

Ethnic Identity Formation Among Students in Post-High-School Religious Gap-Year Programs in Israel

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to test changes in ethnic identity from two points of view, focusing on Marcia's identity status model and the ethnic identity literature. Based on 135 participants who completed the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) questionnaires at two-time intervals, stability was found at the mean level, while stability, progression and regression were found at the individual level. Transitions from moratorium into achievement were found more than to diffusion and status changes derived mainly following changes in the commitment component. In line with Erikson's theory, the results highlight the effect of the sociocultural context on the identity formation process and the need to examine changes in identity formation processes over time, both at the mean level and the individual level. These findings could be relevant to other countries that are going through similar processes of demographic changes in which the minority challenges the hegemony of the majority.

Keywords: Ethnic identity, identity formation, identity development, Israeli Modern Orthodox, emerging adulthood.

In a global world characterized by multicultural societies, ethnic identity is increasingly identified as a critical component of the self, especially during adolescence (Roberts et al., 1999) and emerging adulthood (Phinney, 2006). Specifically, ethnic identity development was found to have significant consequences for the psychosocial, academic, and health outcomes of ethnic minority adolescents (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). The insight that different identity statuses could be found in different periods or sociocultural contexts (Côté & Levine, 2002) suggests that Modern-Orthodox communities in Israel could be an interesting case for studying ethnic identity formation. The aim of this article is to test changes in the ethnic identity of post high school students in a religious gap year program from two points of view. The first is in terms of ethnic identity components: exploration and commitment² to compare the results with the ethnic identity development literature. Second, in terms of the identity status model (Marcia, 1980), since it is the central model in the identity formation literature (Schwartz et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2021) and although used by Phinney (1989) to describe ethnic identity development, it is missing from research on ethnic identity. This point of view could offer comparison to identity formation literature in two issues: first, the debate whether this process is dynamic or stable – an issue which was also explored in ethnic identity literature; second, the question of which of models in terms of Marcia's statuses, is best embodied to ethnic identity process among Modern-Orthodox students in a gap year program – an issue which is still relatively limited in ethnic identity literature.

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²The second component has different names; I will relate to this issue later.

The Israeli context is important since the demographic changes in which the minority of 20% in 1948 is no longer a minority and challenges the hegemony of the majority, a process that could be similar in other countries. The Modern-Orthodox movement in Judaism is one stream in the Israeli population. According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (2014), this stream is 12.5% of the Jewish population and 9% of the general population in Israel. The Modern-Orthodox movement is characterized by inherent tensions between traditional religious observance and western secular modernity (Gross, 2003). Jews who belong to this stream of Judaism are committed to traditional Jewish law but also attempt to fully participate in Western society without always subscribing to Western lifestyles and values.

The religious gap year programs in Israel offer an interesting context to study the ethnic identity formation process due to the hegemony of the majority in the context of religious educational institutions (Gross, 2003). Tzuriel and Klein (1977) explored the connection between ethnic identification and ego identity among religious adolescents in Israel and found that, among ethnic minority respondents who had high ethnic identification, ego identity was higher than ethnic minority respondents who had low ethnic identification; however, among ethnic majority respondents, there was no connection between ethnic identification and ego identity. This result indicates that ethnic identity is relevant mainly for the ethnic minority, similar to findings from other Western contexts (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011; Syed & Azmitia, 2009; Yoon, 2011). In light of a lack of ethnic identity research in the context of the Israeli Modern-Orthodox society in the past three decades, this result could not be a basis for a research hypothesis due to demographic changes in Israel.

Ethnic Identity

Starting in the 1960s, research on ethnic identity from different disciplines has generated a range of definitions. In a review article from 1990, psychologist Jean Phinney examined how ethnic identity has been defined and conceptualized, its measurement indicators and consequent empirical findings. In that article, Phinney (1990) identifies two bodies of work: conceptualizations based on ego identity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980) and the social identity literature (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Phinney found that ethnic identity was not exclusively an intrapsychic developmental construct (Marcia, 1980) but also a process embedded in context, which leads to a sense of connection to one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999). Thus, Phinney (1992) describes ethnic identity as an individual self-conception that is derived from one's knowledge of membership in a social group with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. The components of ethnic identity are therefore self-identification as a group member, a sense of belonging, and ethnic behaviors and practices (Phinney, 1992).

