

Identity agents: Parents as active and reflective participants in their children's  
identity formation

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### **Abstract**

The paper introduces the concept of *identity agents*. This concept refers to those individuals who actively interact with children and youth with the intention of participating in their identity formation, and who reflectively mediate larger social influences on identity formation. This contrasts with the focus of mainstream research in the identity field that tends to portray adolescents as the sole reflective agents involved in mature identity development. The paper presents a theoretical analysis presenting the importance of the concept for the formulation of a comprehensive contextual theory of identity formation. The particulars of this concept are illustrated through the presentation of a qualitative report of religious parents actively encouraging their children's processes of identification; co-participating in their children's identity's formation; and reflectively deliberating their parental roles and goals in regards to this process.

The following paper describes parents' roles as active and reflective agents vis-à-vis the identity formation of their children. The concept of parental identity agency is presented in contrast with the common picture conveyed by mainstream research in the identity field within developmental psychology that tends to portray adolescents as the sole reflective agents involved in their mature identity formation. This concept also contrasts with the common portrayal of the parent as an unreflective agent of social forces, naturally, perhaps mindlessly, carrying on traditional and accepted routine childrearing practices that are intended to reproduce existing social identities (Kuczynski, Marshall & Schell, 1997). Instead, we suggest that parents are active and purposeful co-participants in their children's identity's formation and later identity development, often thoughtfully reassessing and deliberating their own changing parental roles and goals in regards to this process.

We begin by introducing the general concept of *identity agents* and why we believe this concept, though absent from the mainstream literature that discusses identity within developmental psychology, is nevertheless important for the construction of a comprehensive contextual theory of identity. We then describe the components of this general concept as they were derived from a qualitative study of parents as identity agents. Two exemplars of parental identity agents are presented to illustrate this concept. We conclude by discussing the implications of this concept in setting an expanded agenda for identity research.

### ***A contextual theory of identity development***

The contextual nature of development is now widely acknowledged in the discipline of developmental psychology, although this contextual nature has been conceptualized in different ways (Lerner, 1998). Bronfenbrenner (1979) is often considered the forerunner of this trend, claiming that development can only be understood by incorporating in its subject of study a context that is broader than the individual. He described development as always occurring within multiple concentric levels of context that are continuously in interaction

with the individual and among themselves. Developmental Systems Theory has portrayed development as an ongoing co-constructed process occurring between the active individual and his or her active context (Ford & Lerner, 1992). Current theorizations of child socialization within psychology recognize that development is the outcome of bi-directional interactions between child and socializers (Kuczynski, 2003a) within ongoing long-term relationships (Lollis, 2003). Theorists building on sociological models such as social capital theory (Coleman, 1998; Lerner & Benson, 2003) point out the importance of social capital for the ability of individuals from different social groups to attain positive development. This conceptualization of context stresses the importance of looking at sociological factors external to the individual (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) as the stratification of society may cause unequal distribution of developmental assets thus enhancing or constraining development.

Cultural psychology has discussed context in terms of diversity rather than inequality. Different cultural contexts produce diverse courses of development, guided by diverse culturally valued goals (Rogoff, 2003). Super and Harkness (2002) discussed the importance of parents and the larger culture in constructing the *developmental niche*- the constructed environment in which children develop. They pointed out how cultural belief systems inform parenting practices that organize the daily regularities of children's lives. Other theorists have suggested that the individual and the context are so intertwined that they cannot meaningfully be studied separately (Cole, 1996). Shweder claims that the boundaries between the personal and the cultural are diffuse and that each "make each other up" (Shweder, 1991). Valsiner (1998, p.207) critiqued classical models of development for "excluding the potential presence of some purposeful 'social other'". Rather, he claims that the objective world of the child is *purposefully subjectified* by the actions of others.

One implication of this contextual trend for developmental psychology has been to research not only individuals and the changes they go through over time but also the diverse

contexts in which they are embedded; the child's caretakers and their perspectives regarding development; and the continuous bidirectional interactions between children, caretakers and the wider context. Developmental psychology has thus become more attentive both to the diversity of cultural development and to the complex impact social structure has on development. Agents other than the developing individual are recognized as crucial co-participants in determining the paths human development can take. Their beliefs and practices have become a major focus of research.

However, although the contextual perspective and the agency of adults regarding children's development are now widely recognized, this trend has by and large stopped short of identity formation as this concept is usually studied within developmental psychology especially from the Neo-Eriksonian perspective (yet see Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain (1998) who study identity based on thinkers such as Bakhtin, Vygotsky and Bourdieu). While the participation of adults in other major aspects of adolescent personality development is extensively studied and recognized, mainstream research that specifically targets identity development is still likely to portray adolescents as the sole agents involved in the crucial aspects of their own identity formation, and mostly studies them alone. Notwithstanding Erikson's (1968) emphasis that all development is psycho-social by nature, including ego identity development, subsequent research and theorizing based on his work has tended to concentrate on adolescent intrapsychic processes and styles (Berzonsky, 1992; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer & Orlofsky, 1993; Waterman, 2004).

We identify three reasons for this focus, which though all quite understandable, are nonetheless flawed. The first reason is that the literature has tended to describe the main psychological task implicated in adolescent identity formation as involving processes of separation, individuation, or differentiation. The individual developing well is seen as striving towards a self-contained self-determined identity, her choices guided by inner needs and

preferences. The essence of identity formation has been described as the individual's inner need to find a unique self separate from the expectations of his peers, parents and teachers. Positive identity exploration and final identity choice are thus seen as the individual's prerogative and mission that must be self-guided in order to be successful and mature. Waterman (2004) has recently emphasized this aspect of identity formation in his discussion of mature identity as personally expressive, a result of identity elements freely chosen in accordance with intrinsic motivation, and that match the adolescent's unique potentialities. Such a perspective has understandably served to focus research on the developing individual's outlook on identity formation while diverting the focus from other external factors and participants involved in this process. However, the psychological goals indicated by concepts such as separation, individuation, differentiation and autonomy are not the only possibly desired goals of identity development. Adams and Marshall (1996) follow a rich tradition of theorists that stress that personal development in general, and identity formation in particular, is a dialectical process involving both processes of differentiation *and* processes of integration. By integration, they refer to processes of connecting, joining, and being recognized by adult society for the benefit of both the individual and society. Thus processes of integration as well as processes of differentiation should be studied.

