

**Bar-Ilan University**

**Identity Exploration Processes and Religious Exploration among Students in  
Higher Education Yeshivot**

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## Abstract

This study examines the exploration and formation processes of ego-identity and of religious identity amongst students in Religious Zionist *yeshivot gevohot* (higher education *yeshivot*). The students, in their 20's, are highly religiously committed, and therefore constitute a unique and interesting group who are in their emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). Emerging adulthood, which is defined as the years between the late teens and the late twenties, is a sensitive and important stage of life for many young people in industrialized Western countries, since this is the time when important decisions which shape young people's lives are made regarding key areas of life (e.g., relationships, education, employment) (Arnett, 2004). In light of the fact that in most of the *yeshivot gevohot*, complete openness to the investigation of ego-identity does not exist, and there may be limitations and limits to the process of religious identity exploration (Breuer, 2004), it is of interest to examine these processes among this population.

Research on the potential for tension between religious life and exposure to other lifestyles contrary to religious values is extensive. The potential for such tension has intensified in the modern and the post-modern eras (Cohen-Malayev, 2008). *Yeshiva* students affiliated with Religious Zionism, whose unique ideology is partially based upon the integration of tradition and modernity, form an interesting group for investigating ego-identity processes as well as religious identity exploration and formation. This group is unique in that *yeshiva* students are involved in investigating and analyzing religious content related to their religious identity, yet they are characterized as extremely committed due to foreclosed religious identity characteristics (Breuer, 2004). Friedman (2004) believes that during recent years, Religious Zionism, together with its affiliated *yeshivot*, has undergone changes and trends vis-a-vis the tension between the religious and modern worlds. These changes include trends of postmodernism, particularly in an individualistic approach, which have permeated Religious Zionism, especially among young people who now allow

themselves – and even demand – a re-examination of their religious identities and choose their own values and religious practices. It would seem that these trends affect the processes of ego- and religious identity among students in *yeshivot gevohot*.

Erikson (1987) described ego-identity as a person's sense and recognition that beyond different situations and different times, he is the same person and his self does not change. Erikson (1968) believes that religion has a potential for enhancing the development of ego-identity. Research literature has written extensively about ego-identity domains, but little has been written about the process of religious identity exploration (Layton, Hardy & Dollahite, 2012). The current study focuses on examining the processes of ego-identity formation, as well as religious identity exploration processes and its implications among young adults studying in Zionist *yeshivot gevohot*.

From the point of view of psychosocial theories, the exploration process is described as a main "work" for the formation of the individual's identity (Grotevant, 1987; Marcia, 1966, 2002). The exploratory process is described in the literature as one that can be expressed in different ways and forms, including different and various investigation scopes as well as different experiences (Grotevant, 1987; Flum & Blustein, 2000; Flum & Kaplan, 2006). Grotevant (1987) defined the process of exploration as an individual's problem-solving behavior in order to produce information regarding oneself or one's environment in order to make decisions about important life choices.

In the context of identity exploration processes, Luyckx et al. (2005) have distinguished between "exploration in breadth" and "explorations in depth". "Exploration in breadth" refers to collecting information about several alternatives on the way to making decisions. In contrast, "exploration in depth" refers to the collection of information regarding choices that have already been made in order to maintain and evaluate them.

In regard to religious identity exploration, based upon research conducted by Cohen-Malaye (2008), it appears that most of the religious emerging adults who chose to study in a religious framework took the form of a religious identity exploration style that is defined as "within-contextual boundaries exploration" which is characterized by closed characteristics, as opposed to general academic institutions (such as universities), where the distribution of modes of religious exploration was broader. The *yeshivot gevohot* are considered a religious framework in which yeshiva students are less exposed to secular culture, since their main occupation for many years (until military enlistment) is in religious studies, without secular studies (Baruch, 2008). It is therefore possible that students from *yeshivot gevohot* will adopt a religious identity-style approach with closed characteristics.

In view of the changes taking place in the Religious Zionist sector in general and the characteristics of its *yeshiva* students, this study had three main purposes. The first was to examine a theoretic issue regarding the processes of ego-identity formation – What are the main characteristics of the ego-identity formation processes amongst students in *yeshivot gevohot*? The second purpose of the study was to conduct a more thorough investigation of the processes of religious identity formation of this special population, while examining the characteristics of the religious exploration styles of this group and how they relate to aspects of wellbeing? Finally, the third purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between the ego-identity processes and that of religious identity among this population.

