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Classic and Novel Exploration Styles in Religious Identity Formation: Modern-Orthodox Israelis in *Mechina* Gap-Year Programs

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To examine Erik Erikson's identity exploration styles as developed by James Marcia into the identity status model and expanded by Koen Luyckx et al. (2006), the present longitudinal study traced exploration styles in the ongoing process of religious identity formation in an underinvestigated sociocultural context: Israeli Modern-Orthodox students in posthigh school religious *mechina* gap-year programs. Modern-Orthodoxy contains inherent tensions between traditional religious observance and secular modernity. Using qualitative methodology, we conducted 158 interviews over 1.5 years with 20 male adolescents (age 18–20 years) and 3 rabbis heading 3 *mechina* programs. Content analysis distinguished four styles of religious identity exploration, two previously documented styles (in-depth, in-breadth) and two novel substyles (experiential, directed). In *experiential exploration*, students "try out" different behavioral religious experiences; if those are unsatisfying and students will not abandon their current commitment, moratorium may lead to foreclosure (see the case of Tom). In *directed exploration*, students' identity seeking is directed by educators toward one well-recognized alternative; students who reject that doctrine may regress to foreclosure (see the case of Erez). These findings add nuance to identity theory, highlighting the central link between identity and sociocultural context and emphasizing a dynamic model of identity formation in this understudied population.

Keywords: identity, religious exploration, in-breadth exploration, in-depth exploration, sociocultural context

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The Modern-Orthodox movement in Judaism is one stream in the Israeli population. According to demographic assessments from the last decade this stream is between 10%–12.5% of the Jewish population in Israel. The Modern-Orthodox movement is characterized by inherent tensions between traditional religious observance and Western secular modernity (Gross, 2003; Schachter, 2002). Jews espousing this stream of Judaism see traditional Jewish law as binding but also attempt to fully participate in Western society without always subscribing to Western lifestyles and values.

Every year immediately after high-school, approximately 1,000 Israeli Modern-Orthodox male students defer their military draft and instead enter a *mechina* gap-year program affiliated with the Modern-Orthodox movement and headed by a prominent rabbi of that movement. These students are approximately 15% of the male religious state-school graduates. The *mechina* (meaning "preparation") gap-year programs aim is to prepare these religiously observant youth for their upcoming 3-year mandatory military service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Religious state-schools are separate in terms of gender and religiousness in contrast to the IDF, during which these students will encounter an unfamiliar, highly secular world. The *mechina* programs include Torah study, courses on religious faith, discussions on ethics pertaining to use of force, and preparation for coping with the challenges of a nonreligious army, such as finding time to pray. The first *mechina* program was founded in 1988 and as of 2010 there were 16 religious programs and several secular programs which were founded as a result of the success of the religious programs. Although there are variations between the 16 religious programs, five of them are mainstream (they are called "the-line *mechina* programs" because of their homogeneous ideology).

Exploration is one of two dimensions in the identity formation process, alongside commitment, within James Marcia's (1980) identity status model. Based on psychologist Erik Erikson's (1950, 1968) theoretical foundation for psychological identity research, Marcia's (1966, 1980) model proposed four identity statuses: *achievement* (commitment following exploration), *moratorium* (being in the process of exploration), *foreclosure* (commitment without previous exploration), and *diffusion* (an absence of exploration and commitment). Moratorium and achievement statuses both include the exploration dimension. Subsequent scholars emphasized the dynamic, cyclical nature of exploration and commitment—rather than a static perception of the identity formation process (Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Stephen, Fraser, & Marcia, 1992). Yet, despite the centrality of adolescents' ongoing exploration process, defined as "identity work" (Grotevant, 1987, p. 204), and the increasing interest in adolescents' identity exploration (Schwartz, 2005), there is a lack of theoretical knowledge available concerning this dynamic dimension of the identity status model (Cohen-Malayev, Assor, &

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Kaplan, 2009). An important development in exploration process research is the distinction between *in-breadth exploration* (weighing various alternative commitments before choosing one or more) and *in-depth exploration* (thinking and gathering information about a current commitment; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006).

The present study's major aim was to examine Marcia's model (developed by Luyckx et al., 2006) to the ongoing process of exploration during religious identity formation in a novel sociocultural context among Israeli Modern-Orthodox high-school graduates attending religious gap-year programs. Identity scholars have questioned whether the exploration process proposed is generalizable to non-Western sociocultural contexts (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013) or to contexts lacking multiple alternatives available to adolescents in their search for a sense of self. Despite the Eriksonian tradition claiming universality (Sneed, Schwartz, & Cross, 2006), most prior identity research has focused on Western students (Schwartz, 2005), with primarily Caucasian participants (Sneed et al., 2006).

This unique case study of adolescents' anticipation of their transition from the Modern-Orthodox sociocultural context to the unfamiliar modern-secular context of the IDF was expected to shed light on adolescents' religious identity exploration process during this period.

What Is Exploration?