A second closely related reason for the focus on the individual, is the long-established bifurcation between different disciplinary traditions of research: identity formation within developmental psychology has tended to focus on the development of ego-identity and to relate to identity structure, while within sociology and social psychology researchers have instead focused on social and/or personal identities and on identity content, concentrating on the ways these identities are maintained or changed within interpersonal interaction (Côté & Levine, 2002). While social identity is thus recognized as residing mostly within the social and interpersonal realm, the concept of ego-identity has traditionally been understood as an

'inner' and private attribute of the individual. It then becomes clear why Neo-Eriksonian identity research has focused on the individual adolescent rather than on contextual and ecological factors. Nonetheless, although the distinction between ego-identity and personal and social identities is of analytical importance- as is the distinction between identity structure and identity content- we contend that these sets of concepts are mutually interdependent in real-life situations. Thus ego-identity may take different forms within different socio-historical contexts (Côté, 1996) and different social identities require different forms of ego-identity in order to maintain them. Therefore the contextual and co-constructed perspective applies to ego-identity no less than to social identity.

Erikson's (1968) description of the stage of adolescence as the crest of the developmental crises of identity may be a third reason that contextual factors have been under-researched. Despite Erikson's psychodynamic assertion that the critical adolescent phase of identity development is based on prior childhood identifications with parental figures, developmental identity research has tended to focus on the period of adolescence and beyond while ignoring the precursors of identity development. Identification seemingly occurs 'far-away' from the epicenter of ego-identity formation, specifically in early childhood in the context of relationships with significant others. However, these foundational identity processes in childhood, that have a more evident co-constructed nature, are the building blocks of later identity formation and therefore cannot be disregarded.

The acontextual perspective regarding identity has indeed been the subject of critique for more than a decade (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Côté & Levine, 1988; Schachter, 2005a; Yoder, 2000) by researchers claiming that identity research within developmental psychology has taken an exaggerated individualistic perspective that ignores social and cultural influences. While it may very well be that the adolescent believes she is creating an identity of her very own this is not incompatible with the view that she is actually weaving and

working with identity materials at least partly pre-given and pre-imposed; that the possible ways known to her that different identity fragments can be configured are channeled through partly pre-given templates, and that the whole process may be assisted and/or constrained by other goal-directed individuals and social structures. Still, research based on this critique, attempting to relate contextual factors to identity over and above the individual's inner deliberations is scarce and has mostly concentrated on impersonal macro-contextual factors. Researchers have examined macro-socio cultural barriers to identity formation (Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Yoder, 2000) suggesting that identity development is constrained by socio-economic factors. Another related approach links macro-sociological, historical and cultural processes to identity by implicating postmodern social structures and concomitant modes of thought as effecting processes of identity construction; theorizing that diverse socio-cultural contexts result in diverse forms of identity structure (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Côté, 1996; Schachter, 2005b). Paradoxically, such research has implied that the weakening of community and other institutional supports that is characteristic of late-modern societies has shifted the burden of the task of ego identity formation back square on the adolescent's shoulders. And so, the current extent of the presence of other adults in contextual identity theory is the acknowledgement of their relative absence.

On a micro-system level there has been some work done on family processes related to identity exploration (Beyers & Goosens, 1999; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Grotevant, 1998). However, contextual accounts offered on a micro-system level are relatively rare (Kerpelman, Pittman & Lamke, 1997). The contexts chosen for study are rarely other individuals presented as having agentic, goal-directed characteristics and lasting relationships with the developing individual. Research highlighting adults as highly involved and agentic regarding their children is of course widespread within developmental psychology in general and within the socialization literature (Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997; Kuczynski, 2003a) in

particular. However we would point out that this work rarely references the term identity and does not conceptualize adult actions as related to the attempt to participate in identity formation. Conversely, the socialization literature has not been integrated into the identity literature with the goal of constructing a truly life-span developmental approach.

A grand contextual life-span approach towards identity development has not been offered since Erikson's work. The perspective taken here is that four major components necessary for such a contextual approach are missing from current discussions in the identity field: (a) examining perspectives of other agents besides the adolescent's; (b) examining processes starting before the period of adolescence occurring within the framework of relationships with significant others; (c) recognizing possible goals, other than individuation, that mature identity structures serve; and (d) charting the complex relationship between the structure of ego identity and the particular contents of social identities.

Following the above, we suggest that the concept of an *identity agent* is missing from current conceptualizations of identity formation. This concept refers to those individuals who actively interact with youth in order to participate in their formation of an identity. These are the developing individual's partners-in-identity-formation or their co-constructors of identity. Parents, teachers, clergy, mentors and youth leaders are all potentially such agents. The word "partners" conveys our assumption that these agents are not merely individuals to separate from, rather they are potentially resources for positive identity formation.

The concept of agency we use borrows from Kuczynski's description of agents as "actors with the ability to make sense of the environment, initiate change, and make choices" (2003b, p.9) and from Bruner's (1990) emphasis on intentionality. This is not intended to imply that these agents are sole agents replacing the developing individual's agency, nor that the direction of influence is unidirectional (Kuczynski et al., 1997, p.26). We only claim that these agents are potentially active and influential co-participants. Although most would

readily acknowledge that there are social agents that attempt to influence other's social identities, this has rarely been represented in standard theoretical conceptualizations of identity development, all the more so regarding the influence of these agents on ego-identity.

In order to begin addressing this agenda we conducted a qualitative investigation of potential agents of identity formation in order to understand their perspective, to assess their extent of involvement in the process of identity formation, and to identify components of such agency. A central candidate for examination as an *identity agent* is the parent.

