

Identity Status of Jewish Youth Pre- and Post- Cult Involvement*

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New religious groups, arising outside the traditions of mainstream American religions, demonstrated a significant growth period during the past decade. Rudin¹ points out that sociologists have documented the development of 1,300 new religious groups since 1965, which involve thousands of young adults. The literature frequently refers to a proportion of these groups as religious cults. For the purpose of this study the term cult refers to a group characterized by an intense relationship between a living, often messianic leader and followers who totally restructure their lives around the leader's philosophical claims.

The Jewish community in recent years has become increasingly concerned about the numbers of Jewish youth involved in religious cults. While precise numbers are not known, Davis² estimates that 12 percent of the Unification Church's total membership is Jewish. The Jewish community is also disproportionately represented in the population from which many cult members are currently drawn: 18-25 years old, mid-

dle-class, idealistic, college-educated youth.

In conjunction with the authors' clinical work with families of cult members and former cult members themselves, a case study was designed to better understand the notion of vulnerability to cult involvement. The study particularly focused on young adults from the Jewish community.

As indicated in studies by Levine and Galanter, *et. al.*,³ it appears that cult members report having suffered moderate to severe psychological symptoms prior to their recruitment. Clinicians working with cult members report that the period of vulnerability is marked by the presence of both depression and a sense of being between affiliations. This description of the period of vulnerability provided by Singer⁴ and other clinicians who have worked with ex-cult members is similar to observations made about late adolescence in general.

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¹ Marcia R. Rudin, "The New Religious Cults and the Jewish Community," *Religious Education*, May-June 1978, pp. 350-360.

² Maurice Davis, "Lure of the Cults," an address given in Northfield, Illinois. February 26, 1979.

³ M. Galanter, R. Rabkin, J. Rabkin and A. Deutsch, "The Moonies: A Psychological Study of Conversion and Membership in a Contemporary Religious Sect," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 136:2 (February 1979) and Saul V. Levine, "Youth and Religious Cults: A Societal and Clinical Dilemma," in Sherman C. Feinstein and Peter L. Giovacchini, (eds.), *Adolescent Psychiatry*, Vol. VI. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 75-89.

⁴ Margaret T. Singer, "Coming Out of the Cults," *Psychology Today*. January 1979. pp. 72-82.

According to Erikson⁵ and other developmental psychologists, the tasks of late adolescence involve establishing one's identity and forming intimate relationships with others. The feelings of depression and sense of being between affiliations which individuals report experiencing prior to recruitment may be reflective of the ways they were struggling with these life tasks.

Erikson postulated that successful identity formation will be achieved only after an individual goes through a period of crisis. He does not assume that the road to identity achievement is smooth and continuous. Erikson's polar concepts of ego identity and ego diffusion have been elaborated upon by James Marcia⁶ in several empirical studies of college students. In operationalizing Erikson's work Marcia identified four identity statuses which are distinguished by the presence or absence of crisis and/or commitment. Marcia views these crises as involving occupational goals as well as a religious and political belief.

Marcia's identity statuses include: 1. identity achievement; 2. identity diffusion; 3. moratorium; 4. foreclosure. Identity achievement has been described above as the optimal process by which an individual experiences a crisis of some duration and then makes the necessary commitments. Identity diffusion is described as the state in which an individual may or may not experience crisis but has not made a commitment. Moratorium is described as a period in which the individual is in crisis but has not yet made a commitment. Social scientists have come to view the college years as a time during which it is normative to be in a state of moratorium. Quite clearly moratorium is viewed as a transitional stage in which the crisis is apparent to the individual and he or she is struggling to deal with it. In this way moratorium is

⁵ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1966.

⁶ James E. Marcia "Development and Validation of Ego Identity Status," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3 (1966): 551-58.

distinguishable from identity diffusion during which the crisis is vague or the uncertainties are pervasive. Foreclosure is used to describe the status in which an individual has made an early commitment without experiencing any crisis. The example often used of a foreclosed individual is of the college student whose parents want him to go to medical school who follows through on their wishes without internal struggle.

In order to gather data about the period of vulnerability former cult members with Jewish backgrounds were asked to focus on the critical period (T_V), and then contrast it with their time in the cult (T_C) and the present (T_P). From the previous research on cult membership we expected to interview ex-members who had either been in college or were college bound. Thus we felt that the research on identity status among college students to be directly relevant to our concerns. We hypothesized that the depression characterizing the period of vulnerability would relate to being in a state of either extended moratorium or identity diffusion. Furthermore, given our interest in Jewish youth we were particularly interested in characterizing religious identity status in order to better understand vulnerability.