Exploration is the dynamic dimension of the identity status model that appears in both moratorium and achievement statuses. The exploration process is described in the literature as an internally or externally orientated search for psychological identity (Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines, & Berman, 2001; Flum & Kaplan, 2006). Externally orientated means that one is looking for information about *available identity options* within the sociocultural context (Marcia, 1980). Internally orientated means that one is looking for information *about oneself* from sources in the sociocultural context in order to decide about an important life choice (Grotevant, 1987). The majority of research on exploration to date is based on Marcia's externally orientated viewpoint.

Within this literature, Luyckx et al.'s (2006) in-breadth exploration is identical to Marcia's definition (weighing various alternative commitments before choosing), whereas in-depth exploration is a theoretical extension that refers to thinking and gathering information about a current commitment. By integrating these two exploration types with two kinds of commitment—commitment making and identification with commitment—Luyckx et al. (2006) created a cyclical model of dual identity formation processes. During the first stage of the process, in-breadth exploration leads individuals to make a commitment, and during the second stage the individuals check their identification with that current commitment via in-depth exploration.

Likewise, Crocetti, Rubini, and Meeus (2008) recognized two different kinds of exploration: in-depth exploration similar to Luyckx et al.'s (2006) and a *reconsideration of commitment* in which one replaces one's current commitments with new ones after weighing various alternatives. Thus, Crocetti et al.'s (2008) model examines exploration that occurs after one has already made a commitment, having chosen one of the two alternatives.

The difference between these two models is that Luyckx et al. (2006) assumed that one enters the identity formation process without any commitments and therefore the outcome of the first stage is commitment making (followed by the stage of identifying with that commitment), whereas Crocetti et al. (2008) assumed that one already has made a commitment and so there is only one stage—where one either maintains or else reconsiders one's current commitment (Meeus, 2011). Another kind of exploration reported by Luyckx et al. (2008) is *ruminative* exploration, which describes an individual who is "stuck" in the exploration process.

Exploration and Religious Identity

According to Erikson, religiosity is a salient component of ideological identity that must be explored in relation to identity (Markstrom-Adams & Smith, 1996). Armet (2009) claimed that exploration is an important dynamic in the process of forming an intrinsic commitment to religion, enabling the individual to cast doubts on conventional beliefs, examine previously held dogmas, question experiences, and reject simplistic slogans. Research on the connection between religious doubts and identity statuses has been limited and inconsistent with regard to possible links between doubts and exploration processes in relation to religious identity. On the one hand, neither Hunsberger, Pratt, and Pancer's (2001) study with 939 students, aged 17–18, nor Klaassen and McDonald's (2002) study with 160 university students found a link between religious doubts and identity achievement status, with the latter concluding that such a link could not occur because religious doubts contradict commitment. On the other hand, Puffer et al.'s (2008) study spanning ages 11–20 years (n = 604; 44% - ages 11–16, 56% - ages 17–20) did find links between religious doubts and moratorium and achievement, the two statuses that include the exploration dimension.

Despite the importance of religion to identity formation, little research is available on religious identity (Bell, 2008; Fulton, 1997; Layton, Hardy, & Dollahite, 2012; Peek, 2005); hence, there is a paucity of knowledge on the exploration process within adolescents' religious identity formation process, but research results to date appear similar to Luyckx et al.'s (2006) exploration styles. For example, Hunsberger et al. (2001) detected two kinds of religious consultation among adolescents: "belief-threatening consultation" from antireligious sources and "belief-confirming consultation" from proreligious sources. They found that identity achievers used both kinds of consultation, adolescents in moratorium used only belief-threatening, adolescents in foreclosure used only belief-confirming, and diffused adolescents used neither. Similarly, Chaudhury and Miller (2008) also identified two styles of religious exploration, labeled adolescents "external seekers" when they searched outside their religion (similar to in-breadth exploration) or "internal seekers" when they searched within their religion (similar to in-depth exploration). Similarly, in a study with 104 Israeli religiously raised emerging adults (ages 18–31), Cohen-Malayev et al. (2009), found two kinds of exploration which they defined as "exploration within contextual boundaries" (similar to in-depth exploration), and "radical exploration" (similar to in-breadth exploration).

In summary, as investigated only preliminarily by research to date, current identity theory points to a process of religious

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exploration that generally encompasses two major exploration styles: in-depth exploration of one's current religious commitment, the purpose of which is to confirm one's existing religious beliefs, and in-breadth exploration of alternative religious beliefs that threaten one's existing commitment. However, within the *mechina* religious education context, like any religious education context (Snook, 1972), indoctrination of religious beliefs should also be considered. Indoctrination describes a process of belief transmission that leaves the individual with impaired reflective capacities (Merry, 2005) or closed-minded beliefs (Callan & Arena, 2009), undermining the individual's autonomy. In identity status model terms, indoctrination leads to the foreclosure status (Marcia, 1966).

Current Study Design

Quantitative research can strengthen or refute hypotheses from existing theory, but cannot easily help develop new theories or even extend existing theories (Charmaz, 2006). Indeed, both Erikson (Côté & Levine, 2002) and Marcia (Kroger & Marcia, 2011) expressed concern about the compatibility of quantitative methods to their theories. In light of the paucity of research on religion's in the identity formation process, in general, and on Israeli Modern-Orthodox adolescents in posthigh school religious *mechina* gap-year programs, in particular, the present, longitudinal study qualitatively examined this population's dynamic religious identity exploration over a 1.5-year period with the aim of enabling investigation of identity formation as an ongoing process (Klimstra, Hale, Raaijmakers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010; Lichtwarck-Aschoff, Van Geert, Bosma, & Kunnen, 2008).