### ***Jewish Orthodox parents as potential identity agents***

The analysis was conducted on life stories of parents drawn from an ongoing larger qualitative study on the topic of identity and context (Schachter, 2002, 2004, 2005b). In order to flesh out the complexity of identity and context, the larger study examines adolescents, parents and educators affiliated with Orthodox Jewry in Israel. This group was chosen for study as it offers an arena to examine a complex intersection of possible influences on identity on a Macro-systemic level. Israeli Orthodox Jewry juxtaposes traditional, modern and postmodern influences; religious and secular influences; and particular nationalistic and ethnic identity elements of a minority group coupled with a degree of openness to globalized culture. Preserving Jewish identity in the historical circumstances of living more than a millennium in the Diaspora, often under conditions of anti-Semitic prejudice and persecution, entailed creating a strong cultural commitment to continuity as a value in and of itself. The promised freedoms of the beginning of the Modern age posed additional challenges for the continuity of Jewish identity. Some Jewish groups embraced Modernity and either abandoned or reformed much premodern traditional observance; some created an Ultra-Orthodox identity— attempting to reject Modernity and continue tradition unchanged while at the same time attempting to fortify religious practice and reinforce boundaries within a closed society;

a third group, Modern Orthodoxy, attempted to somehow integrate certain aspects of modernity while remaining faithful to the traditional Jewish code of law. The later advent of Zionism, the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel, all created a climate of shifting collective and personal identities, with forces of dynamic change co-existing with attempts to preserve and consolidate identity. Postmodern macro-contextual influences too stir up identity issues (Schachter, 2005a). Sociologically, all contemporary Jewish Orthodox Israelis live within educational, family, occupational and leisure settings that expose them to various degrees to premodern, modern and postmodern influences (Kaniel, 2000; Schachter, 2002, 2004, 2005b). This is an "extreme" case (Yin, 1984) that can potentially bring out in finer detail characteristics which are believed to generalize to a much broader population. Jewish Orthodox parents can be seen as representing a much wider group of parents whose parenting takes place in the context of the encounter of different, sometimes conflicting, cultures, worldviews and values, social and educational institutions. Such a context brings forth unique challenges for parenting (Hartman-Halbertal, 2002), and thus their views on identity seemed promising for study.

### *Narrative data collection*

In the larger ongoing study on context and identity within the Jewish Orthodox community, over seventy life-story interviews have been collected with unrelated adolescents, parents and educators. The twenty parenting narratives in the study were collected in the same manner, using the *thematic life story* technique (Schachter, 2004): In the first part of the interview, the interviewees are asked to freely narrate their childhood and adolescent life story with particular emphasis on themes of religious development and on interactions with parents. In the second part, the interviewees are asked to continue their life-story with particular emphasis on them as parents: on the history of relations with their children in general and surrounding issues of religiosity in particular. Most parenting

interviews in the study took two sessions of ninety minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and identifying information was removed. The analysis was carried out using a method based on grounded theory technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) generating theoretical concepts from a constant comparison of empirical narrative and previous theoretical conceptualizations. Our analysis centered on building an "ideal type" of an identity agent.

### *Six components of identity agency*

Our analysis revealed six major components of identity agency. We will illustrate these components with the help of two life stories drawn from our sample. We briefly describe here, in advance, the components we discovered so as to attune the readers of the stories to our specific focus. Following the stories we discuss these components more extensively:

1. **Identity concern:** *Identity agents* are concerned with issues of the youth's developing social *and* ego identity.
2. **Goals:** *Identity agents* have goals regarding identity development– either concerning favored identity content and specific social identities or even implicit goals regarding favored ego-identity structure and course of development.
3. **Praxis:** *Identity agents* act upon such concern and responsibility, implementing practice intended to further their goals.
4. **Assessment:** *Identity agents* assess both the youth *and* his or her socio-cultural context in order to better address their role as mediator of identity.
5. **Implicit theory:** *Identity agents* hold implicit psychological theories regarding identity development that guide practice.
6. **Reflexivity:** *Identity agents* reflect on goals and practice, reassessing and refining both.

### *Narrative exemplars of identity agency: Amitai and Zvi*

The following two parents' narratives serve us to illustrate identity agency. They were chosen as they present in a highly articulate manner two very different approaches to parenting while they each clearly demonstrate identity agency. The stories exemplify parental identity agency in a complex context of juxtaposed cultural influences. These two parents' own identity formation in such a context was not problem-free, and their parenting later became a "problem" which needed to be worked through. We begin by presenting both stories in detail and then discuss the manifest elements of agency.

**Amitai:** Amitai is a 38-yr-old director in a governmental educational organization. He is married and the father of four children aged 5 to 12 and is working towards a Ph.D in the social sciences. Amitai's narrative contains several interwoven mini-themes that converge into one overarching one. The first theme is related to the fundamental place he accords to the nuclear family regarding identity. His parents immigrated to Israel from two Mediterranean countries in the early 1950's soon after the creation of the state of Israel. Both his parents were previously married, his father having a daughter from his first marriage. Amitai describes how his mother married his father under the express condition that he sever all ties with his former wife and daughter. Amitai begins his narrative with this foundational story explaining that it demonstrates his parents' attempt to create a new family which is a secluded and protected haven. He calls this attempt "the totalitarian will of my parents to create a 'bubble' of a strong nuclear family, protected from all sides, which becomes *the* thing— it is the future, it is the emotional core of life, it is everything, it is the nuclear reactor powering everything". Amitai fondly recalls a warm, cozy, family atmosphere, odors of cooking, hours of perusing the family albums, and lots of kissing and hugging between family members. However, he also recalls that ties with relatives outside the nuclear family were discouraged. In particular he mentions colorful quaint grandparents (one who concocted alcoholic brews and wrote poetry following the study of esoteric texts; and an illiterate yet highly intuitive

grandmother, an expert in dream interpretation) whom he saw less frequently than he wished. The warm family environment was created by his parents at the expense of a flowing easygoing contact with the "outside" and "others". Amitai's ambivalence is manifest in his use of the term "totalitarian" together with his avowed appreciation of the value of the family warmth.

A related theme emerges surrounding issues of flexibility vs. rigidity vis-à-vis religious identity. Religiously, Amitai's father came from an assimilated unobservant family, while his mother came from a relatively strict Orthodox home. Amitai comments that this union was not as unheard of as it might sound today in contemporary Israel— where these identities are diametrically opposed— since in the formative years of Israel identity was more flexible. Amitai comments:

I understand this as follows: My father came (to Israel) without any deep foundations of identity. He wasn't deeply rooted in any one culture. In some ways this allowed him to "connect" wherever and to whatever he wanted to. The flip side of this was that any fascinating notion passing by managed to sweep him off his feet. And that's the real story here, and *I am delighted to inherit this story*. It empowers me. It suits me more than to believe I am committed to some way of thinking and doing (just because) that originated hundreds of years ago making it a story I have to continue to tell. From my father's side I felt as if he bequeathed me with all the possibilities I could dream of.