Phinney (1989) presents three stages in the development of ethnic identity that are built on and expand upon Marcia's (1966) identity status model. The latter identified two dimensions of ethnic identity formation: exploration and commitment. In the first stage, to the "unexamined" stage, the individual is in a state of "diffusion" – an absence of exploration and commitment – or "foreclosure" – commitment without previous exploration. In the second stage, the individual is in the "moratorium," namely, in the process of exploration, during which he/she reads about the ethnic group to which he/she belongs, asks questions and discusses this ethnic identity with friends and family members. In the third stage, the individual assumes an ethnic identity – commitment following exploration. Phinney and Chavira (1992) found that progression toward an assumed ethnic identity occurs mainly between the ages of 16 and 19.

A prominent debate in the literature about identity formation is whether this process is dynamic or stable. The notion that this was a progressive process (e.g., Marcia, 1993; Waterman, 1982) – namely, the transition from low statuses (diffusion and foreclosure) to high

statuses (moratorium and achievement) – has been challenged in recent decades, leading van Hoof (1999) to conclude that most studies indicate greater stability than change within the identity formation literature. Recent studies vary in their findings (e.g., Klimstra et al., 2010; Kroger, 2007; Kroger et al., 2010; Meeus, 2011), suggesting that the complex process of identity formation is both progressive and regressive (e.g., Fadjukoff et al., 2016; Kroger, 2015) rather than linear or predictable.

Longitudinal research from the past 15 years has examined the extent to which ethnic identity formation is dynamic or stable by using the two factors of MEIM (Roberts et al., 1999), namely, exploration and commitment/affirmation. These studies yielded inconsistent results. For instance, French et al. (2006) found that the level of ethnic identity commitment among African American and Latinx American youth increased during the transition from junior high school to high school. In a longitudinal study with four time points, Syed and Azmitia (2009) found an increase in both exploration and commitment throughout the college years. Some of these findings are compatible with Tsai and Fuligni (2012), who compared ethnic identity development at two time points – at the end of high school and two years into college – and found a decrease in exploration on the one hand and stability in commitment on the other. In contrast, Kiang and colleagues (2010) conducted a longitudinal study among European, Latino, and Asian Americans from the age of 14 until 17 and found no change in either exploration or affirmation.

These findings are again different from Zhou and colleagues (2019), who found in a longitudinal study among ethnic and racial minority students during their first 2 years of college a moderate increase in both ethnic identity exploration and commitment. These findings stand in contradistinction to Lu and colleagues (Lu et al., 2020), whose ten-year longitudinal study among Mexican Americans found a decrease in both exploration and affirmation, especially among boys.

Another aspect of the identity formation process that is examined in the literature concerns the models, in terms of Marcia's statuses, that best embody this process. Three main models have been examined and illustrated thus far. The first model (Stephen et al., 1992) is MAMA (M=moratorium, A=achievement), which describes an iterative process with a period of moratorium followed by commitment. The second model (Pulkkinen & Kokko, 2000) is FAFA (F=foreclosure, A=achievement), which describes an iterative process of different forms of commitment. The third model (Côté & Schwartz, 2002) is MDMD (M=moratorium, D=diffusion), which offers the option of an iterative process with a period of moratorium that leads to diffusion. Whereas a range of longitudinal studies have been published to explore the question of stability versus change in the components of ethnic identity formation, there is still a lack of research that applies Marcia's identity status model to this question.

Ethnic Identity in Israel

The effects of sociohistorical context on adolescents' identity development, as presented in Erikson's theory (Côté & Levine, 1988; Schachter, 2005; Schwartz, 2005), have thus far been examined mainly with university students in North America and Europe (Schwartz, 2005). More broadly, academic journals place greater emphasis on the American context (Neblett et al., 2019). Following Côté & Levine's (2002) framework, which proposes that different identity statuses will be found in different periods or sociocultural contexts, Modern-Orthodox communities in Israel offer an interesting case for studying ethnic identity formation.

Israeli society features unique ethnic identity divisions, with their specific characteristics within Modern-Orthodox communities. First, Jewish Israeli society is broadly divided into two key ethnic identities: Mizrahim (Jews from Africa and Middle Eastern countries) and Ashkenazim (Jews of European and American origin). However, due to mixed marriage and

the lack of spatial segregation between these ethnic groups (Lewin-Epstein & Cohen, 2019), many Jewish Israelis can identify as belonging to both. In addition, the Israeli ethos, perpetuated by a national hegemonic discourse, denies the existence of ethnic stratification within the Jewish population (Biton, 2011; Cohen & Gordon, 2018; Sasson-Levi & Shoshana, 2013; Shoshana, 2016). With regard to the Modern-Orthodox society, some of the differences between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim refer to the ancient customs and religious practices adopted by each group in each diaspora, such as differences in the texts and melodies used during services of prayer, customs of foods served, and even additional festivals.