When summarizing prior work in the identity research field, Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al. (2008) reported 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 retrospective exploration of the dynamics of one's past identity formation process; expressive research refers to current exploration of the dynamics of one's ongoing process. Hence, we carried out numerous interviews with each participant to provide both reflective and expressive viewpoints.

Research Questions

1. To what degree will these students reveal in-breadth and in-depth exploration styles?
2. To what degree will these students reveal other novel styles of exploration?
3. Will these students describe indoctrination and will these rabbis use indoctrination to influence students' identity search?
4. Will a reflective perspective (of past processes) and an expressive perspective (of current processes) yield different findings or a dynamic progression in identity formation?

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 20 male Jewish adolescents aged 18 to 20 who had deferred their mandatory military service in order to attend one of three Modern-Orthodox *mechina* gap-year programs immediately after high school. Gender separation characterizes this religious stream in Israel. There was only one parallel institution for females at this time, although part of the female religious-state graduates enroll in the IDF. The duration of the students' program was 10 months, with the option of further IDF deferment for an additional 6 months of study. Students could leave the program at any time to begin their IDF service, to transfer to another *mechina*, or to enter a Modern-Orthodox Jewish seminary (*yeshiva*) for more intense Torah study. The three male rabbis heading these *mechina* programs also participated in the study. They were all in their 50s, had studied at the same *yeshiva*, and consulted with the same revered rabbinic sage. One rabbi grew up in a secular family (*Mechina* B) and the other two in Modern-Orthodox families.

Measures

Interviews were held with students and rabbis.

Three biannual reflective student interviews. Semistructured interviews (20 min to 1 hr.) were conducted with students at three time intervals coinciding with the academic calendar in order 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 seven students who continued for another 6 months, at the end of the first semester of Year 2 (REF3). The interviews were conducted using guiding questions such as: In 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 *mechina* 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 exploration in which participants engaged earlier. The interviews related to three domains—religious, ethnic, and gender identity—of which religious identity was most dominant (Halevy, 2012).

Monthly expressive student interviews. As recommended by Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al. (2008), the expressive viewpoint concerning one's identity formation process gives insight into the dynamics of one's ongoing process. Thus, up to 9 informal open interviews (5 to 45 min) were conducted with participants monthly during their *mechina* attendance. Participants were asked about what was happening to them in relation to religion. Interview length varied within and between participants, depending on the interviewee's responses.

Rabbi interview. One in-depth interview (~1 hr) was conducted with the head of each *mechina*, during February 2010, concurrently with the student interviews, and comprising two open questions. First, the interviewer asked about the rabbi's personal background and how this led him to become head of the *mechina*. The second question concerned the rabbi's vision as *mechina* head,

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examining what the rabbi viewed as an educational success or failure. The use of numerous research methods (triangulation) improves the quality of the study and strengthens the validity and reliability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

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 Bar-Ilan University. Of the 16 Modern-Orthodox *mechina* programs in Israel, we selected five mainstream programs after consultation with several rabbis who are highly familiar with this field. Two *mechina* program directors rejected our request to undertake research. The other three rabbis gave their consent.

We originally planned to interview eight randomly selected students per program, for a total of 24. However, after 2 months, four students left the *Mechina* programs; 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 *Mechina* B program; we included their interviews. Only seven students continue to 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 *mechina* staff. The first author, a Modern-Orthodox male, conducted all of the interviews as part of his doctoral dissertation (Halevy, 2012). All participants gave consent for material from their interviews to be published under pseudonyms.

Interviews were held monthly at each *mechina* during the 1.5-year research period, sampling all participants who were present in the *mechina* on the interview days. We collected only a total of 158 interviews because at any time and as part of the ideology of the *mechina* program, students have freedom to come and go. All students participated in the first two reflective interviews, and the number of interviews per participant at the end of the first year ranged from four to nine, reflecting the unrestricted nature of students' time commitment to the *mechina*.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was conducted separately by the first author and the second author, a Modern-Orthodox female with expertise in qualitative research analysis, and was discussed three times during the process of data analysis. Content analysis was based on Gross (1995). After reading all of the transcribed interviews twice chronologically, we started data analysis, which included four steps: identification of key words (e.g., process, my way, search, study, doubts, answers), categorization into five main categories (i.e., exposure, gap, tension, crisis, exploration), connections between categories, and creation of a theoretical model (Gross, 1995; Halevy, 2012). This article focuses on exploration, one of the five main categories.

Results

Our data analysis in relation to the first and second research questions revealed four identity exploration styles: two styles documented in the literature (in-depth and in-breadth) and two novel substyles (experiential and directed). We next exemplify these four styles with interview excerpts translated from Hebrew (using pseudonyms). Table 1 describes the dynamic ongoing process of religious identity formation for the 20 participants.

In-Depth Exploration

In line with Luyckx et al.'s (2006) in-depth exploration, 15 of the participants revealed this style of identity exploration. The following interview excerpts illustrate this style of exploration among two participants, one demonstrating current (expressive) exploration and one reporting about past (reflective) exploration.

