

Executive Summary:

Patterns of Exploration in Young Adulthood – The Case of Young Israeli Adults September 2012 (Research Funded by the Gandyr Foundation)

Rachel Gali Cinamon – School of Education, Tel Aviv University; Yisrael Ritz – School of Education, Bar Ilan University; Michal Gross-Spector – School of Education, Tel Aviv University

Academic Introduction

Young adulthood – the period of life between the late teens and the late twenties – is a sensitive and crucial stage for many young people in Western industrialized nations. During this period, young adults make important decisions in key areas of life (such as relationships, education and employment) that shape the format of their lives and of society as a whole (Arnett, 2004). The experiences of young adults in various fields of life and the meanings they attach to these experiences constitute important components in the process of exploration, a central mechanism in the construction of their identity (Côté, 2006; Flum & Kaplan, 2006).

There is broad theoretical agreement regarding the importance of exploration in the process of the construction of identity in general, and in young adulthood in particular (Grotevant, 1987; Luyckx, Goosens, Soenens & Byers, 2006; Flum & Kaplan, 2006; Kroger, 2007). However, the extent of existing knowledge regarding the nature of this exploration is incomplete and the environmental and personal contexts that promote or impede the process are insufficiently clear (Schwartz, Kurtines & Montgomery, 2005). A further difficulty is that most of the existing studies focus on middle-class young adults in the USA; there is a lack of insight regarding the young adulthood stage and the nature and essence of exploration among young adults from other social and cultural backgrounds, and specifically among young Israeli adults, who undergo a developmental process that includes different experiences (such as military service) to those that characterize young adults in other developed countries. Such an understanding is important given the agreement regarding the importance of the environmental context to the process of exploration (Soenens, Berzonsky, Vansteenkiste, Beyers & Goosens, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2005; Côté, 2006). Moreover, numerous studies relating to the development of identity and exploration processes in young adulthood focus on just one facet of life, rather than on the full range of aspects relevant to young adults. This compartmentalized approach, focusing in each study on a single facet of life, prevents integration and is incompatible with the comprehensive nature of life and that fact that young adults grapple simultaneously with issues relating to different and interrelated facets of their life. These theoretical and empirical gaps impair the ability of professionals interested in optimizing decision-making processes and development in young adulthood. Social and educational programs that are not adapted to the unique characteristics of this stage and the needs of young adults in specific contexts may be less effective and relevant.

The present study aims to reduce the above-mentioned gaps by focusing on exploration processes among young Israeli adults who belong to various social groups (Jews: residents of the center and periphery of the country in economic terms, and religious and secular; Arabs: center and periphery of the country in economic terms). The study uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and focuses on the areas of exploration of interest to young adults in the various social groups, the profile of exploration in different fields, and an examination of the specific connections between the different fields and the sociocultural context and the nature of exploration.

Methodology

The quantitative part of the study included 529 young adults aged 19-30 ($M=24.7$, $SD=2.97$), 152 of whom (28.7%) were men and 367 (69.4%) women. The majority of the respondents (344 – 65%) are single, while the remainder are married or in a significant relationship (84 – 15.9% and 92 – 17.7%, respectively). The participants included 315 Jews (average age – 25.8) and 214 Arabs (average age – 23.25). In terms of religious identity, 259 of the young adults defined themselves as secular, 84 (15/9%) as traditional, and 175 (32.8%) as religious. The respondents' economic ranking was determined according to their reports regarding their mother's education and their parents' joint income. The figures show that approximately half the mothers (44.4%) have an academic education, and approximately one-fourth of the parents (25.7%) have lower than average income, while approximately one-third (31.8%) have average income and over one-third (38.8%) have higher than average income. Most of the young adults in the study (383 – 72.4%) report that they are studying, including 233 (44%) studying toward a bachelor's degree. Almost half the respondents (44%) live with their parents, and over 70 percent are in employment. Half the respondents (49.9%) report that they do not receive any financial support from their parents or that they receive only a little support. Regarding vocational clarity, almost half of the respondents (43.6%) report a clear direction, while approximately one-fifth (19.1%) state that they are unsure what vocational direction they will choose. Over half the respondents (56.1%) reported that they engage in various leisure activities, but only one-fifth (19.5%) report that they are involved in voluntary activities in the community.

The qualitative part of the study includes semi-structured interviews with 38 young Jewish and Arab adults from different socioeconomic strata.

Tools

Quantitative research tools

The main research tool examining the character of strength of the exploration of identity was developed for this study on the basis of the literature and an analysis of the content of the interviews. The tool includes 32 items representing eight facets of exploration (work and integration of functions, studies, relationships, leisure, economics, religion, politics and

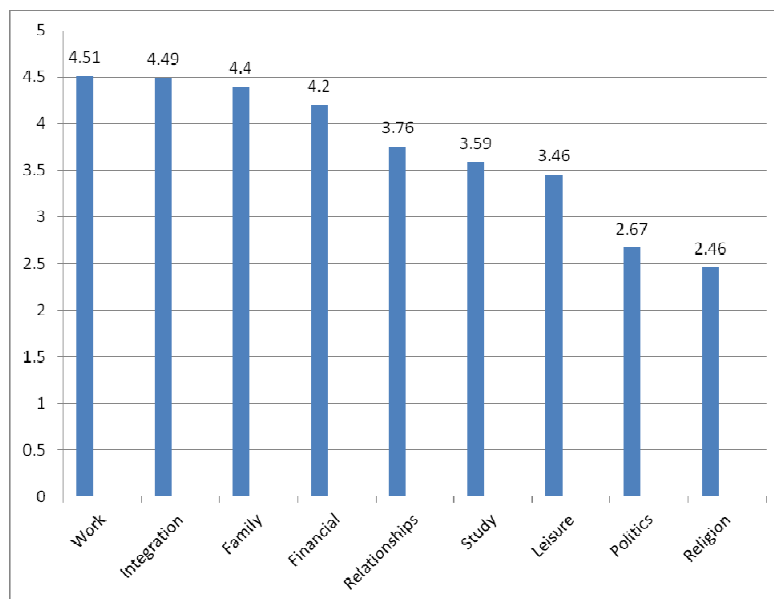
society, and family of origin), explaining 65 percent of the variance in the data. The reliability of the general scale is $\alpha = .901$.