Religious state schools in Israel, which are affiliated with the Modern-Orthodox movement, are essentially "Ashkenazi" (Gross, 2003) since they are based on European models of Jewish education that were established on the tension between the need to keep traditional Jewish education and the need to become integrated into the modern world. This hegemonic model was expressed by Ashkenazi pedagogical methods within Jewish education as well as Ashkenazi religious practices such as prayer text and melodies. In 1978, the policy of the Ministry of Education was changed, and slowly, after parental struggles, there was a change in religious practices in schools. Nevertheless, there has been little empirical research into ethnic identity formation within Modern-Orthodox education in the past three decades, which highlights the significance of the current research.

The first religious gap-year program, whose students are the research population of this study, was launched in 1988. To date, there has been no specific empirical research on the formation of ethnic identity within religious gap-year programs in Israel and in general a lack of research in the Israeli Modern-Orthodox context in the past three decades. This study fills this gap while exploring the different components and changing status of ethnic identity formation during the religious gap-year program in the aforementioned important institution. In so doing, the study also aims to contribute to the developmental literature of ethnic identity in Israel.

Research Questions

In light of the above theoretical and empirical discussions, the current study addresses the following questions:

1. Does ethnic identity among the gap-year students change over the course of the program, or is it stable? Where changes take place, are they progressive or regressive?

Although research has addressed this question, there is no conclusive answer to date. Moreover, this question has not yet been examined in an Israeli context. We therefore explore whether the specific context of the gap year program engenders changes in students' ethnic identity.

2. Which models of ethnic identity statuses best capture the participants' experience? What are the observable changes in ethnic identity status in terms of exploration and commitment among participants?

As discussed earlier, little longitudinal research related to the issue of a model of the ethnic identity formation process has been carried out yet. According to Phinney (1989), the development is linear, starting from either diffusion or foreclosure moving to moratorium and to ethnic identity achievement. Which of the three main models that have been examined and illustrated in the identity formation literature thus far best captures the participants' experience?

3. Does ethnic descent account for differences in the distribution of ethnic identity status types?

We examine the extent to which religious gap year programs and ethnic descent affect ethnic identity in terms of identity status. According to the literature, ethnic minorities exhibit more pronounced identity features than ethnic majorities (Syed & Azmitia, 2009; Yoon, 2011). However, in Israel, Modern-Orthodox educational institutions are essentially "Ashkenazi" (Gross, 2003), and the Israeli ethos denies the existence of ethnic stratification within the Jewish population (Biton 2011, Sasson-Levi & Shoshana, 2013; Shoshana, 2016). How will differences between ethnic minority and majority manifest then in such a unique context?

Methodology

Sample

The research population was defined as Modern-Orthodox gap year students in Israel aged 18 to 19 who had deferred their mandatory military service to attend Modern-Orthodox gap year programs immediately after high school. These gap year programs were established to give an opportunity for male religious high-school graduates to prepare for a full three-year mandatory military service, in which they will be met with a new and potentially confronting nonreligious way of life. This preparation includes courses such as religious faith and Israeli history and society, equipping participants with tools to cope with the challenges of serving as soldiers in a nonreligious army.

The current study included students from two academic years who completed questionnaires both at the start and the end of the academic year. In total, 135 participants (approximately 7% of the population) completed the questionnaires at the two points of measurement. Twenty-three percent of the participants completed program 1, 23% were from program 2, and 54% were graduates of program 3.

Despite its significance, most ethnic identity research has focused thus far on adolescence, and only a few studies have critically engaged with the development of ethnic identity during the period of emerging adulthood (Lu et al., 2020; Syed & Azmitia, 2009; Tsai & Fuligni, 2012; Zhou et al., 2019). Given the limited longitudinal research about ethnic identity formation beyond late adolescence, longitudinal studies during the transition into adulthood are critically needed.

Measures

Demographic Variables

Demographic questions included reference to place of living, type of middle and high school, and parents' descent. The parents' ethnic origin when 50% of the parents were of Ashkenazi descent; 34.6% of Mizrahi descent; 11.5% of mixed descent; and 3.9% did not answer this question.