Ilan (*Mechina* A)—expressive in-depth exploration. In his first interview (age 18) at the start of the *mechina* program, Ilan reported that during high school (ages 15–17) he had avoided exploration, fearing it might impair his religiosity (foreclosure). Yet he immediately showed eagerness to engage in a current process of in-depth exploration, expressing keen interest in investigating sources of religious faith at the *mechina*:

> Here there are classes on religious faith, fantastic! I want to become "stronger" [a euphemism for becoming more observant], to know, to explore a little in order to know where it comes from . . . If I know more about religion, then I will keep it better.

As this excerpt reveals, Ilan's search for answers to his questions focused on the sanctioned religious *mechina* lessons, resembling belief-confirming consultation (Hunsberger et al., 2001). This desire coincided with internal seeking (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008) and contrasted with his earlier avoidance of religious identity exploration, because he feared external seeking (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008) and belief-threatening consultation (Hunsberger et al., 2001). In terms of Marcia's model, although Ilan has undergone a process of in-depth exploration during the *mechina* program, he remains in the foreclosure status.

Tom (*Mechina* C)—reflective in-depth exploration. In Tom's first interview (age 18), he retrospectively described his past in-depth exploration during high school (ages 15–17) due to his role as a youth leader in a Modern-Orthodox youth group, leading him to seek answers to many religious issues that he intended to convey to the youth: "At the start of the 10th Grade I became a youth leader, so it makes you check it [religion] out. You cannot educate youth about something that you do not believe in, so you investigate, you inquire . . ."

By questioning rabbis, searching through books, and talking with peers, Tom carried out a cognitive process of internal seeking (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008) for religious resources that could help him explain issues to himself and thus to his youth group. In terms of Marcia's model, although Tom has undergone a process of in-depth exploration he remains in the foreclosure status.

In-Breadth Exploration

We define exploration outside of Modern-Orthodoxy or inside Modern-Orthodoxy but in contrast to home ideology as in-breadth

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Table 1
Exploration Styles and Identity Statuses Based on Mechina Students' Reflective and Expressive Interviews (N = 20)

Period	Variable	*Mechina* A (*n* = 6)					
		Ilan	Simon	Ben	Yaron	Noam	Yakir
Childhood	Religious parents[a]	+	+−	+	+	+−	+
	Exploration style	None	None	None	None	None	None
	Identity status[c]	F	D	F	F	D	F
Adolescence	High school religiosity[b]	Yeshiva	Yeshiva	State	Yeshiva	State	State
	Exploration style	None	None	None	In-depth	Experiential	None
	Identity status[c]	F	D	F	F?	D/M?	F
First year of *mechina*	Exploration style	Directed	Directed	Directed	Directed	Experiential	Directed
	Identity status[c]	F?	D/M?	F?	F/IA?	D/M?	F?
Whole 1.5-yr *mechina* program	Exploration style	In-depth	None	In-depth In-breadth	In-depth	In-depth In-breadth	In-depth
	Identity status[c]	F?	D/M?	A?	F?	A?	F?

		Mechina B (*n* = 7)						
		Shamay	Matan	Adir	Moshe	John	Erez	Lior
Childhood	Religious parents[a]	+	+	+	+	+	+	+−
	Exploration style	None	None	None	None	None	None	None
	Identity status[c]	F	F	F	F	F	F	D
Adolescence	High school religiosity[b]	Yeshiva	Yeshiva	Yeshiva	Yeshiva	Yeshiva	Yeshiva	Yeshiva
	Exploration style	None	None	Experiential	Experiential	In-depth	Experiential	None
	Identity status[c]	F	F	F/M/A?	F/M/A?	F?	F/M/A?	D
First year of *mechina*	Exploration style	Directed	Directed	Directed	Directed	Directed	Directed	None
	Identity status[c]	F?	F?	F/M/A?	F/M/A?	F?	F/M/A?	D
Whole 1.5-yr *mechina* program	Exploration style	In-depth	None	None	In-depth In-breadth	In-depth	In-breadth	Directed In-depth
	Identity status[c]	F?	F?	F/M/A?	A?	F?	F?	F?

		Mechina C (*n* = 7)						
		Oren	Tom	Meir	Roni	Shawn	Avi	Ran
Childhood	Religious parents[a]	+	+	+	+	+	+	+−
	Exploration style	None	None	None	None	None	None	None
	Identity status[c]	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Adolescence	High school religiosity[b]	State	Yeshiva	Yeshiva	Yeshiva	State	State	Secular
	Exploration style	In-breadth	Experiential	Experiential In-depth	Experiential	In-depth	None	None
	Identity status[c]	M/A?	F/M/A?	F/M/A?	F/M/A?	F?	F	F
First year of *mechina*	Exploration style	Directed	Directed	Directed	Directed	Directed	Directed	Directed
	Identity status[c]	M/A?	F/M/A?	F/M/A?	F/M/A?	F?	F?	F?
Whole 1.5-yr *mechina* program	Exploration style	In-breadth	In-depth	In-depth	In-depth In-breadth	In-depth	In-depth In-breadth	In-depth
	Identity status[c]	M/A?	F/M/A?	F/M/A?	F/M/A?	F?	F?	F?

