools, and at religious youth groups, as expressed by participants Erez and Moshe:

> 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 used to take religion for granted.

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

> Oh, regular religious education [where did you learn]. I mean, I learned 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, this is a foreclosure; however, none of this model's participants spoke about their religious beliefs or practices in this age period. It is reasonable to assume that at this age, if they say they believe in religious beliefs or participate in religious practices, it is because of the collective component, as Erez will express in Stage 2.

Model A, stage 2: practical component (middle school to 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 for most of the participants. Erez discussed 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.

> In middle school, what I did . . . I continued to put on phylacteries since my bar mitzvah until grade 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 grade 10 in the yeshiva high school, at the time of the days

of repentance after a period of partying, girlfriends, and so on, I felt a need to do something deeper, I wore fringes [a Jewish 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. . . . [I]t continued like that until the 12th 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 being in a secular society . . . just not defining myself as "religious," not being committed . . . even though, consciously, I always knew that I want to be a religious person, it was just a period.

In this case, Erez did not change everyday practices as a result of a cognitive process that addressed conceptual questions. At this stage, he did not want to be committed to religious practices, even though he knew that he wanted to be religious 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 join the gap year program after he had decided that he wanted to be religious, but he did not know how religious he wanted to be or what form it might take. Erez did not want to be religious in thoughtless way but wanted to make decisions after thorough exploration:

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 rabbis 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 [i.e., religious practices] is not "red cow" [a Jewish practice from the Torah which is an extreme example of a practice that has no clear reason] but things that I learnt about and decided to do or not to do them . . . however, this model I want to investigate and build by myself.

Unlike the classical definition of exploration (a personalized search for different values, beliefs, and goals), which relates to the conceptual component, Erez looked to investigate the practical component, e.g., why and how much to keep religious practices.

Model A, stage 3: conceptual component (high school age to gap year period) – dealing with religious beliefs

The conceptual component in this study relates to questions and doubts about religious beliefs, for example, questioning 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. Unlike most other participants, during high school he started asking questions about religious faith: "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 is describing a transition from foreclosure status into moratorium status.

Lior grew up in a religious settlement, but based on what he said, his father was not very religious. Until the end of high school, Lior had no interest in his religious identity (similar to *carefree diffusion*; see Crocetti et al., 2008). He decided to join the gap year 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 was dealing 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 changed classes. 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 [the] commandments.

In the final 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 [it], learns the musical notes, learns what every note means, learns how everything joins, and now looks at the difference between them.

Lior's view on the importance of exploration to religious identity relates to the achievement status in Marcia's model. His story raised 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 diffusion status in relation to the practical component and in 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 possibility 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, stage 1: practical-conceptual component (until gap year) – religious faith with partial religious practice

During the first interview, Ran described 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 were not working, that was in order to keep the Shabbat.

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

Ran joined the program with the willingness to become religious. He described his position in the first interview as a person without any doubts in terms of his religious beliefs; however, he did not maintain many basic religious practices.

> Interviewer: OK, you were strong enough from home to be in the 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 [gap year] 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 [it] on [for] special occasions, a 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 would give me answers to questions that I hadn't found answers to yet and make me stronger religiously, maybe I can say would make me religious officially. Do you understand? I always had the awareness that I was going to be religious all my life, even with everyday practices, I can say that.

Ran joined the program mainly to broaden his religious practices but also to obtain answers to a few questions on religious faith, although these questions did not threaten his commitment to religion. In terms of Marcia's model, Ran described a commitment to

religious faith without any exploration (foreclosure); however, he was not committed yet to all religious practices even though he was motivated to commit without any exploration period. We claim that Ran was in foreclosure status, which was not enough for him to truly perform religious practices every day.

Model B, stage 2: collective component (during the gap year)

As opposed to most participants, in the case of those participants who were not born into the modern orthodox group, the collective component expresses itself in a later period. Ran went to a secular high school, unlike the other participants, who all went to a religious high school. After one month in the program, in the first open interview, Ran was asked for an update, and he responded, "[There is a] development, [I'm] starting to feel [like I] belong."

A month later, 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) in particular.

> 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 talked about the collective component from an expressive viewpoint since he grew up in a secular society and the gap year program was 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 exemplified a challenge to Marcia's theory because his case 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 stated that he had recently started to keep religious practices that he had not kept 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 many 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 books you are reading.
> Ran: Torah 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–half religious. Now I live in a religious society, I'm 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 lives of Erez and Moshe when they will think about, in light of their commitments to the other two components, which religious group they want to commit to.

This finding pointed to the understanding that the collective component could appear as a first stage in the religious identity formation process, which Peek (2005) called "ascribed identity" 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) termed "declared identity" in relation to Muslim students in the United States after 9/11, or as a complementary stage, as Ran expressed.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the religious identity formation process of students in gap year programs in the context of 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 appears similar to the work of 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 in a study 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 based on any of the theoretical perspectives relating to identify. Peek's (2005) findings could not be explained by her base theory, identity theory (Stryker, 1980). She used 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 relation to 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 belonged 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 decline of religious participation at that age is due to participants starting to explore abstract concepts (conceptual component).

In an attempt to find a common definition of religious identity, our review of the literature reveals that there is no agreement between the disciplines; for the social identity theory school and the identity theory school, religious identity is defined in terms of the collective component (e.g., Davis & Kiang, 2016; Lopez et al., 2011) whereas for the Eriksonian school religious identity is defined in terms of the conceptual component (e.g., Adams, 1999). We have not found any research which defines religious identity in terms of the practical component. This component appears as a separate dependent factor, religious participation, which is affected by "religious identity" but is different from the collective component (e.g., Davis & Kiang, 2016; Greenfield & Marks, 2007; Lopez et al., 2011) and

the conceptual component (e.g., Bell, 2009). This raises questions for future studies: (1) Is the practical component a necessary product of identity processes or part of the identity formation process? (2) Is this component a product of identity or is identity a product of this component?

Our 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 then because they are part of a religious group or community. During high school, the practical component was seen to be dominant; the person makes changes in their religious practices. During the gap year, the conceptual component was dominant; the individual asks questions about religious beliefs. We also found that people from different sociocultural backgrounds expressed different components as the dominant component. For example, Ran, who came from a different background (traditional family, secular high school) than the others, expressed the collective component as dominant during the gap year. These three identity components did not appear in our theoretical framework as separate components. Marcia's model did not relate separately to these components; the exploration and commitment dimensions were usually interpreted in relation to values, beliefs, and goals. The finding that people from different sociocultural backgrounds expressed different components as the dominant component in different stages of their religious identity formation process points to the collective component that is 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 & Levine, 2002; Kerpelman & 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 seem 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 of the ethnic group's history, tradition, and customs; an 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 common ground 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 wider sociocultural contexts to confirm or refute this possibility.

Limitations and recommendations

The current 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 used a 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 identified in this study. However, contrasting with 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 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 is required on a larger sample from a wider population. For example, based on the integrative theory of self-identity and identity stressors and traumas (Kira, 2019), it would be interesting to explore the development of religious identity among people who have experienced 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, EOMEIS-II (Adams, 1999), and its extension of the religious part by Bell (2009), did not provide such a picture. Bell's Religious Identity Statuses (RISt) questionnaire expanded the part of EOMEIS-II (Adams, 1999) which relates to religious identity, going from two questions for each status in EOMEIS-II to five questions for each status in RISt, and Bell validated this psychometric measure in his dissertation. It may be possible to confirm or refute the thesis of our study by expanding Bell's Religious Identity Statuses (RISt) questionnaire to measure separately each of the three components and to validate this measure using confirmatory factor analysis.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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