Ethnic Identity

Participants completed the 12-item version of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure ([MEIM], Roberts et al., 1999). Designed by Phinney (1992), the MEIM is a self-reporting tool comprised of two factors: 7 items measure levels of commitment, affirmation and belonging, and 5 items measure exploration. The questionnaire's response format ranged from 1 (strongly

disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). According to Roberts et al. (1999), the reliability of the MEIM is 0.84 Cronbach's alphas for the first factor and 0.70 for the second factor.

The exploratory factor analysis of our data revealed a discrepancy in the classification of two items: item 3 ("I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me"), which was classified by Roberts et al. (1999) as commitment, affirmation and belonging, featured in our own data as the second factor, namely, exploration (.689). Likewise, item 7 ("I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me", which Roberts et al. classify as commitment, affirmation and belonging, was found to be better suited to the second factor in our research (.386, as opposed to .286 for the first factor). Since these outcomes are in line with Phinney's (1992) original division, we decided to classify the two items (3 and 7) as exploration³. Subsequently, reliability for the exploration factor was 0.73 in T1 and 0.79 in T2 and 0.85 in T1 and 0.90 in T2 for the commitment, affirmation and belonging factor.

Finally, given the significance of ethnic labeling to the formation and maintenance of group identity (Ashmore et al., 2004; Phinney & Ong, 2007), both measures of our questionnaire included an open question inviting participants to label themselves in relation to their ethnic identity. This question likewise follows the MEIM (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999).

Procedure

Approval for the study was obtained from the ethics committee of the School of Education at Bar-Ilan University as part of the first author's Ph.D. dissertation. At the planning stage, 16 institutes were identified as religious gap-year programs. Following a consultation process with several rabbis who are highly familiar with these programs, five were selected to broadly represent the mainstream programs. Of the five, two program directors rejected our invitation to participate in the research; one offered no explanation for his refusal, and the other explained he did not allow students to be asked about their ethnic identity. The remaining three directors gave their consent. Our sample followed geographical lines, including students from Southern (1), Central (2) and Northern (3) Israel. In addition, our sample was based on the total number of students attending each program: two medium-sized programs, (1) and (2), have approximately 50 students each, and a large program (3) has approximately 100 students. The duration of each program is 10 months, taking place between September and July. Subsequently, students have the option of postponing their military service by an additional 6 months to extend their studies. They completed the questionnaires at the two points of measurement: at the beginning (T1) and at the end (T2) of the program.

Results

In the first question, we tested whether there is stability or change in the ethnic identity of the participants between the survey measures. To check this question, two repeated measures were used; insignificant differences between the measures were found in both commitment and exploration (Table 1). These results point to the stability of ethnic identity formation. No demographic variables were found to influence this question.

To check this question at the individual level, we defined stability as a change in exploration between 0 ± 0.3 and in commitment between 0 ± 0.35 (\pm half standard deviation), low progression/regression defined between half to one standard deviation and high progression/regression defined above one standard deviation. As we can see in Table 2, stability was the most frequent with 74 participants (55.2%) in exploration and 59 (44%) in commitment,

³ While MEIM is a useful tool for measuring ethnic identity formation, several articles have highlighted its problems in terms of factor analysis (e.g., Fisher et al., 2020; Gaines et al., 2010; Lin et al., 2019; Nelson, 2012).

progression was the second with 32 participants (23.9%) in exploration and 39 (29.1%) in commitment, and regression was the third with 28 participants (20.9%) in exploration and 36 (26.9%) in commitment.

Table 1

Differences in Commitment and Exploration Between Survey Measures (N=135)

	T1		T2		
	M	SD	M	SD	
Commitment	1.77	0.65	1.84	0.72	F(1,124)=1.257, p=0.264, $\eta^2=0.009$
Exploration	2.55	0.59	2.58	0.61	F(1,127)=0.415, p=0.52, $\eta^2=0.003$

Table 2

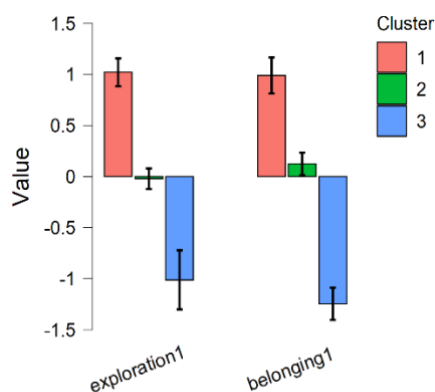
Frequency of Stability and Changes in Ethnic Exploration and Commitment (N=134)