[a] Parents were religious (+), secular (−), or partially religious/traditional (+−). [b] State-religious schools are public Modern-Orthodox, yeshivas are semiprivate Modern-Orthodox. [c] Identity statuses: D = diffusion; F = foreclosure; M = moratorium; A = achievement.

exploration. In contrast to the in-depth exploration style that emerged for most of the participants during adolescence and/or the *mechina* period, the in-breadth of identity exploration only emerged among one of the participants during adolescence and six of the participants during *mechina* period. This style coincided with Luyckx et al.'s (2006) in-breadth exploration, as illustrated by two cases of reflective (past) in-breadth exploration.

Oren (*Mechina* C)—reflective in-breadth exploration about high school. The case of Oren was unique in that he grew up in a mixed settlement of Modern-Orthodox and secular Jews, founded on the ideology of a mixed society. In his (in-breadth) exploration from a reflective viewpoint of his high school years (ages 15–17), he described daring to explore a secular identity:

> One of my youth counselors, who was secular, is a real human being, really moral, with principles. . . . And this counselor used to be religious so he had the same questions as me, and I spoke to him more than once . . . and it raised questions. He didn't try to persuade me about anything, and I also tried to keep his personal views about religion from affecting me . . . I didn't do things that are forbidden, just these questions bothered me all the time . . .

It seemed that prior to his decision to attend a religious *mechina* program and to further examine his religious beliefs, Oren weighed the secular alternative to religiosity via external seeking (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008). In terms of Marcia's model, since Oren has undergone a process of in-breadth exploration he progresses from moratorium into achievement status, or at least staying in a moratorium status.

Erez (*Mechina* B)—reflective in-breadth exploration about the *mechina* program. At the end of the first academic year, it was clear that the *mechina* studies had served as retrospective

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in-breadth exploration for a number of students who did not accept the *mechina*'s portrayal of an "ideal" Modern-Orthodox man. For example, Erez reflected how he had started the past year with an open mind; however, because he disagreed with the alternative that the *mechina* offered, Erez regressed largely to his starting-point commitment—to his family point of view:

> At the start of the year . . . I hoped that I would end it between religious or secular, as I am now, or ultraorthodox, something that would be fulfilling . . . Today I'm not in that position because I heard a lot of things here (in the mechina) that I disagree with. I heard a lot of things that I agree with too, but I had all sorts of discussions, disagreements, and situations that made me stay more or less in my place.

In terms of Marcia's model, since Erez has undergone a process of in-breadth exploration he is supposed to progress into achievement status, or at least staying in a moratorium status; however, Erez describes regression into foreclosure status: back to his family point of view although he learns that this kind of religious has no rabbinic support.

Experiential Exploration

Our analysis pinpointed an experiential exploration style, representing a search for information about one or more alternatives through behavioral experiences of "trying out" different aspects of religious identity. Indeed, the theoretical literature relates to such behavioral experiences as part of the moratorium period in Erikson's (1968) theory and as an integral part of the exploration process in Marcia's (1980) model. This experiential exploration style seemed to differ from the mostly cognitive nature of students' in-depth and in-breadth styles.

The following interview excerpts present three participants who exhibited *experiential* exploration, among the total of seven *mechina* students who revealed this experiential style as well as an excerpt from one of the rabbis who discussed this style of identity exploration.

Tom (*Mechina* C)—reflective experiential exploration. As seen above, Tom described his own in-depth exploration as a youth group leader to address cognitive aspects of his current Modern-Orthodox commitment. Yet, Tom's first interview revealed another stage, a prior behavioral-experiential exploration stage at the junior high school period, before the aforementioned cognitive one:

> There are a lot of secular parents who send their children to religious schools . . . and it [classmates' secularity] interests you. Listen, everything is interesting, how everyone lives, and then you try it, you test it. But at some stage you understand that there is nothing in it.

From a reflective perspective, Tom described a short period of experiential exploration without any cognitive aspects. This was sufficient for Tom to rapidly reject the secular alternative. In all, Tom described a process beginning with an experiential style while in the moratorium status to explore the secular alternative, followed by a regression to the foreclosure status. In terms of Marcia's model, Tom has undergone a process of in-breadth exploration hence he is supposed to progress into achievement status, or at least staying in a moratorium status; however, Tom describes regression into foreclosure status.

Meir (*Mechina* C)—reflective experiential exploration. Meir retrospectively examined his simultaneous experiential "tasting" and "juggling" of three different types of religiosity to which he was exposed: his traditional Modern-Orthodox parents who were "traditional, like secular but with religious values," his idealized ultrareligious relatives who "were religious like my father always told me that he wanted to be," and his secular sisters who would "go out on Friday night" desecrating the Sabbath:

> I could always take a bit from here and from there, juggle between the ideal and the reality and between the other reality which is my sisters. So . . . when I went to my sister's house I would pray less . . . and sometimes I didn't lay phylacteries . . . I could taste a "kind of secularity" on one hand, the "tradition" at home and the "ideal" . . . in the end I decided that this [Modern-Orthodox] is the path I want to take.

