

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**Parental Identity Exploration Processes following the
Experience of their Children who 'Made T'shuva'**

Hagai Weiss

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Abstract

This study attempts to describe the experience of parents whose adult children have become religious and how the parents cope with the process. In addition, the research seeks to make a theoretical contribution, and to clarify whether the process of the children's religious identity change can stimulate identity exploration among parents. To the extent that such an exploration develops, the work will describe this investigation and its dimensions.

The parental role is based on an intense interpersonal relationship characterized by commitment, responsibility and emotional and practical nurturing, and requires multiple investments that are not limited in time and place (Cohen, 2007). This parental devotion is expressed not only in the first years of the child's life or during adolescence and in many cases the parental role does not end even with the maturity of the children (Levitzky, 2006).

The literature on the general experience of parenting suggests that even before the birth of the offspring, the parent creates a fantasy about the child's functioning in various areas of life and yearning for his success. Failure of the child may create an experience of disappointment in the parent as a result of the gap between fantasy and reality (Licht-Weinisch, 2011). The experience in the wake of the gap between parental fantasy and concrete reality is reinforced by the uniqueness of the role of parenting involving endless investment and dedication.

The research literature dealing with the experience of parents whose children have returned to religion or who have become non-religious has not been explored in depth, but it can be learned from the existing literature that in general these significant life events can lead to conflicts in the parental experience and tensions in the relationship between those who have become religious or left their religion and those around them. Doron (2013), for example, noted the relationship between tension and crisis with parents as one of the main characteristics of the process of identity change, between

those who became religious and those who left their religion, and thus the parental preoccupation with the question: "Where did I go wrong?" The parental experience in these cases may be accompanied by many negative feelings and a sense of mourning and loss of parental fantasy (Moskowitz, 2008). Moreover, in some cases, parents may feel personally harmed by what they perceive as a rejection of the identity they aspired to impart to their children.

A broad literature deals with both the experience of people who have found their religion and those who left their religion. However, the literature that describes the experience of the parents is scant. We therefore proposed in this study to examine the parental experience in the case of new found religion in relation to a similar case - the experience of parents whose children came out of the closet (in connection with the exposure of their sexual identity).

Becoming religious, irreligious and coming out of the closet are all examples of cases in which the discovery of the new identity of the offspring may create tension for the parent as a result of the potential gap between the parental wish regarding the identity of their offspring and reality. This tension may be exacerbated by the significance that society attaches to religious conversion and to sexual identity. The literature on the subject of the parental response to a child coming out of the closet was examined under the assumption that between the two cases there are common themes, similar parental experiences and parallel coping patterns, although there are certainly unique themes for each subject.

The moment of exposure to parents is described in literature as a paramount moment in the process and the accompanying parental experience is described as extremely difficult. (Savior-Williams & Dubé, 2001), and others (eg, Salzburger, 2004; , 1998) suggest that the discovery may cause great difficulty, shock and even trauma, feelings of loss and great crisis, sense of responsibility and guilt, experience of grief, attempts by the parents to control their children's sexual orientation and parental struggles with their children's sexual orientation.

Like Lichten-Weinisch (2011) mentioned in regard to parenting fantasies and parents expectations of the child, Mizrahi (2001) also notes the parents' sexual orientation because, as a result of the gap between their views and the new reality, parents perceive themselves as failing in the role of parents, and feel guilt over the situation. The prevailing view in the study is that exposing the individual's sexual tendencies to his or her parents will lead to a crisis and family rupture that could even lead to splinters within the family. However, various studies show that many parent-child relationships remain the same or improve (eg, Grafsky, Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003).

Various studies (eg, Cohen-Malayev, 2008; Layton, Hardy & Dollahite, 2012; Vogel, 2015) demonstrate similar catalysts that have promoted identity exploration among adolescents and adults emerging from different backgrounds. Among other things, it was found that a deep sense of crisis, conflicts, times of stress or significant events in life - may speed up exploration processes, as well as exposure to new lifestyles and the need to find the middle ground and integrate the worlds. These findings reinforce the fact that external processes in the parents' living environment may be triggers for identity exploration at older ages. Grotvant (1987) also stressed the importance of the social context so that changes in the social or family environment may contribute to the advancement of the process of exploration.

Marcia (2010) believes that significant life events and crises disrupt the cognitive balance and as a result of this, identity needs to be reconstituted. The identity of the individual is an ongoing process throughout his life, and every time a new challenge arises, the Moratorium-Achievement-Moratorium-Achievement (MAMA) cycle is repeated, in the wake of which a new and higher identity structure develops. Marcia notes that most of the investigation of an adult's life will be in stages in which there are identity-challenging events.