	Exploration	Commitment
High progression	18 (13.4%)	20 (14.9%)
Low progression	14 (10.5%)	19 (14.2%)
Stability	74 (55.2%)	59 (44%)
Low regression	11 (8.2%)	20 (14.9%)
High regression	17 (12.7%)	16 (12%)

To adjust the results of ethnic identity, which was measured using the commitment and exploration components, to Marcia's model, K-Means cluster analysis was used. Cluster analysis is a statistical classification technique that identifies groups of individuals or objects that are similar to each other but different from individuals or objects in other groups. The K-Means method is the most suitable method in the case of a priori theory (Norusis, 2010). In the current study, we used this technique to identify ethnic identity statuses by means of the two ethnic identity components, commitment and exploration. Since we know that the identity status model includes four statuses – diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and achievement, the K-Means method was used, and four clusters were specified in relation to the two measures. However, only three statuses were identified from these four clusters in the two measures: diffusion, moratorium and achievement (Figure 1); the latter is represented by the other two clusters. Subsequently, the K-Means method was used again, and three clusters were specified (Figure 2).

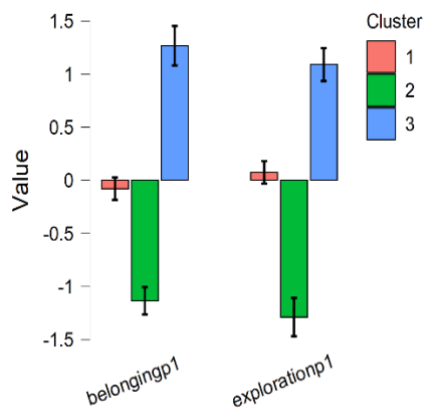
Figure 1

K-Means Cluster Analysis T1



Note. 1=Achievement, 2=Moratorium, 3=Diffusion

Figure 2
K-Means Cluster Analysis T2



Note. 1= Moratorium, 2= Diffusion, 3= Achievement

These statuses were identified within the two measures, with significant differences between the measures (Table 3).

Table 3
Classification of Participants into Ethnic Identity Status in T1 and T2 and Frequency of Transitions Between the Measures (N=135)

	T1	T2	Origin in T1
Achievement	63 (46.7%)	41 (30.4%)	A=35, M=5, D=1
Moratorium	37 (27.4%)	72 (53.3%)	A=28, M=23, D=21
Diffusion	35 (25.9%)	22 (16.3%)	M=9, D=13

With regard to our first research question, the K-Means test points mainly to stability (71 participants, 52.6%) but also to both progression from low to higher status (27 participants, 20%) and regression from high to lower status (37 participants, 27.4%). The results of the cluster analysis help us answer the second research question as well, namely, which model/s of the ethnic identity formation process best captures the participants' experience? In contrast to the results of the repeated measures, which point to stability in the mean, the results at the individual level demonstrate transitions from achievement to moratorium (AM), from moratorium to both achievement (MA) and diffusion (MD), and from diffusion to moratorium (DM).

To examine what changes the three types of statuses undergo in terms of exploration and commitment between the survey measures, two repeated measures were used. Significant differences were found between the measures in both commitment ($F(1,2)=18.198$, $p<0.001$; $\eta^2=0.22$) and exploration ($F(1,2)=22.503$, $p<0.001$; $\eta^2=0.25$).

A post hoc t-test revealed that students who were in diffusion in the first measure significantly increased exploration and decreased commitment. Students who were in the moratorium in the first measure significantly decreased exploration and increased commitment. No significant change was found among students who were in achievement in the first measure (Table 4).

Table 4

Differences in the Three Types of Statuses in Terms of Exploration and Commitment Between the Survey Measures (N=135)

Status in first measure	Factor	T1		T2		t test	Cohen's d	Power
		M	SD	M	SD			
A	ex	2.93	0.44	2.84	0.44	t(62)=1.485	0.20	0.35
	com	2.29	0.37	2.25	0.60	t(62)=0.413	0.08	0.10
M	ex	2.69	0.36	2.31	0.63	t(36)=4.068***	0.74	0.99
	com	1.10	0.44	1.67	0.67	t(36)=4.425***	1.01	0.99
D	ex	1.84	0.37	2.23	0.43	t(34)=-5.235***,	0.97	0.99
	com	1.55	0.43	1.26	0.48	t(34)=3.73***,	0.64	0.96

Note. A=Achievement, M=Moratorium, D=Diffusion, ex=exploration, com=commitment
 *** <0.001

Our third research question asked whether ethnic descent accounts for differences in the distribution of ethnic identity status types between the measures. Chi-square tests revealed a significant relationship between ethnic identity distribution and student descent.