In terms of Marcia's model, Meir describes a process of in-breadth exploration hence he is supposed to progress into achievement status, or at least staying in a moratorium status.

Noam (*Mechina* A)—expressive and reflective experiential exploration. In his first two interviews, Noam reported that he had little interest in the *mechina* studies. However, after two months, he decided to try to start carrying out a few religious practices (e.g., prayer, laying phylacteries, reading religious texts), representing behavioral-experiential exploration:

> I believe that if I slowly feel these [religious practices] more, I will get ahold of myself slowly. A commitment here, a commitment there, a lesson here, a lesson there . . . the more you "live" it, the more you feel that this is what you need to do.

After six months in the *mechina*, Noam started praying daily and reported: "I think it's all a matter of time. If I lived in an Arab village for six months, I would know Arabic. Living in a religious *mechina* for six months . . . I'm exposed to it . . ."

At this point, it appears as if Noam has reached identity achievement status by means of experiential exploration but in the last interview (REF2) he describes confusion rather than coherent commitment.

Rabbi Joseph—experiential exploration. Reference to experiential exploration can also be seen from the interview with the head of *Mechina* B. This rabbi, who was very connected to the young generation, emphasized that his students were not exposed to the cognitive aspects of secularity but rather to the experiential aspects. Hence, he offered his students a better experience than secular encounters, focusing on the noncognitive aspects of religion. He quoted a religious text (*Mesillat Yesharim*, by Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto) that he used for teaching the students:

> I tell the students: "God wants you to enjoy yourselves." They are shocked, but I really believe this, that they should have as much fun in life as possible, more fun than the nightclub in ____ Beach [known for its alcohol and drugs], a lot of girls [on the beach]. . . . We offer more fun, the most fun in life. . . .

Experiential behavior as a separate exploration style. In Erikson's and Marcia's works, moratorium is expressed both by experiences and by cognitive exploration without any distinction between them. Experiential exploration is not a novelty; it is obvious to identity researchers because it is immanent to the

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identity formation process. However, to date, this style has not been theoretically documented as a separate exploration style.

The current findings suggest that the two aspects of exploration could be separated: the behavioral-experiential aspects, which can be labeled experiential exploration, and the cognitive aspects, which can be labeled in-breadth/in-depth exploration. Support for classifying this style separately was proposed recently by Berzonsky (2011), who described a dual-process model with one experiential, intuitive process and another rational process. However, Berzonsky referred to two parallel "processes" whereas we found these processes to be sometimes parallel and at other times transpiring at different times.

Directed Exploration

Sixteen of the participants revealed a directed style of identity exploration, which represented students' search for information that was directed by educators toward one well-recognized, advocated alternative. The educators in the *mechina* consensually presented their students with a constrained ideal model of a "properly religious" person. This ideal placed students at a crossroad, where they had to choose to be either properly religious or secular. We often heard this catchphrase from the student participants and from the head rabbis of the *mechina* programs.

Rabbi Joseph—directed exploration. All of the *mechina* heads explicitly stated that this decision between secularism and proper religion was their educational precept, as seen from an interview with Rabbi Joseph, the head of *Mechina* B:

> You must decide about your life. It isn't necessary to decide now, but you must strive to decide [between being secular or fully religious] . . . Not to sit on the fence . . . It is [religion], not folklore. It is real . . . I do not think that in a year or year and a half you can make all the decisions, but you can prepare yourself, you can understand that you must decide. Even though there are a large number of traditionalists in the Jewish people [secular with some traditions, neither here nor there], in my opinion that phenomenon will not continue . . . You cannot stay stuck in the middle.

To ensure that the *mechina's* strict educational precept, which pervaded the whole culture of the gap-year programs, was indeed an attempt to encourage students' genuine identity exploration without indoctrination, we added explicit interview questions on the extent to which students actually explored the *mechina*'s proposed ideal model for the religious person, asking questions and raising doubts, or whether they accepted that model sight unseen (foreclosure) without exploration. The following interview excerpts illustrate this directed exposure style, indicating that the students did not blindly accept and adopt the *mechina* doctrine without further examination.

Shawn (*Mechina* C)—reflective directed exploration. Shawn grew up in a religious family that was not affiliated with Modern-Orthodox education in Israel. Nonetheless, Shawn was educated in mainstream Modern-Orthodox education. When asked to explain the process by which he adopted the *mechina* ideology, Shawn replied that he did not accept it blindly:

> I had a lot of questions . . . it's not something that you get into straight away. It's something that takes time, even if, like you say, it's easy for me to adopt it, but still you check it out, you do not go into it blindly . . . Like . . . TV for example . . . and the whole idea of going to pubs . . . So . . . you see the lifestyle of religious people, in contrast to the lifestyle of other people, and you can see the differences. You see the meaning of it on family life, you understand?

Shawn's description clarified that he did not undergo classic indoctrination but neither did he engage in classic exploration; instead, what we termed directed exploration contains characteristics of both. That is, on the one hand, Shawn was directed by his educators in the *mechina* to a specific ideology; on the other hand, he did not accept this ideology blindly but rather asked questions before adopting it. In terms of Marcia's model, although Shawn has undergone a process of directed exploration he remains in a foreclosure status; yet at the end of the *mechina* program (REF3) he describes a different commitment to that at the start point (REF1).