Method

Given the exploratory nature of this research we choose to use a study approach. As Lijhart⁷ points out, the great advantage of the case study is that by focusing on a single case, that case can be intensively examined even when the resources are relatively limited. The limited research resources facing us were those of a limited and uncertain subject sample. We could not predict how many ex-cult members would come forth nor would we be able to control or precisely evaluate what population our sample could be said to represent.

⁷ A. Lijhart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method," *American Political Science Review*, 3 (1971).

The scientific status of the case study method is somewhat ambiguous since science is a generalizing activity. However, case studies can make important contributions to the establishment of general propositions and thus to theory building.⁸ Thus we undertook what could be considered an hypothesis generating case study of former cult members.

Subjects and Design

We solicited interviews from ex-cult members of Jewish origin through the use of newspaper ads and public speaking, as well as the informal network of individuals and agencies working with clients having cult related concerns. Our goal was to interview 20 Jewish ex-cult members, 10 non-Jewish ex-cult members, and a control group of 10 Jewish non-cult members. Through the use of this design we can compare the two Jewish groups in order to examine the factors that pre-disposed ex-members to join. In this comparison, religion is held constant and we can compare other life experiences between these religiously homogeneous groups. By including the latter group of non-Jewish ex-cult members we sought to increase our knowledge of ex-cult members in general and to be able to compare the pre-disposing factors of Jewish vs. non-Jewish youth.

The information we are presenting in this paper represents our research in progress. To date we have interviewed 7 Jewish ex-cult members and it is the interview information from these people which follows.

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview instrument was designed for use in this study. Each interview lasted approximately 2 hours. While our interview touched on many areas of the individual's life history our major focus was on understanding vulnerability. Thus we asked ex-cult members

to focus on this critical period (T_V) and then had them contrast it with their time in cult (T_C), and the present (T_P). We used the identity status interview designed by Marcia⁹ to assess identity status for these three time periods. We also asked detailed questions about earlier life history including relationship with parents, school experiences, and peer relationships.

Overview of the Cases Studied

The seven cases of cult involvement we have studied consist of one female and six male ex-members. Four of the six males were members of the Unification Church, one was in Scientology, and the other was a member of Ananda Marga (a lesser known religious cult involved in grass roots political change). The female ex-member had belonged to Synanon (a drug treatment group which became cult like). The length of stay in these groups varied from 1 month to several years. Two of the Unification Church members were deprogrammed while remaining interviewees left the cult on their own. Following is a brief description of each of the seven cases of cult involvement we studied.

Interviewee A was our only female member. This woman is in her mid-forties and quite different from our interviewees in several respects. She joined Synanon while in her 30's. She was seeking treatment for a minor addiction problem as well as responding to a delusional desire to maintain contact with a show business celebrity. She agreed to be interviewed for the project when asked by her current therapist who knew of our research on cults. Therefore, unlike the others we interviewed, she did not define herself as a former cult member or contact us around cult concerns. As is indicated below, her functioning in all the life stage areas was identity diffused and thus, reflective of her overall borderline functioning.

Interviewees B through E were all mem-

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Marcia, 1966, *op. cit.*

bers of the Unification Church recruited in the Berkeley/San Francisco area in a similar manner in the mid-seventies.

Interviewee B is a young man in his mid-twenties who became involved with the Unification Church following his sophomore year in college. He was involved with the Unification Church for a period of two months. He characterizes his involvement as atypical as he never moved in with the group and seemed to come and go as he pleased.

Interviewee C is a young man in his mid-twenties who was involved with the Unification Church for one month in 1975. He had completed his freshman year of college and decided to take a year off to travel.

Interviewee D is presently in his mid-twenties, and he joined the Unification Church while living in Berkeley following his graduation from college. He was a member of the group for 2½ years at which time his parents invited him home and had him deprogrammed.

Interviewee E is in his late twenties. He was a member of the Unification Church for sixteen months. His mother was granted a conservatorship and subsequently had him deprogrammed.

Interviewee F is presently in his early twenties. He was in Scientology for approximately 1 year. His first contact with Scientology was while he was in college. He joined subsequent to leaving college in his sophomore year following a series of academic failures.

Interviewee G is presently in his mid-twenties. He was a member of Ananda Marga throughout his college years. He describes leaving the group as a two-year-long process which he has only recently completed.