Amitai contrasts inheriting the freedom of a free-floating ability to "connect" with inheriting a closed identity commitment. Later on, as Amitai's father becomes more strict and stringent in his religious observance, Amitai mourns the loss of flexibility that accompanies his father's choice. The ability to freely "connect" is seen as a strength that can empower Amitai rather than impoverish him. Such a structure of identity enabled the father to

"connect" to his dissimilar mother, to "connect" to his heritage, and Amitai later claims that this enabled his father to "latch-on" to the exciting drama of the birth of the state of Israel. Amitai says that he is delighted to inherit this structural flexibility. At the same time though, Amitai's father is heading in the opposite direction seeking grounding for himself and for his family. According to Amitai, the father's newly acquired religiosity and Sabbath observance was intended to focus the family having to face new and changing surroundings. This double-sided theme resurfaces later on during Amitai's early adolescence. As his father becomes more stringent, Amitai connects to his religiosity differently. Joining a Torah study group, Amitai excels— he describes his success in this arena as empowering him by giving him the feeling that "this world responds to me". He was recognized by others and thus recognized within himself a mature and valued member of religious society. While his father's religiosity is viewed as inflexible, dogmatic and constraining, his own is described as an identity resource. However, he also acknowledges that his father indeed found grounding and anchoring through religious identity. Amitai recognizes and admires his parents' attempt to create a warm and strong family character through the construction of clear boundaries and the casting of solid foundations. He also recognizes and deplors what he views as an excessive tug towards rigidity and 'xenophobia'. He prefers the possibility of a more fluid identity, being empowered by the past but not bound to it.

During adolescence and emerging adulthood, Amitai distances himself from his father's religiosity by adopting alternative religious models available in the wider community. He especially turns to the study of Talmudic lore, within which he finds subversive, radical, and challenging elements, as opposed to his father's conservative reading of religious texts. For some ten years he teaches Talmud in a religious high-school, emphasizing the subversive elements. He is outraged by what he sees as a complacent religiosity characterizing many of his religious peers whom are interested only in petty religious issues. As a teacher, he

attempts to connect students to the Talmud by engaging them in an authentic open dialogue regarding existential and moral issues. Personally, ritualistic elements lose their sway. He also goes through a religious crisis relating to the death of a friend, adding to his alienation from certain aspects of religious praxis. He attends synagogue weekly, but remains outdoors overlooking the playing children.

Becoming a father himself, Amitai faces questions regarding his own children's upbringing that are similar to those his parents faced; questions of family boundaries and their permeability, and of identity flexibility vs. structure. However, he views his socio-cultural context and his chosen identity as different than his parents'. He faces these questions under a different set of constraints and with somewhat different goals. Amitai then attempts to create his own workable parental scheme enabling him to face these challenges. He reports aspiring to create a warm family atmosphere similar to the one he enjoyed as a child. Though he feels that many other socialization institutions failed him, the nuclear family his parents created basically didn't, despite his recognizing its negative aspects. In attempting to recreate a similar environment he must deal with the question of how to structure one without rigid boundaries; and how to foster meaningful religious identity without rigidly imposing unwanted commitment. He describes his attempts to resolve these inherent tensions:

In my view, the strength of our particular (childhood) home, more than that of any other social institution, never dissipated. That is something I am also trying to recreate for my own children— to create a microcosm that is not just four walls, rather it is also something very consistent, and emotionally infused. An environment of warmth, of awareness, of relationship, one that has pulsating rhythms from one Sabbath to the next, a home with a lot of effort put into sustaining good relationships, one that has a lot of 'touchy-feely', where you pay a lot of emotional attention to what's going on with each and every family member. In some ways I think I am totally replicating my

parents' pattern of presuming that family is the center, the core within which the most important things I can create for my children will evolve.

Amitai described his parents as creating family warmth by cloistering the family. Similarly, Amitai, stresses the stable, emotional, cozy and caring components of his new family. He understands that the creation of a warm environment requires structuring. He uses religious ceremony to that purpose; however, he stresses that according such a central place to family and to religious atmosphere, does not mean imposing an inflexible, insensitive and pre-given identity. He is also wary of the xenophobic particularism that such an intense family experience can create:

*I don't* want to define or delimit for my kids what they will or can be. I *do* want to set particular boundaries that will create tangible foundational, primordial experiences. You can't reach out to the universal experience of religious fervor... if you don't have something- some inner music that you heard before, that awakens a yearning within yourself... ...An authentic, significant, deep religious experience comes from these places, comes from the womb of how you were raised. That's the kind of starting point I want to create within my children- but again, with the deep belief that I have no idea what will be- only a deep faith in the sanctity of the process.

We stress five points in this passage: First, Amitai is deeply concerned with his children's religious identity. Second, he believes that parents should not try to predetermine identity; however, they do have the duty to provide the basic ingredients because mature identity needs foundation. Third, despite Amitai's previous romantic admiration of his father's rootlessness, he now stresses that meaningful identities are rooted in the particular. Universal aspects can only be accessed through the particular, and so it is wrong to skip the latter in order to go straight to the former. Fourth, the particular aspects of identity are created by

structure, boundaries and ritual. Fifth, the term "sanctity of the process" suggests that the parent has to provide the context in which these embryonic seeds of identity can flourish:

I am not a purveyor of religious experience- I can make it possible though. I can mediate it. Sometimes if I sing a Sabbath song with a deep unashamed yearning I don't hide, I suddenly might find my daughter come and snuggle up to me. She'll feel that I'm singing from some deep place inside, not characteristic of an Israeli macho. I know if there is something I want to hand over- it's that. The melody. Not a rational text that can be deconstructed. It's a melody they heard in their father's home.