Ran (*Mechina* C)—reflective directed exploration. Ran grew up in a traditional family that became religious after his grandfather's passing; Ran attended secular high schools and came to the *mechina* to strengthen his religious commitment. During the interview after a year of the program, Ran was also asked explicit questions to uncover the extent of indoctrination versus exploration and to help him explain the process whereby he adopted the *mechina* ideology:

Ran:	A year in the *mechina* starts to . . . put their words deep into your head. It's always the same words, but you slowly learn them and you know how to answer questions.
Interviewer:	What do you mean, you recite what they say?
Ran:	Exactly. In principle, it's like repeating what they say.
Interviewer:	[These answers are] not from personal thinking? It's all from reciting slogans?
Ran:	After I explored, after I read, after I heard, I checked the ideology. Now I have to practice it. Sometimes I hear myself say [smiling] "Wow, I heard that sentence all the time in the *mechina.*"
Interviewer:	But it's a sentence that you agree with?
Ran:	Of course, without a doubt.
Interviewer:	That you explored, you understood the sense behind it?
Ran:	Without a doubt.

In terms of Marcia's model, although Ran has undergone a process of directed exploration he remains in a foreclosure status; however at the end of the *mechina* program (REF3) he describes a different commitment to that at the start point (REF1).

Rabbi Samuel—directed exploration. Interestingly, this dilemma between indoctrination and exploration was also reflected in the interviews with the *mechina* head rabbis. As the rabbi who directed *Mechina* A stated, they did not want the students to choose the *mechina* ideology without fully exploring, thinking, and initiating their own decisions:

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> So . . . the *mechina* works using trust and not coercion, with the thought that if we continue what happened in high school, where learning was forced, or tests, or pressure, the end result is that the program doesn't build *your own* Torah for *you* [emphasis original], you do not come to know yourself. Only by making a choice you can build your spiritual world; therefore, we do not pressure . . . Here there are some students who . . . when I ask them at the end of the year "what did you have here?" they say that after all the classes, all of that, in the end it was those few minutes that they themselves decided to sit down and study—that was what built them up!

Rabbi Joseph—directed exploration. Intriguingly, the head rabbis asserted that although they wanted students to choose the *mechina*'s Modern-Orthodox vision for religious ideology, they claimed that they did not utilize classic indoctrination tactics. They preferred students to select the secular alternative rather than selecting the *mechina* ideology blindly, without adequate exploration. Rabbi Joseph referred to such cases of blind ideological acceptance (foreclosure) as failures:

> . . . Failures. One year . . . they came here for the Sabbath when they were already in the army . . . and I asked them how they felt about the *mechina* today. One of them said, "I left with the decision that I am religious." Another said, "I left with the decision that I am secular." When the round finished, I told them: "Look, I want to tell you, both of you are successes of the *mechina* because both of you made a conscious decision and that is very important . . ." It was a success because he chose.

Directed exploration as a separate style. The current findings suggest that this directed exploration style is short-lived. That is, if the individual adopts the *mechina* ideology for being properly religious, then his exploration becomes in-depth exploration—seeking further information to strengthen his commitment. On the contrary, if the individual rejects the *mechina* ideology, his exploration becomes in-breadth exploration because he returns to a previous alternative commitment, as described by Erez. We also found a third option by students who partially accepted the *mechina* ideology; in these cases, directed exploration became in-depth for the parts that they accepted and in-breadth for the parts that they rejected.

We conclude that the directed exploration style is a separate style that, to date, has not been defined as exploration. In our understanding, this exploration style is perhaps close to, but not identical to, in-depth exploration. This style is cognitive, like both in-depth and in-breadth exploration styles, and in contrast with the experiential exploration style, directed exploration does not appear in the literature, either implicitly or explicitly.

Directed exploration was found as an answer to our third research question about the use of indoctrination during the *mechina* program period. Several reasons may explain why this directed style of exploration emerged in the students in our unique sociocultural context. First, the *mechina* is an ideological context conducive to indoctrination because educators direct students toward one "proper" alternative—that of maintaining Modern-Orthodoxy even in the face of the unique transition from a religious environment toward an anticipated secular environment. Second, the *mechina* offers a new opportunity to deal with identity issues because Modern-Orthodox high schools not only focus on preparing the students for final exams rather than on identity issues but also enforce mandatory religious practices that do not enable freedom to choose religious identity. In contrast, the rabbis in the *mechina* programs understand that freedom is a necessary condition for identity formation processes to unfold, despite the rabbis' immanent tension between this recognition of the importance of free choice and their wish for students to choose their Modern-Orthodox vision for religious ideology. As an answer to our fourth research question, the unique integration of both expressive and reflective perspectives uncovered gap-year students' dynamic processes, which raise questions about current identity statuses and about progression versus regression in the process. They also provided an answer to the disagreement between Luyckx et al. (2006) and Crocetti et al. (2008) about the starting point of the process (see Table 1).