Identity Status of Former Cult Members

As described above we assessed the identity statuses of our interviewees in three areas: occupational goals, religion, and politics for the three time periods. These

statuses are represented in Tables 1, 2, and 3. We then reviewed the statuses in each area and assessed overall identity status. In the majority of cases the interview responses to each area reflected the same status and thus, their overall status was easy to assign. When there were differences among the areas, a qualitative judgment was made as to which area was most representative of their functioning. The overall identity statuses are presented in Table 4.

In all areas of identity status we found support for the hypothesis that the pre-cult identity statuses of our interviewees would be primarily moratorium or identity diffused. We found no evidence of pre-cult identity achievement in any areas of inquiry.

Occupational Goals

In the areas of occupational goals, three of our seven interviewees were identity diffused, three were moratorium and one was foreclosed. The foreclosed interviewee (F) had begun college with the predetermined idea of being an engineer like his father. He suffered failure and was placed on academic probation. He then continued to do poorly, and was asked to leave school. At this point he took courses at a junior college and did well. This was considered by his university to be evidence of his ability to achieve and he re-entered the university once again. However, once again he failed and was asked to leave. This young man's story is unique among our interviewees as he never indicates any doubts about his goal of being an engineer. He clearly indicates commitment in Marcia's and Erikson's terms. There is no evidence of a crisis in terms of wanting the goal. For him the crisis he experienced was in his difficulty obtaining that goal.

Interviewee D presents a good example of how our interviewees experienced a moratorium status in terms of occupational goals. This young man had graduated from college without having made a commitment to an occupational choice. He talks about

the decision to go to college as a non-decision (i.e. an expectation). His goals were vague: "I knew I was good in science, physics; didn't like chemistry or biology. If I had taken geology I might have wanted that." He finished college in August and then hitchhiked to Boulder to visit a Tibetan Monastery. While there he heard about the Living Love Center in California which he describes as a "consciousness growth place." This was attractive to him so he signed up for one of their courses. He attended a 25 day seminar and while he initially considered staying on and getting more involved he decided to "take with me what I had learned and go to San Francisco and get a job." It is clear that he was "shopping around" for a lifestyle and commitment which is characteristic of a moratorium status. Ten days after this he became involved with the Unification Church. His

resulting 2½-year-long involvement was ended by a deprogramming. Interestingly, interviewee B who was also in moratorium prior to his recruitment, was involved with the Unification Church briefly and then left to take a course at the Living Love Center.

Interviewee E was identity diffused prior to his recruitment. He, too, graduated from college without making an occupational commitment. He presents a more disorganized sense of self than Interviewee D and while describing a search for meaning, the search seems to have been stimulated more by internal needs than by a sense of meaning to make a commitment to the external world. He reports having felt "disenfranchised from the whole world" immediately prior to the meeting with the Unification Church. He became involved immediately and remained a member until his deprogramming 17 months later.

Occupational Identity Status

Interviewee	Pre (T _v)	Cult (T _c)	Post (T _p)
A	Identity diffused	Identity diffused	Identity diffused
B	Moratorium	Moratorium	Moratorium
C	Identity diffused	Identity diffused	Moratorium
D	Moratorium	Moratorium	Moratorium
E	Identity diffused	Foreclosed to Cult #1	Foreclosed to Cult #2
F	Foreclosed	Foreclosed	Foreclosed
G	Moratorium	Moratorium— Identity achieved	Identity achieved

Table 1. Identity statuses of interviewees: occupational goals.

Religion

As indicated in Table 2, three of the interviewees were in a state of moratorium in reference to their religion. These interviewees all expressed some doubts (crisis) about how to integrate Judaism as presented to them by their families with other spiritual and philosophical concerns. In all cases there is a sense of active struggle.

Interviewee D's description of his relationship to religion is a good example of

the moratorium status. He clearly describes his positive feelings towards Judaism. He felt that being Jewish was "something special," and speaks fondly about his rabbi as "a warm and wonderful man." Yet, he talks about feeling disillusioned with Judaism and needing to satisfy his spiritual feelings outside of Judaism in the years immediately preceding joining the Unification Church. He began to read extensively

about Buddhism. It was Interviewee D who was so actively searching for a lifestyle and thus unable to make a commitment to an occupational goal. Interestingly, although Interviewee D was in the Unification Church for 2½ years we assessed his in-cult religious identity status as moratorium. He attended the Unification Church's seminary and, thus, was engaged in the active understanding of the Divine Principle. He acknowledges gaining increased pride in his Judaism while in the Unification Church. He learned that he was one of "God's people" and was proud of being of Jacob's lineage. Throughout all of this there is a

sense of an active struggle to integrate religious feelings into his sense of self.