Amitai wants to create the possibility for the child to "connect" (i.e. identify and commit). This entails being a source of identification, channeling heritage by modeling such connection, initiating into tradition, yet not imposing it. The narrative further reveals that he believes that the "sanctity of process" is dependent upon the parent being authentic, dialogical and with presence. Regarding authenticity, Amitai says:

It's crucial that she see authenticity- and if my being authentic means she (his eldest daughter) sees me in religious crisis then I want her to see that. I even want to praise it. I want to make a point out of it: my religious life and hopefully hers isn't a trinket to be played with. God doesn't want me to pray just in order for her to see me pray- so that it will be part of her visual social order. That's not the religiosity I'm after. I want her to see the broken heart. ... Maybe I want to tell her a real story of a father- a story that isn't "dressed up". If I go to synagogue just in order that she see that... what can I expect her to become? Some bourgeois Jew? ...That won't breed anything interesting. That's stagnant, on its way to decay. I'd like to tell her the story of my crisis. Maybe when she is 16 she'd be old enough to understand its authenticity.

Amitai is aware that he is an identity model for his children. Not only does he not want to hide his crisis for educational reasons, to the contrary, he wants to reveal it to his daughter for educational purposes. Notice also that he has an implicit developmental perspective on identity formation, putting off such revelation to an age that he feels she will be able to comprehend the complex message.

According to Amitai, authenticity is always accompanied by open dialogue. Relating to a story he previously narrated of his daughter's freely choosing to pray in the morning during school vacation he says:

I'm glad she makes such decisions about religious practice– that she prays in the morning when she gets up, and I'll be happy if she continues to do so. But if not, that's also OK by me. What's important to me is that I be involved with the things that matter to her– that I be part of her dialogue. Not because I *have* to know exactly what is going on in her head, but because I *want* to– because that is really living life for me– I *want* to be in a deep conversation with her, to deliberate with her, and to support certain of her decisions.

The basic dilemmas of how to navigate between structure and flexibility; between valued particular ideals and the desire not to be coercive; between creating particular family boundaries while staying open to the "other"- is tentatively solved by the parenting "philosophy" of creating basic building blocks and being present in a continuous ongoing authentic dialogue with the child. Thus creating a relationship of parental presence in the process replaces any need for attempting to predetermine social identity.

That is the essence of parenting- being involved. Not wanting to control or influence but just to be there, to be present.

The last theme we would like to emphasize is that in order to sustain such a parenting outlook Amitai must address the question of control. He needs to face the basic dilemma of

being concerned with conveying a specific identity while allowing the child to form his or her own. Rather than attempting to duplicate his own identity, or conversely to relinquish his stake in his children's identity, Amitai creates metaphors describing a third position. First he coins the concept of "limited partnership". As a limited partner, he doesn't step back from involvement nor take full responsibility for his children's identity. Nevertheless he sees himself as a central and active participant in their identity development:

I am a limited partner in the formation of my children's identity. ...Partial doesn't mean passive, partial can be very active. My experience as a teacher taught me that "There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit" (Ecclesiastes, 8,8)"..... ....So I am not looking for a firm hold (on people), I am looking for relations, for process, for dialogue– and I am willing to change too (along the way).

The above metaphor stresses intense and active bi-directional involvement together with the aspiration to relinquish control. He borrows a second set of metaphors from the arts:

Soberly looking at reality, at the myriad forces impacting my children and their world– recognizing that education and schools have limited sway, and influence only a small modest part of their identity formation, I can only try and do my best in this "dance" without any high expectations... ...There is a sort of process going on over which I have no control. I can try and do a sort of "parenting dance" with myself, with my wife, with other family members, with other social agents, but between me and you I have no real control, no firm grip, I can only attach a prayer. ...It's like Jazz. We're playing music, and there are all sorts of undercurrents flowing that I'm not even aware of, and there are all these social agents around, educational systems and families, the media ...if I want to be loyal to my parental role than I suppose I am a moderator. My (musical) role is to know when to "dissolve", when to let things "discord", and to be there for my kids if they want my advice. I can't totally prevent all dissonance.

The role of jazz musician, as Amitai construes it, is to be a moderator in a dynamic fluid situation in which numerous and disparate sounds not all originating from him are nevertheless under his partial control. He can actively influence the resulting music by participating in the decision of how to configure the musical phrases.

A third metaphor is that of the sand and the sea. Amitai literally feels the awesome power of the social forces surrounding his family. Rather than viewing this as a doomed struggle, he tries to find ways to merge with, and take part in, the give and take of opposing forces

... The sea washes the sand. Can you fight the sea? You can't. It's unrealistic to fight such force, but you can sort of become 'water' yourself, and merge and become part of this business that is somehow influencing them. I don't mean to say that I have surrendered; I'm also not at war. I just think I should be looking at reality as it is.

**Zvi:** Zvi is fifty years old, living as an Ultra-Orthodox Jew, a father of five. He is an engineer, a political activist and a self-taught expert in Jewish philosophy. Zvi was born in Italy to a family that escaped from Libya in the 1950's because of anti-Semitism. In stark contrast to Amitai's description of the family as a center of warmth, the main emotion that pervades Zvi's description of his childhood is alienation. A fifth child in a family of nine, Zvi describes his father as self-absorbed in his religious practice, not giving him proper care, attention or affection. An immigrant faced with economic hardship, his father is repeatedly unemployed. Deeply religious and stringent, the father refuses to work on Jewish holidays and so time after time loses his job, causing the family to live in constant poverty. As a result, Zvi was sent to a public school rather than a Jewish private school. Zvi describes the school with the same term— alienation. He repeatedly states that he didn't understand what was going on socially. His peers and he were interested in utterly different things. He describes his continuous attempts to evade gangs of bullies. He then says:

Z: This of course connected to "we (Jews) survived Pharaoh, we'll survive this too".

I: What do you mean by that?

Z: I think I identified them as Cossacks (~bitterly laughs).

I: Was that attitude something you picked up at home?

Z: My parents survived persecutions of their neighbors during The Nazi occupation of Libya and survived miraculously. They went through lots of stories of pogroms.