Discussion

The current analysis of religious identity exploration exhibited by Israeli posthigh school students in a Modern-Orthodox Jewish gap-year program yielded four styles, including the cognitively based in-depth and in-breadth styles previously documented in the literature (Luyckx et al., 2006) and two previously unexplored substyles: experiential and directed. It seems that these two novel exploration substyles emerged from this study design that integrated both expressive and reflective perspectives, which was missing from current research (Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008), together with the qualitative methodology that is necessary for the research of identity formation processes (Phinnwy & Baldelomar, 2011), as applied in a novel sociocultural context. Findings also contribute to the literature by showing that even in a generally homogeneous population several different dynamic ongoing processes of religious identity formation were documented. The starting point of this process in childhood appeared to be mainly foreclosure (in 17 cases), as in Crocetti et al.'s (2008) model; however, in three cases the starting point was diffusion, as in Luyckx et al.'s (2006) model.

The current findings add to our theoretical knowledge in three main areas: the theoretical dilemma of regression from high to low identity statuses, the need to further refine Marcia's (1980) identity status model, and the question of whether Marcia's model is universal or context dependent.

First, beyond their unique contribution to exploration styles and to the ongoing process of religious identity research, the two novel exploration substyles revealed by the current research may provide an answer to the theoretical dilemma posed by prior studies (Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2016; Marcia, 1976; Waterman, 1982; Waterman & Archer, 1990) of "regression" from high statuses (identity achievement and moratorium) to low statuses (foreclosure and diffusion). Identity researchers such as Kroger and Marcia (2011) and Kroger, Martinussen, and Marcia (2010) raised questions about the conditions that may lead someone to regress from a high to a low status.

Our findings regarding the two novel exploration substyles may help elucidate this regression dilemma. On the one hand, we found that experiential exploration may lead the individual from moratorium to foreclosure if the different behavioral religious experiences that students try out are unsatisfying and, as a result, students are not prepared to abandon their current commitment, as in Tom's case. On the other hand, we found cases where students completed a period of directed exploration by rejecting educators' proposed

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ideal alternative and hence regressed to foreclosure, which represented a safe place. Such regression emerged in the case of Erez, who ended his directed exploration by regressing to his starting-point commitment to his parents' point of view.

Second, in light of the exploration styles that we found and our difficulty in classifying our participants into identity statuses as described in Table 1, we suggest that the identity statuses should be further refined. For example, is commitment after in-depth exploration or directed exploration not considered "better" than foreclosure? Can one view the stage following an individual's in-depth exploration process as achievement? According to Marcia's (1980) definitions, if in-breadth exploration is lacking, the status is considered foreclosure. Support for this suggestion to refine status classifications can be found in recent literature that proposed several new identity statuses—such as *carefree diffusion*, considered low to moderate on both commitment dimensions and low on both exploration dimensions (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005); *searching moratorium*, characterized by high commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, W., 2008); and *ruminative moratorium*, describing individuals who are stuck in the exploration process (Luyckx et al., 2008). However these new definitions bring controversy; for example, it is unclear why high commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment (which is a kind of in-breadth exploration) is defined as a moratorium (searching moratorium). In terms of Marcia's model it seems an achievement (Waterman, 2015). These disagreements could also strengthen the claim that the identity statuses should be further refined.

Finally, as mentioned above, one of the main criticisms of Marcia's (1980) model is its focus on the individual's intrapsychological identity while ignoring the social component of identity as described in Erikson's theory (Côté & Levine, 1988; Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Schachter, 2005; Schwartz, 2005; van Hoof, 1999). The sociocultural context of our sample, the Modern-Orthodox Judaism stream in Israel, furnished an opportunity to examine a society located between a modern individualistic society and a traditional collectivist one. Indeed, Modern-Orthodox Judaism was a major solution provided for the tension between traditional Judaism and secular modernity (Schachter, 2002). Considering Modern-Orthodoxy's unique location along the traditional-modern continuum, it is not surprising that we found novel substyles of exploration than discussed to date. These findings strengthen the connection between identity and context. Thus, identity formation cannot be detached from context.

There are significant practical implications of our findings, which can be used by *mechina* program directors who may choose to explicitly encourage open identity exploration. In addition, implications may help both educators and counselors through this new understanding that there are numerous exploration styles, which can lead to different identity statuses, and hence better help their students to deal with questions of identity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research examined male students' narratives relating retrospectively to childhood and adolescence, up to the end of the *mechina* program at about 20 years of age. It revealed that different exploration styles, adding the concepts of experiential and directed substyles, will occur in later stages of young adulthood. Hence, in line with Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, and Branje (2010), further longitudinal study of this population should be conducted to explore ongoing life changes in identity formation.

The *mechina*'s specific sociocultural milieu precludes the claim that these four exploration styles for religious identity are universal. Additional longitudinal research in diverse sociocultural contexts as well as in relation to other types of identity such as professional or ethnic identity will test their generalizability. Moreover, to broaden research in this area and continue to help further refine the identity status model, researchers would do well to formulate questionnaires tapping these four exploration styles and/or others if they should be found. Thus, exploring the identity formation process in additional underinvestigated contexts along the traditional-modern sociocultural continuum, using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, could uncover nuances that may further extend knowledge on the generalizability and universality of identity theory.

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