Procedure

The participants were sampled using a convenience sampling method in universities and colleges by a team including young adults who belong to the social groups we wished to sample. The young adult centers around Israel helped collect data from young adults of low socioeconomic status. Participation was voluntary and unpaid. The participants completed the questionnaires online and by hand.

Findings

The main purpose of the study was to map the areas of exploration of different groups of young Israeli adults and to examine the extent to which they are involved in these areas. This section of the findings presents the results of the quantitative part of the study. The summary will also include discussion of the findings of the qualitative study, which provided the basis for developing the research tool and for gaining a deeper understanding of processes of exploration. Diagram 1 shows the average level of involvement in the areas of exploration among the respondents:



As Diagram 1 shows, the areas of most interest to the young Israeli adults who participated in the study are work, integration of functions, relations with the family of origin, and the financial sphere. Politics and religion were found to occupy the bottom ranks of the areas of exploration of young Israeli adults.

Significant differences were found between Jewish and Arab young adults in terms of their exploration in the following areas: study, religion, relationships and leisure.

- Young Israeli Arab adults explore the study, religion and leisure areas more than their Jewish peers. Young Israeli Jewish adults explore the relationships area more than their Arab peers.
- The model for examining gender differences in the exploration of these nine areas also proved statistically significant, though significant gender differences were found in just two areas: integration of functions and family of origin.
- Young women are more interested than men in the manner in which they will integrate all the functions in their lives, and in the question of the relationships they will preserve and nurture with their family of origin.
- Young adults in employment explore the field of work more than their peers who are not in employment. Conversely, young adults who are not in employment explore the area of religion more than those who are working. The findings show a significant gender difference in the contribution employment makes to the exploration of relationships. While young working men explore relationships less than their non-working male peers, young working women explore relationships more than young women who are in employment.

A Manova analysis also reflected the contribution of education to explaining the variance in patterns of exploration among young adults, yielding statistically significant differences in the exploration of three areas: integration of functions, work and relationships. The higher the level of education, the greater the exploration of these three areas. The level of clarity of the vocational direction was also found to be related to patterns of exploration. The clearer the vocational direction, the more young adults explore the areas of work and integration of functions.

Summary and Conclusions

The present study examines patterns of “exploration” among young Israeli adults with reference to culture and economic status. The goals of the study were to identify and map areas of exploration of young Israeli adults from different social groups, while examining the extent to which they explore various areas and the contributions social and environmental contexts make to the process of exploration. The study employed a combination of qualitative methods (in-depth interviews with 36 young Israeli adults, which provided the basis for a culturally-sensitive questionnaire examining the areas of exploration) and a quantitative examination based on questionnaires relating to patterns of exploration in various contexts.

The study findings identified nine areas of exploration that interest young Israeli adults. Two relatively new areas of exploration were shown to be of interest to young Israeli adults in the study: the integration of functions and the leisure area. In view of the ramifications that rich integration between the functions of work, family and leisure brings in terms of functioning and mental wellbeing (**comprehensive and up-to-date source**), it is highly

important to encourage and guide young adults to address these issues. Programs in the field of the development of the autonomous ability to integrate functions may help young adult centers to guide those who turn to them on this important aspect (for example, see Cinamon, 2009). In this context, it is extremely important to address the gender and cultural issues and to help young adults plan their future in a manner that integrates different areas, while discussing means that may help them to advance their aspirations (such as shared responsibility both for livelihood and for domestic functions, social support, and the organization of time).

The findings show that young adults are more likely to explore areas in which they are involved, emphasizing the importance of encouraging young adults to experience diverse jobs and fields of study before reaching a decision. This finding also shows that young adults continue to explore and to consider aspects of their lives even after they have made decisions in different areas. In these stages, too, they require consultation and guidance in order to reevaluate and maintain their decisions.

The findings that the commonest means of exploration among young adults is “self-talking” highlights the need to expand the means by which young adults can learn about themselves and their surroundings. Consultation to this end could expose young adults to the advantages of additional avenues of exploration by providing supervision and individual guidance alongside participation in consultation groups bringing together friends and peers, family members, and so forth.

Regarding the cultural and environmental influences on exploration, the findings revealed statistically significant differences between young Arab and Jewish adults and between young adults from different statuses regarding the values and aspirations that guide their areas of exploration and their choices. The desire for financial security, in the form of an official diploma, sets aside questions of identity such as areas of interest and personal desires among young adults of low socioeconomic status. Collectivist values sometimes create a conflict with personal expression among young Arab adults. These factors should be taken into account when providing consultation to young adults from these groups.

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight the interest young people show in exploring their way of life in different and interrelated areas, as well as the differences between the areas and character of exploration between different groups. Knowledge about these differences and a familiarity with the cultural and environmental variance found in the different groups is necessary in order to respond to their needs. This knowledge may also help expand the young adults’ expectations and beliefs regarding the possibilities open to them in different areas of life.