Zvi's personal experiences at school become embedded within and interpreted through a larger family and national historical narrative. The bullying children are not just unfriendly aggressive kids; rather, in his mind they join a long historical line of anti-Semitic persecutors, and he continues a long line of victims, even martyrs who sacrificed their well-being in order to continue the chain of a committed Jewish identity. This historical burden eased the daily confrontation by giving it meaning; it also created a complex of commitment and guilt surrounding the imperative to continue the same identity path. Zvi's experiences promoted anger both towards his persecuting peers and his father, who in his eyes betrayed and abandoned him unjustly. His father was willing to pay the price of poverty by stubbornly refusing to work on Jewish holidays for his own religious welfare but consequently Zvi was sent alone to brave the hostile gentile world.

Zvi describes that as the years went by events of anti-Semitism were tempered by other experiences of social acceptance, teacher support and academic excellence. His desire to belong as opposed to his feelings of alienation becomes a basic tension between his inner resistance to the attempts to deprive him of his cultural identity coupled with his identification with universalistic ideals of liberty, justice and morality from the vantage point of the oppressed. Zvi says:

I remember it was obvious to me- being an observant Jew is a matter of preserving your identity. The religious issue (in my life) was like making a stand against the steamroller

of the hegemony of secular culture that wants to deprive Jews of their identity. It was an act of defiance- of résistance. A heroic act, a noble act of not giving in.

In his adolescent years in the mid 1970's, Zvi delves into intellectual and political realms and constructs a socialist, humanist, Zionist worldview. He sees Zionism as a liberation movement enabling the possibility of personal redemption through a communal (non-alienated) framework. He enthusiastically adopts then prevalent notions that secular concepts such as humanism and liberty can be consonant with religious concepts such as messianic redemption. However, Zvi also acknowledges that certain aspects of religiosity, similar to those he discerned in his Father, are oppressive and authoritarian. He then adopts an agnostic viewpoint, losing his absolute conviction in the existence of God.

Zvi graduates and moves to Israel. There, no longer needing to resist in order to retain his national Jewish identity, he slowly drifts into a Jewish secular lifestyle, although with mixed feelings. He feels increasingly alienated from the Israeli religious community due to what he perceived as its misguided political agenda which starkly contrasts with his humanistic ideals. On the other hand he feels that he is nevertheless betraying his religious identity and his forbearers' values.

As Zvi anticipates family and parenting he undergoes a radical change:

I was living then with a girlfriend who wasn't religious, [you see] I really wanted to become [mainstream] Israeli. Yet at some point the whole religious-cultural thing started bothering me. After all, I still had this longing for something religious. It's hard for me to live in a non-religious world. Up to then I had always been able to work in all sorts of [religious] stuff- like, go to a synagogue here and there, observe Sabbath occasionally, but when you get to the point where you have to decide about marriage I saw that this can't hold. I couldn't build a family on a secular foundation.

The secular world didn't suit me anymore, I couldn't stand it– I had left the religious world because it was sort of defective and dull-witted, but the secular world was no less empty and dumb. ... When I met my [Ultra-Orthodox] wife, this all came together. I had enough of women that go to bed with you on the first date– with no anchor of absolute values. Everything goes when you have money, good looks and a bright future... But [instead there was] relativism- nothing is worth dying for- the girls I met they had no anchorage. Nothing you could establish a family on.

Establishing a family, according to Zvi, requires a framework of absolute values. Though the religious world is still seen as 'defective and dull-witted' he maintains that a firm identity is built on commitment that transcends the individual and that relativism and inconsistency 'wont hold' when establishing a family. This becomes the base of Zvi's adopting an exacting religious identity that dictates the minute details of his life. Zvi and his future wife cut a deal. Zvi, in an act he calls 'self-sacrificial' takes upon himself to lead a strict Ultra-Orthodox observant life in spite of his religious skepticism. She marries him acknowledging this.

The secular world is no alternative; I don't know how you can raise children in it. I prefer an Ultra-Orthodox ...robust community based on values. You can raise kids there- even if religion's all an illusion, or just one possibility among many. The Ultra-Orthodox model, even though it has its price, is excellent value-wise. It's a good model, it works. Its validity derives from the fact that the model works educationally. Good praxis corroborates the underlying ideology. Maybe the ideology is based on an untruth or an illusion- there's no God, the whole story is a bluff- but the social model works. It's for the kids' education. For my own sake I don't know what I'd do.

Zvi's self sacrifice is in that he chooses this lifestyle although he claims he does not need it for himself; rather he feels that he needs it as a father to construct a sphere that works educationally. His own identity is constructed according to what he sees as the educational

needs of his future children. His belief in this is so strong that he is willing to construct and maintain an absolutist world that he does not fully believe in for this purpose. Note that Zvi believes that children's identity should be formed within an absolute structure although- or perhaps because- the actual world is a relativistic one. Within such a world, the moral stance consisting of the willingness to commit and to do good in spite of moral relativity becomes paramount. Conversely, recall that we saw Amitai does not believe that children can or should be sheltered from the relativistic world; rather, this circumstance demands that identity formation become relational and dialogical.

The blatant acknowledged discrepancy between Zvi's personal religious uncertainty and his paternalistic conviction brought the interviewer to raise the question of authenticity in parenting. Zvi answered that he believes that his children aren't aware of the discrepancy since he is careful to say only what he believes in, leaning on other social agents- such as his wife and teachers at school- to complete what he cannot. Zvi had beforehand told the story of teaching his school age daughter the importance of the Jewish rite of making a blessing before eating. "When a child makes a blessing, [switches to whispering voice] 'a choir of angels replies *blessed be his name* and God himself says *Shhh, listen everyone, Rebecca is blessing* and everyone listens carefully'; that's the cosmic sacred symphony that accompanies every action and ritual we do." The interviewer referred to this example, asking regarding the authenticity of such practice coming from an agnostic. Zvi responded:

At the moment I say this, I believe in it. I wouldn't say this if I didn't. I'm telling a story... You can't tell (the child) this is all socially constructed... At that moment I am in marketing. You work for a company you say their product is the best. You believe that because you work there. It's like cognitive therapy- change cognition, change reality. You want to love someone... so you [actively] look for his good qualities so you can change your attitude. You want to believe in God? You can, at least for a short

time. So at the time I said it I believed in it. For educational reasons I'll also say all sorts of other things, like that it's really important to wear a school uniform. I'll 'sell' that to my kids as important even though I have my doubts. Or I'll tell them to go to school every morning, even though that's surely questionable, because I don't want to question it with them yet. That's [Descartes'] *provisory morality*- morality within a specific framework. ...I don't absolutely believe; rather it's a utilitarian belief. ...I see no possibility in educating without dogmas or at least a provisory morality- but you can't declare that it's provisory. Some say everything is narrative, but you can't educate unless you believe in the option that it might be true. If you say outright it's a story... [it won't hold].