Table 5

Classification of Ashkenazi Participants into Ethnic Identity Status in T1 and T2 and Frequency of Transitions Between the Measures (N=66)

	T1	T2	Origin in T1
Achievement	34 (51.5%)	21 (31.8%)	A=18, M=3
Moratorium	17 (25.8%)	40 (60.6%)	A=16, M=13, D=11
Diffusion	15 (22.7%)	5 (7.6%)	M=1, D=4

Table 6

Classification of Mizrahi Participants into Ethnic Identity Status in T1 and T2 and Frequency of Transitions Between the Measures (N=44)

	T1	T2	Origin in T1
Achievement	17 (38.6%)	10 (22.7%)	A=9, M=1
Moratorium	13 (29.6%)	23 (52.3%)	A=8, M=7, D=8
Diffusion	14 (31.8%)	11 (25%)	M=5, D=6

This is true for Ashkenazi (Table 5) students [$\chi^2(1, 4) = 22.606, p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.44$, power=1.00], Mizrahi (Table 6) students [$\chi^2(1, 4) = 18.439, p = .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.70$, power=1.00] and the overall (Table 3 above) sample [$\chi^2(1, 4) = 45.860, p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.43$, power=1.00].

Discussion

The current research aimed to explore the development of ethnic identity among religious gap year program students in Israel. The aim of this study was to test changes in ethnic identity from two points of view: Marcia's identity status model and the ethnic identity literature. Our first research question concerned stability versus change in the ethnic identity of participants between the survey measures. The results reveal a difference between the mean level and the individual level. Similar to other studies (Kiang et al., 2010; Quintana, 2007; Yip

et al., 2006), we found stability in terms of identity components at the mean level. However, at the individual level, alongside the dominance of stability in identity components, we also found evidence for progression and regression in the ethnic identity formation process. In addition, we identified three ethnic identity statuses among participants: diffusion, moratorium, and achievement. The foreclosure status did not appear in either of the two measures, and moratorium became the frequent status in the second measure. This result is similar to Syed and Mitchell (2013), who found moratorium to be the dominant status in the emerging adulthood period, and in line with Kroger et al. (2010), who found that 42% of their research participants at the age of 19 were in moratorium. These results are in contrast to those of Maehler (2022), who found that in emerging adulthood, most respondents were in the two low statuses. These results, together with the contradictory results presented in the theoretical background, indicate that the ethnic identity process is not a universal homogeneous process, and to understand which circumstances affect the contradictory data, we must undertake more longitudinal studies in a variety of sociocultural contexts.

With regard to the second question, the results attest to transitions from achievement to moratorium (AM), from moratorium to both achievement (MA) and diffusion (MD) and from diffusion to moratorium (DM). These findings support the MAMA model (Stephen et al., 1992), which describes an iterative identity formation process with a period of moratorium followed by commitment. Likewise, our results are in line with the MDMD model (Côté & Schwartz, 2002), which proposes an iterative process with a period of moratorium leading to diffusion. This study thus supports the recent understanding in the literature that identity formation is a complex process that includes stability, progression and regression (e.g., Fadjukoff et al., 2016; Kroger, 2015; Maehler, 2022). Nevertheless, our findings are inconsistent with Phinney and Chavira (1992), who found that adolescents between the ages of 16 and 19 show progression toward ethnic identity achievement.

Findings from the current study provide a start of explanation for the contradictory findings in the literature regarding the question of stability versus change in identity formation. As shown in Table 3 above, students who were in achievement status in T1 were stable in both exploration and commitment. In addition, students who were in moratorium status in T1 had decreased in exploration since they moved to either the achievement status (MAMA model) or diffusion status (MDMD model). Finally, students who were in diffusion status in T1 had an increase in exploration and a decrease in commitment since they moved to the moratorium status (MDMD model).