This study will describe the experience of the parents and their ways of coping with the process of their child's religious conversion. In addition, the study will describe the

parental exploration conducted by the parents following their children's process of the exploration of their own identity and its dimensions.

For this study, 15 parents (single or in pairs) were interviewed, with one or more of their children becoming religious at their matriculation stage. The vast majority of the subjects were around their 50s and 60s and define themselves as secular or formerly secular. All participants in the study came through a wide distribution of messages on the social network (WhatsApp) or through acquaintances who brought the participants to the study.

The purpose of this study is to use a semi-structured interview (Shkedi, 2003), in order to hear the life of the interrogee on the one hand, with reference to the description of his / her child's conversion in his / her own language and words, and focus on the parents' experience of religious conversion and subsequent parental exploration.

Accordingly, the interviews opened with a general request for the interviewee to tell his life story, focusing on the story of his child's conversion process and after the open reference, additional questions were asked until the interviewer's felt satisfied with the course of the interview.

The protocols of the interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis method, while trying to understand the parenting experiences of the stories. From the repeated reading of the interviews, the main themes that emerged in the various interviews began to clear up. At first, there was a process of categorizing the data first and names were given to the various categories, so that in total 19 primary categories were created. The various data were presented in a large table and following the presentation of the data in the table, a map categorization was carried out based on the frequency and prominence of the data and the preliminary categories were grouped into 8 main categories. An in-depth study of the categories that were created raised three main themes that describe: a) the parents experience with the process and its evaluation; b) the parents' coping with the process of religious conversion of their son and daughter; and c) the exploration of identity that some of the parents made.

The results of the study show that the parental experience moves along a very wide axis between two extremes: on the one hand there is a positive experience, an experience of joy with respect to the process, acceptance and openness, an experience of joy in relation to the outcomes of the process or parts of it, and a sense that the process led to a positive and positive place. To an experience that the son / daughter are fulfilling a parental fantasy. On the other side were painful, difficult and challenging experiences, which describe fear and anxiety, great anger, lack of containment, disappointment, hurt and insult, accompanied by the deterioration of relations and many quarrels to the point of real separation between the parents and the repentant. The parental experience is usually dynamic and may change throughout the process, depending on the parents' perception of the process as normative rather than extreme, as positive and beneficial, or vice versa. However, it is important to examine whether the parents' perception of the process is the main factor that shapes the parental experience as reflected in many of the parents' stories, or whether there are other significant factors such as: the parents' approach to the process, their degree of openness and willingness to cooperate, or any other factor not mentioned.

The main practical coping of the parents, as reflected in their stories, revolves around focal points related to the new way of life created by the process, and includes the tension created around the need to adapt the way of life of the parents to the new ways of repentance, as well as the conflicts and difficulties that arise in the extended family and coping with the challenge created around the family meeting on Shabbat and holidays. A large part of the parents' coping with the process relates to the cognitive aspect. In this sense, parents deal with worldviews and actions that are not always what they would choose, and with the need to allow their offspring to form their religious identity.

The findings of the study on the investigation of the identity of the parents show that the process of forming the religious identity of the son / daughter can indeed trigger a renewed investigation of the identity of the parents. Most of the parents who

participated in the study (about two-thirds) reported a renewed exploration (at one level or another) of their religious and / or parental and / or marital identity. The identity inquiry reported by the parents in this study relates mainly to their religious identity, but also to their parental identity and in some cases even to their marital identity. These findings are consistent with the findings of other researchers in the context of the process of coming out of the closet, which describe an investigation of parents' identity as a result of their children's coming out.

The findings of the study show that there is a great similarity between the parental experience with the process of religious conversion and the parental experience with regard to the sexual orientation of the offspring, between the reactions of the parents to the process, and the similarity of the parents undergoing a long process of acceptance, although in both cases not all situations end with acceptance.

With regard to the subject of the investigation of parental identity, the findings of the study reinforce Erikson's (1968) ideas regarding the fact that the process of exploration continues throughout the person's adult life, and in particular the work is also referred to the generative processes that motivated the parents in the generativity phase as part of the attempt to instill in their children their identity and the values they believe in. The findings also reinforce Marcia's (2010) ideas that significant life events may trigger identity exploration and open circles of inquiry (MAMA), and in this sense, one can certainly include the process of the conversion of a child as a significant event in the lives of the parents, which has the potential to create parental stress and the crisis that may arise from the exploration of identity among parents.