Regarding the first research question, the assumption was that due to the educational-social climate in *yeshivot gevohot*, their students would be characterized by foreclosed ego-identity status and a high religious commitment. This assumption was based on previous research describing the educational climate in *yeshivot gevohot* as highly religiously committed (Horowitz, 1996). Regarding the second research question, the assumption was that since the present research population was in a relatively closed religious framework, most of the subjects would be characterized as holding "within-

contextual boundaries" religious exploration style. Therefore, as a continuation of the first research questions and hypotheses, it was decided to examine whether there is a relationship between the process of ego-identity formation and the process of religious identity exploration.

The sample consisted of 153 students from five different National Religious *yeshivot*, between the ages of 19 and 23. This age range was chosen on the assumption that the students were in the midst of their exploration processes. It should be noted that students in *yeshivot gevohot* defer their military service, therefore the subjects had not yet been drafted into the Israeli Defense Forces.

Four questionnaires designed to test four variables (level of religiosity, religious exploration style, well-being and the dimensions of ego-identity development) were distributed to the study participants; their religious background was examined through a questionnaire on religiosity and demographic information based on a version by Cohen-Malayev (2008); religious exploration style was examined by way of a questionnaire formulated by Cohen-Malayev (2008), compiled according to nine sub-categories defined for religious exploration; well-being was examined through a Hebrew version of the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1989) translated by Cohen-Malayev (2008); dimensions of identity formation were examined through the Hebrew version (Har-Melech, 2011) of the Dimensions of Identity Development Scale questionnaire (DIDS) (Luyckx et al., 2008).

Findings indicated that *yeshiva* students are characterized as searching for ego-identity. It was found that they were characterized with low commitment and identification with their commitments, low ruminative exploration, and high exploration-in-depth. Thereof, examination of development of ego-identity profiles found that the participants were characterized as holding a moratorium identity status, reflecting their search for identity despite the serious religious commitment among all *yeshiva* students. Thus, in spite of the relatively closed *yeshiva* way of life vis-a-vis

lack of exposure to study content and other lifestyles that differ from theirs, it transpires that the students undergo a significant process of ego-identity exploration.

Likewise, findings show that yeshiva students' exploration of their religious identity has foreclosed characteristics. A more focalized examination showed that the participants were differentiated by four methods of dealing with religious issues and exploration: within contextual boundaries exploration, revisionist exploration, radical exploration, and lack of exploration. It was also found that the majority of the participants explore within their own frameworks. Likewise, our assumption that it would be possible to distinguish between the main types of exploration that lead to different levels of excellence were refuted. In the context of the third research question, there was no difference between the style of religious enquiry and the status of ego-identity.

The findings pertaining to the three research goals raise two main issues which will be discussed: the first issue, which is a basic educational one, is regarding the characterization of ego-identity and religious identity process amongst the students in *yeshivot gevohot* who study in a unique educational climate. The second issue, which is basic theoretical issue, wishes to examine the relationship between the religious dimension (a specific dimension) identity processes and the more general ego-identity processes.

This research shows that the characterization of the processes of ego-identity of the students is contrary to what was expected, and that they undergo a process of examination and exploration of their future lifestyles. It can be said that despite the high religious commitment among this population, there is a significant process of ego-identity exploration. The findings show that the yeshiva students were characterized as holding low commitment as well as low identification with commitment, low ruminative exploration, as well as high in-depth and in-breath exploration. In addition, it was found that contrary to expectations, the main identity status held by Yeshiva students is moratorium profile, which is characterized by high

ego-identity exploration and low commitment. In other words, *yeshiva gevoha* students are in a deep process of exploring their ego-identity. We therefore claim that despite religious commitment their process of exploring their ego identity among the subjects stems from several factors: their ages - reflecting a clear stage of going out to adult life; an ideological-educational regarding the working-world that they will enter after graduating their studies in the yeshiva, and the social effects of the process of their entrance to the working world which have gathered momentum in recent years (Spiegel, 2011).

Likewise, our findings show introversion in the religious identity process among the Religious Zionist *yeshiva* students. It can be argued this religious introversion stems from a number of factors: social and cultural influences, special reward, and the process of choosing a *yeshiva* education. It is also possible that the need for an identity process hand in hand with religious identity having to be in harmony with other dimensions of one's personality allows for a more closed and comfortable type of identity.

The findings show that there exists a lack of dependence between the religious exploration process and the ego-identity process among higher *yeshiva* students. It is possible that this lack of dependence stems from two main causes: the subjects' stage in life, their "emerging adulthood", and the pull between strong religious obligation and integration into modern-day life in the modern world.