In responding to the interviewer's challenge, Zvi reveals the complexity of his situation. Living in a postmodern world sensitizes him to the constructed nature of reality. He himself can and maybe even is forced to accept that there are multiple optional ways to apprehend it. However, he also deeply believes that developmentally and educationally children cannot be raised to be firm moral beings within such an epistemic atmosphere. He therefore uses the certainty of Orthodox identity as a scaffold to build moral identity. His developmental perspective compels him to adopt a paternalistic approach. His predicament is that he is fully immersed in a philosophical zeitgeist of deconstruction, while as a parent he feels he must construct. Borrowing on Descartes notion of 'provisory morality', Zvi claims that in the absence of absolute confidence in any specific way of life, a tentative structure must be created and maintained. Although he feels no absolute confidence in this way of life he must take part in maintaining the impression that he does. Since he acknowledges that educating for identity needs a semblance of authenticity, he 'works' on himself so as to temporarily identify with the role he has voluntarily assumed.

Zvi goes on to emphasize that he does not refrain from instilling within his children a critical attitude towards the Orthodox social world. However, within the gestalt of the identity he chose for them, certainty is intentionally placed as the taken-for-granted background, and criticism is the cautiously added foreground. This contrast must be carefully managed:

My main uncertainty is what my chances are. I don't know anyone else who does as I do. It's a very complex and risky method. The discrepancy between the [carefully critical] home and the [uncritical] school can't be too great or it will explode... I think my kids are enduring this [well] and eventually, hopefully, they'll be more complex.

In conclusion, Zvi too exemplifies a parent with explicit goals vis-à-vis his children's identity, with a strategic and tactical approach to attaining these goals, with a sensitive understanding of the problematic nature of the practical aspects needed to attain such goals, and a reflective deliberative attitude towards dealing with such problems.

***Narrative analysis: Parenting for identity***

The juxtaposition of traditional, modern, and postmodern contexts in contemporary religious Jewish Orthodox life posed a common set of personal identity dilemmas for Amitai and Zvi, this despite the fact that these individuals' narratives depict two very different personalities that ultimately settle on two very different identities. As individuals, both are critical of the socio-religious identities which they inherited, whether for epistemic or moral reasons, yet neither abandons traditional identity. To the contrary, they each show considerable commitment to an identity that places demands on their day-to-day living. Both commit to a particular cultural identity and community although they both have universalistic humanistic aspirations. Both stories also reveal how personal commitment needs to be (re)negotiated through ever-changing historical conditions and relationships. However, these identity dilemmas transcend personal identity issues and become issues for parenting. We

now discuss our topic of parenting for identity, and use the narratives to illustrate the six interrelated components of *identity agency* mentioned above:

***Identity Concern:*** Identity concern means that parents or other identity agents are concerned with issues related to children's developing identity, seeing themselves as solely or partly responsible for aspects of such development. Being involved in the identity formation of the other is part of the agent's own identity, and may be part of the agent's generativity (Erikson, 1968; McAdams & St. Aubin, 1998). Parental involvement is not solely out of concern for children's well-being, success, or even for their morality, although it could touch on any of these- it is a concern for their identity. This in no way necessarily implies that identity agents impose specific social identities or identity structures, only that they are concerned with identity development and participate in it. Both parents we interviewed were explicitly concerned with their children's social- in this case religious- identity. This traditional identity is seen as potentially meaningful for their children's development and therefore passing it on to them is seen as part of the parenting task. Moreover, though it might seem as if the extent of the identity concern of these parents amounts to their involvement with their children's social identity, a careful reading reveals that parents concern themselves with aspects of ego-identity as well. These parents were concerned with questions of preferred identity structure, not just with how to advance commitment towards particular identity content. Specific identity structures are preferred both because of their perceived utility in sustaining particular identity contents, yet also for moral reasons. When Amitai expresses his preference for dialogue over control, he is not speaking of his preference for a specific social identity, rather he is implicitly expressing his preference regarding the basic processes that influence and structure the way the ego will go on to organize and regulate identity contents. When Zvi commits himself to a strict Orthodoxy for the sake of his children, this is mainly because of

his stated moral preference for a stable anchoring structure of identity in a relativistic world, while the specific contents of Jewish Orthodoxy are only a secondary consideration if at all.

**Identity Goals:** Identity agents have goals regarding their children's identity development, and these identities in turn, may serve wider psychological and educational goals. While both parents educate within the framework of traditional Judaism, each set a different educational goal: Zvi stressed religious identity as a medium for creating an obligation towards interpersonal morality, while Amitai stressed the importance of a particular cultural religious identity as the necessary foundation for creating an authentic and vital engagement with the self and the world. In either case, the parent has set a desired goal vis-à-vis identity formation, and has interest in specific goals that he believes that identity serves.

**Praxis:** Identity agents act upon their identity concerns and goals, implementing practice intended to further these goals and enhance their participation in identity formation. This can be done in various ways. Parents may alter their lifestyles, residences, social networks and daily commitments for the sole purpose of their children's identity formation. They may manage the boundaries of the social settings that the child will in all probability encounter, or form a continuous open dialogue with the child in order to offset possible harmful influences. Daily encounters with children are seen as opportunities to practice identity agency. Whether through the construction of the Sabbath meal as a focal point involving the whole family serving Amitai's goal of creating the protected and tangible family core of identity; or whether it is through Zvi's reciting a blessing with his daughter while whispering to her that the celestial choir is awaiting her blessing with bated breath; both stories demonstrate the different possible ways parents purposely attempt to form identity through praxis.