Interestingly, with regard to the third research question, while the literature on ethnic identity development stresses its relevance mainly for ethnic minorities (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011; Syed & Azmitia, 2009; Yoon, 2011), we found no difference between Ashkenazi students and Mizrahi students at the beginning of the academic year. Likewise, there was no difference in the distribution of ethnic identity status types among these groups between the two measures. This result can be attributed to the unique sociocultural context in Israel, where the national ethos and hegemonic discourse broadly deny the existence of ethnic stratification within the Jewish population (Biton 2011, Lewin-Epstein & Cohen, 2019; Sasson-Levi & Shoshana, 2013; Shoshana, 2016), or to the preference of "clean" class identity instead of stigmatized ethnic identity, as found in Israel in recent studies (Haisraeli, 2021; Shoshana, 2016). Another explanation can be a result of the struggle on the hegemonic culture in Israel, when the Mizrahim became demographically from a minority of 20% in 1948 toward being the majority⁴, a fact that express well recently in the Israeli music and in the political field. This

⁴ According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) from 2019, live in Israel 23% Mizrahim, 29% Ashkenazim, and 48% whose father which was born in Israel. There is no formal information about the descent of the third generation in Israel.

explanation could be relevant to other countries that undergo similar demographic changes and increase the importance of empirical study in these countries.

Conclusion

The results of this study bring a different point of view to the literature by utilizing two methods for the measurement of changes in ethnic identity formation: at the mean level, change was tested by taking the mean scores of the sample, whereas at the individual level, we examined whether mean scores reflected most individuals in the sample (Klimstra et al., 2010; Meeus, 2011). These two methods yielded different results. In addition, by using cluster analysis to combine the two factors and then testing the individual change of each participant in terms of Marcia's model, we were able to more sensitively understand changes in the ethnic identity formation process while comparing our own results with the literature on the identity formation process.

In conclusion, our findings that approximately half of the sample demonstrates change in both ethnic identity components and statuses join similar studies that consistently point to changes in ethnic identity formation during emerging adulthood (Lu et al., 2020; Meeus, 2011; Syed & Azmitia, 2009; Tsai & Fuligni, 2012; Zhou et al., 2019). The other half of the sample demonstrates stability in both ethnic identity components and statuses, thereby supporting studies that found stability of ethnic identity (Kiang et al., 2010; Quintana, 2007; Yip et al., 2006). In order to understand which circumstances, affect the contradictory data, we must undertake more longitudinal studies in a variety of sociocultural contexts.

In addition, the context of demographic changes in which the minority is no longer a minority and as a result challenges the hegemony of the majority, a process which could be similar in other countries, such as the U.S., raises the importance of further comparative longitudinal studies between societies with a salient minority and majority and societies undergoing a process of challenging the hegemony of the majority.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The results of our study have several limitations. First, ethnic identity was measured by MEIM, which consists of three components: exploration, belonging, and behavior. These components reflect two factors (Phinney, 1992), the first identified by Roberts et al. (1999) as affirmation, belonging, and commitment and the second as exploration of and active involvement in group identity. Later, Phinney and Ong (2007) named these two factors exploration and commitment, leaving only six questions in their revised questionnaire. Two questions arise from the way ethnic identity has been explored by the original MEIM: first, are belonging and commitment, which derive from different theoretical fields the same factor? Second, are there two or three factors in total? Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) provide inconsistent results about the number of factors (e.g., Fisher et al., 2020; Gaines et al., 2010; Lin et al., 2019), and we decided to limit the EFA to two factors, following Roberts et al. (1999). As such, our findings must be treated with caution.

A second limitation of the research is that our examined population cannot be generalized due to its unique sociocultural context. Additionally, the sample size is not large enough since gaining access to students in gap-year programs proved challenging. Future research should continue to examine the ethnic identity formation process within different social contexts while aspiring to achieve larger samples. Finally, it is important to focus on other domains of identity formation, such as religious identity, as highlighted by Erikson (Markstrom-

Adams & Smith, 1996), as well as on the relationship between distinct identity domains (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011).

The extensive research carried out between 1990 and 2020 (e.g., Fisher et al., 2020; Gaines et al., 2010; Lin et al., 2019) about the factorial question of the MEIM and the changes introduced in this questionnaire highlight the need to rethink the extent to which this instrument can accurately test Phinney's (1990) theoretical framework. In this study, we focused on quantitative changes to the ethnic identity formation process, exploring whether it is progressive, regressive, or stable. However, it is equally, if not more important, to question and uncover the conditions that lead to progressive, regressive, or stable processes. The latter can only be explored using qualitative research methods.

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