The two interviewees whose religious identity was diffused indicate a dismissal of Judaism. This dismissal was not an angry or an active one. It was more of a case of not seeing the role for religion in their lives at that time. The two interviewees who demonstrated a foreclosed status in relationship to Judaism indicate having related to their religion as did their parents without having questioned those beliefs. Interviewee C says of himself prior to recruitment "I didn't come to doubt. I was myself—a Jewish youth."

Religious Identity Status

Interviewee	Pre (T _v)	Cult (T _c)	Post (T _p)
A	Identity diffused	Identity diffused	Identity diffused
B	Moratorium	Moratorium	Identity diffused
C	Foreclosed	Foreclosed	Foreclosed
D	Moratorium	Moratorium	Moratorium— Identity diffused
E	Identity diffused	Foreclosed to Cult #1	Foreclosed to Cult #2
F	Foreclosed	Foreclosed	Foreclosed
G	Moratorium	Moratorium	Moratorium

Table 2. Identity statuses of interviewees: religious beliefs.

Politics

In assessing the identity status of our interviewees' politically, we found that, in general, there was little strong political commitment and/or crisis. Thus four of our seven interviewees are labeled identity diffused. This assessment comes about in part by the vagueness with which they responded to questions of politics. This is, perhaps, an indication of the times during which they were forming their identity. Unlike all other categories, we find only one interviewee in a state of moratorium

and thus actively engaged in a crisis involving political questions. Not surprisingly, this interviewee (G) was involved in a grass roots politically oriented cult.

These findings may be support for the notion that the youth of the 70's are the "me generation." For them religion and/or a personal philosophy were more salient in their lives than politics. As mentioned above, even in the occupational category, we find the moratorium interviewees defining their goals in terms of a self search.

Political Identity Status

Interviewee	Pre (T_v)	Post (T_p)
A	Identity diffused	Identity diffused
B	Identity diffused	Identity achieved
C	Identity diffused	Moratorium
D	Identity diffused	Identity diffused
E	Identity diffused	Moratorium
F	Foreclosed	Foreclosed
G	Moratorium	Identity achieved

Table 3. Identity statuses of interviewees: politics.

Overall Identity Status

Table 4 portrays the overall identity statuses of our interviewees and is consistent with the information presented above. Our interviewees are evenly divided between the categories of identity diffusion and moratorium with the exception of Interviewee F who was foreclosed across all categories. Thus our examination of identity status supports our assumption that the depression and/or transition experienced by many cult members prior to their recruitment may result from the manner in which they handled the late adolescent life task of identity formation.

Our investigation supports the notion that identity diffused and moratorium youth

are vulnerable to cult recruitment. Although we may speculate that a sample of youth recruited by cults would reveal a disproportionate percentage of those identity statuses, we have not yet tested this notion. We are in the process of locating a control group with which to compare our former members. Previous research, however, indicates that whereas most males begin as diffusions or foreclosures, the greatest change in identity status occurs between the ages of 18 and 21.¹⁰ Thus our interviewees were entering the cult at the ages during which identity status has been found to be the most fluid.

Overall Identity Status

Interviewee	Cult	Pre (T_v)	Cult (T_c)	Post (T_p)
A	Synanon	Identity diffused	Identity diffused	Identity diffused
B	Unification Church	Moratorium	Moratorium	Moratorium
C	Unification Church	Identity diffused	Moratorium	Moratorium
D	Unification Church	Moratorium	Identity achieved in cult(?)	Moratorium
E	Unification Church	Identity diffused	Foreclosed to Cult #1	Foreclosed to Cult #2
F	Scientology	Foreclosed	Foreclosed	Foreclosed
G	Ananda Marga	Moratorium	Moratorium	Identity achieved

Table 4. Overall identity statuses of interviewees.

¹⁰ Marcia, 1980, *op. cit.*

In Table 4 we have listed the identity statuses of our interviewees during their cult involvement. Cults, in general, require total unquestioning commitment to their principles and leader. From what is known about cult life, we expected that the description of identity status within cult would uniformly reflect a foreclosed status. Also, we expected that these descriptions would indicate influences of the cult rather than family of origin on the foreclosed status. Surprisingly, the results did not support our assumptions about in-cult foreclosure. Interviewee A remained identity diffused throughout her involvement with Synanon, lacking in commitment but not questioning or searching in a unified manner. Interviewees B, C, and G remained in moratorium throughout their involvement. B and C were involved with the Unification Church for relatively brief periods of time while G was involved with shaping the ideals and principles of his group. Interviewees E and F demonstrated the foreclosed status we had predicted. F viewed his involvement in Scientology as yet another means to his original foreclosed goals. His questions about the group arose only in terms of whether the philosophy would be effective in terms of his personal life goals. E, on the other hand, joined the Unification Church and remained an unquestioning member until his deprogramming. Interviewee D also remained a Moonie until he was deprogrammed. However, we found it more difficult to label his in-cult status as clearly foreclosed. He moved up in the leadership of the Unification Church and was attending their

seminary in Barrytown, New York prior to his deprogramming. Although it is difficult to view him as truly identity-achieved, the freedom he experienced as a Moonie makes it feasible to view his commitment as a more informed and self-made one.