**Assessment:** Identity agents continuously assess and monitor the child and his or her environment on different levels, in order to better mediate identity. Both parents developed an awareness of the larger macro-social influences pertinent to their children's identities. For

example, the postmodern context was seen by both as a potent influence on their own and on their children's identities; either by having a relativizing impact on morality and commitment, or as an overwhelming wave of constant change.

***Implicit theory:*** Agents hold implicit psychological theories regarding identity development that guide their practice. Whether it be the belief in the importance of consistency, or the importance of understanding the child's developmental stage, or whether on the subject of the amount of control parents can actually have on the identity development of their children; all such beliefs exert influence on the choice of parental practice. For example, both parents, but especially Zvi, believe that identity is necessarily threatened by exposure to competing worldviews. However both, especially Amitai, acknowledge the potential enriching benefits of various degrees of such exposure. Such implicit beliefs guide these parents in managing their children's exposure to the diverse micro-contexts of home, school, grandparents, etc'.

***Reflexivity:*** Lastly, we claim that identity agents are potentially reflective practitioners. This means that they do not passively adopt goals and replicate practices from their own socialization; rather they also may reflect on them: sometimes adopting them, sometimes adapting them, and sometimes rejecting them. Both parents reflected on the worthiness of different identity goals and practices they encountered in their childhood or in their current communities. Both also reflected on dilemmas regarding the appropriate way to co-construct identity. For example, The tension between the aspiration to initiate children into traditional identity while at the same time being critical towards certain aspects of this identity caused both parents to deliberate the question of 'authenticity'– whether and how as a parent to reveal personal crises while at the same time inculcating traditional beliefs.

## **Discussion**

The narrative analyses were brought in order to illustrate the necessity of incorporating the concept of identity agents in identity research. The two individuals discussed were chosen

from the sample for their exceptional articulateness, and because we believe the contrast between them best serves our purpose of representing, through their similarities, an "ideal type" of identity agency. We acknowledge that the above components of identity agency may vary in degree among different parents; what is important though, is that these narratives demonstrate the extent that individuals may view themselves as active participants in their children's identity formation and develop intricate reflective viewpoints on the 'how and why' of their involvement. We believe such a demonstration supports the reconceptualization of identity as an entity co-constructed by multiple agents possessing varying degrees of reflexivity. The fact that we recognize parents as identity agents does not of course mean that all parents' goals are necessarily realized; however, we claim that the potential impact reflected in such intensely articulated parental perspectives should be acknowledged and further assessed by additional research. A contextually sensitive developmental psychology cannot ignore these actors and their perspectives on identity formation.

Our concept of agency differs from the classical sociological conceptualization of "social agent" attributed to Parsons (1937) which portrays social agents as representing social institutions and acting on their behalf. The interviewees' reflectivity demonstrates a different concept of agency. Namely, that individuals have the potential to assess their own roles, actions, assumptions and values vis-à-vis the social context in which they are embedded (Giddens, 1991). Such a concept of a reflective practitioner has been elaborated on in the education literature (Schon, 1987; Van Manen, 1977). Reflectivity regarding identity implies that agency is not carried out solely as a proxy for social institutions, or mindlessly, based on one's own socialization, rather, agency involves a deliberation of means and goals related to youth's identity formation (Holden & Hawk, 2003; Kuczynski et al., 1997).

Furthermore, such parental activity and reflectivity are probably not the sole result of our interviewees' unique personality traits; rather, we hold that these characteristics may be

brought about by the unique intermediate position that all identity agents hold, being situated in the Meso/Micro systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which places them in a crucial spot vis-à-vis the identity formation of youth. They are in close proximity of youth, they interact with youth on a daily basis, and cultural institutions often vest them with responsibilities and authorities regarding the activities of caretaking, education and guidance. They are also strategically situated in an in-between point between youth and other levels of social influence, and therefore their mediative capacities are required: as thinking individuals, these agents possess the abilities to choose, filter out, channel, buffer, and interpret larger social influences. Moreover, activity and reflexivity are further intensified by socio-cultural conditions (Berger, 1979) that place many parents in contemporary society at the interface between juxtaposed conflicting influences thus requiring activity and reflectivity. Identity agents should thus not be written off as passive agents serving as unreflective representatives of larger social institutions. Nonetheless, they of course may sometimes intentionally choose to represent such institutions and to foster children's identification with them.

In conclusion, the concept of *identity agents* was presented in order to contribute to a comprehensive contextual theory of identity development. We identify three major theoretical implications. First, the concept of identity agents adds a fundamental missing link between the individual and macro-social contextual influences, calling for a focus on the intermediate level. This level is important, not merely to understand how larger social influences are passively channeled as in a unidirectional model; rather, we call attention to the mediational properties of such agents and to their being potential originators of identity influence (cf. Holland et al.'s (1998, pp.15-18) notion of 'improvisation').

Second, the unique perspective of identity agents suggests goals for identity formation different from those classically associated with this developmental task. Rather than espousing exploration in the service of individuation, identity agents may attempt to find

ways to balance personal choice and expressiveness on the one hand with identification with cultural heritage and moral ideals on the other. This duality resonates with Grotevant's emphasis on family processes fostering both autonomy and connection regarding identity (Grotevant, 1998; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985) and Adams and Marshalls' (1996) emphasis on identity formation as a dialectical process involving both differentiation and integration.

Third, we stress the conceptual importance of understanding early socialization processes for the understanding of identity formation in adolescence. Childhood identifications become the working material for the identity work of adolescence, and the ways these identifications are cultivated, constructed and maintained in relationships with significant others can be crucial for later processes of exploration and commitment. These identifications, originating in a complex joint process involving the child and significant others contribute to the fact that cultural ideals, personally reworked, can subjectively be experienced as part of the self. The purposeful attempt of identity agents to promote identification is missing from current accounts of identity formation as is a good account of the bidirectional co-constructive fashion in which this process takes place.

Further research would need to explicate the different roles of other agents besides parents. Educators, clergy, youth group leaders and others are all purposeful agents involved in ongoing relations with developing youth. We suggest that a dialogue between the identity literature, the socialization literature, and the literature from education may produce fruitful new concepts for all three disciplines and can open new directions for research.

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