Once again, these results differ from our expectation that we would find in-cult foreclosure among cult members. We see this as evidence of the relative high functioning of the ex-members we attracted.¹¹ We attribute this sample bias to several factors. By attracting a self-selected sample, we increased the chances of interviewing relatively healthy young people who felt sufficient comfort about their cult experience to be interviewed at a Jewish agency. This health is also reflected by the brief length of time during which several of our interviewees were involved with the cult.

Our assessment of post-cult identity status indicates again the higher than expected level of functioning of our small group of former cult members. With the exception of Interviewee A, none of the former cult members demonstrated identity diffusion in his current functioning. Interviewee G appears to be identity-achieved presently. His functioning across all time periods was quite high. He joined his group at the start of college and managed to remain intensely involved with it while successfully completing college. Interviewees B, C, and D, all former Moonies, remain or are once again in a state of moratorium. Their moratorium status has been protracted, to be sure, but the sense of crisis continues and striving for commitment remains. Therefore, we felt they remained in a state of moratorium, not identity diffused. Interviewee D, who has been deprogrammed several months prior to his interview, describes his immediate plans in almost the same words as he described his plans prior to his recruitment by the Unification Church. The intervening 2½ years had done little to promote his growth.

¹¹ J.G. Clark points out that those who succumb to cults seem to be divided into two distinct groups. The first is composed of chronic schizophrenics and borderline personalities. The second appear to be normal, young people. It is clear that our sample pulled heavily from the second group. "The Effects of Religious Cults on the Health and Welfare of Their Converts," *Proceedings and Debates of the 95th Congress*, 1977.

Interviewee F continues to be foreclosed. He never expressed a sense of questioning or search for an identity of his own. Interviewee E seems to have resolved his earlier diffused state by being involved again in a highly structured cult-like group. It was difficult to assess his role in finding and adapting this new group. Thus we view his current functioning as a second in-cult foreclosure. He has certainly made a commitment to this group but it was not clear whether he had struggled to make that commitment or adopted it readily as he had with the Moonies.

Once again, it would be useful if we could compare the post-cult identity statuses of our interviewees with a matched group of young adults who had not been involved with cults. Only one of our seven ex-members was identity-achieved at the time of his interview. Marcia¹² offers the following as a summary of the developmental aspects of identity formation, "Identity increases from early adolescence (age 12) until late adolescence (18 to 21); at the earlier ages one may expect a predominance of temporary foreclosures and diffusions, many of whom will begin crossing over into the moratorium and achievement statuses around age 18. By age 21, the highest proportion of individuals will be identity-achievement." Using this as a norm with which to compare our group of male interviewees, whose average age was 24, we find their development somewhat arrested.

This finding of arrested identity development prompted us to re-examine each interviewee's identity development across the three time periods. For some, (D and

G) time in the cult was clearly an extended moratorium. The issues of identity development were temporarily suspended. It is as if the time in cult represented a tangent from the process of identity formation. For others (B and C) affiliating with the cult was a brief experimental identification during a moratorium. One interviewee (F) remained foreclosed, but used the cult as an attempt to achieve his foreclosed goal. Two others (A and E) use the cult as an attempt to resolve identity diffusion.

Hypotheses Supported and Hypotheses Generated

We began this project in order to understand vulnerability to cult recruitment. Pulling from both the extant literature as well as our developmental perspective on identity formation, we tested the hypothesis that the pre-cult identity statuses of cult members would be identity diffused or moratorium. Our results offer support for this hypothesis.

Further hypotheses to be tested resulted from the examination of post-cult identity statuses which indicated a protracted state of moratorium or identity diffusion. When we focus on the interviewees whose cult involvement was brief, it seems that the cult did *not* arrest identity development. For those who were involved for longer periods of time it seems that cult involvement did arrest their development. Is the arrested development indicated by this latter group a result of cult involvement or would their identity statuses of moratorium and identity diffusion have been otherwise protracted? This hypothesis awaits testing in subsequent research with a larger more representative sample of cult members.

¹² Marcia, 1980, *op. cit.*