Multiple Identities as Viewed by Eriksonian Theory and its Critics: A Psychological Perspective with Relevance to Contemporary Jewish Education

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Abstract

The first part of this paper presents the issue of "multiple identities" as it has been addressed in Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory and as it has been addressed by Erikson's critics. Within psychology the debate surrounding Erikson's theory has focused on a) whether and how the current sociological postmodern context engenders a fragmentation of identity, b) whether this should be viewed as problematic, and c) whether psychology itself reflects and contributes to problematizing multiple identities. The second part of the paper discusses this debate's possible relevance to the field of Jewish education by presenting a series of issues around which Jewish educators might deliberate as they seek to apply insights from this psychological debate to their work. In both parts of the article, a third level of intermediate positions is presented as an alternative to the dichotomizing debate.

Keywords: Multiple identities, Erik Erikson's identity theory, Postmodern identity theory, Identity education
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The purpose of this paper is to briefly discuss the scholarly debate taking place within the field of psychology, especially within developmental psychology surrounding Erik Erikson’s identity theory, concerning the issue of multiple identities. This debate has also been referred to as the "modern vs. postmodern identity structure debate" (see Schachter, 2005a, 2005b). After outlining the debate in the first part of the paper, I will offer a few suggestions in the second part of the paper as to how it might be relevant to the field of Jewish education. My premise is that although originating in a field far from Jewish education, Erikson’s theory, and the debate it evoked, can nevertheless provide conceptual tools that enable us to engage with issues relevant to Jewish education in greater depth. These tools can help Jewish educators clarify and examine some of their assumptions regarding multiple identities and perhaps even open up new educational options. This, however, entails applying such conceptual tools carefully and reflectively, for reasons I will discuss shortly. However, I mention this point at the outset in order to make clear that my purpose in this paper is not to set out a programmatic plan for dealing with issues of multiple identities in Jewish educational settings based on insights and principles gleaned from psychological theory and empirical research. Rather, it is to bring psychological theory as one more perspective with which to inform ongoing debates within Jewish educational circles and, through this, to raise certain questions and suggestions for Jewish educators who wish to apply theoretical concepts to their work.

Multiple identities- the psychological debate

The topic of multiple identities is discussed in the psychological literature in at least two important different ways. The first, which will be the sole focus of this paper, deals with the potential conflict between an individual’s different identities, each perhaps entailing a different set of commitments. For example, the identities of "mother" and "corporate executive" for a working mother, or "Asian" and "American" for an Asian-American adolescent, might come into conflict. A second way, discussed under the title of ‘intersectionality’ (see Burnes & Chen, 2012; Cole, 2009), deals with the issue of how different social identities, not necessarily conflicting, interact in the social sphere to create even more particular identities. Thus, for example, the claim would be that in order to understand black women, it is not sufficient to simply 'add' the separate understandings of the 'effects' of racial identity and those
of gender identity. Rather, racial and gender identities interact in a unique manner to produce a unique third identity. This article focuses on the former formulation of multiple identities, although the latter formulation also has interesting implications for research and practice in Jewish education (e.g., orthodox-feminist identities).

### Erikson’s perspective

The debate regarding multiple identities within psychology is often formulated in relation to Erik Erikson’s notion of ego-identity (Erikson, 1968), although the roots of this debate go back to the very early days of psychological inquiry. The essence of this debate concerns whether 'possessing' multiple identities is to be considered a stable and desirable state. The straightforward Eriksonian answer to this question was 'no'.

Erikson’s developmental psychology posited a universal personality developmental trend, whereby multiple childhood identifications are reworked in adolescence to produce a mature coherent identity in adulthood. In Erikson’s theory, the term 'childhood identifications' refers to emotionally charged self-representations that develop as a result of interactions with significant others (for instance, parents, teachers, peers, or cultural heroes). Over time, such interactions result in the child identifying him- or herself with valued attributes or roles of the adult, or in the child adopting self-representations based on the way he or she is viewed by the significant other as embodying such attributes or roles. Thus a child might identify with her fathers’ generosity, an older sister’s community leadership, a teacher’s erudition, or a comic book hero’s courage. A child might also be recognized and labeled by his mother as artistically talented, by a peer as sophisticated, and by a Rabbi as a 'Tzaddik'. These labels might then become internalized as valued and recognized self-attributes. Individuals, naturally interacting with many significant others in different situations, create multiple identifications. (Note that the concept of ‘identification’ here describes an internalized view of self, and not merely an external label attributed to an individual based on any supposed objective characteristic.)

Erikson saw these multiple self-representations, or adopted aspirations of the self, as the building blocks of a future identity – rather than as identity itself. According to Erikson, childhood identifications are functionally limited due to their possible immature rigidity, their circumscribed and unexamined nature, the fact that they are not necessarily realistic, and their unorganized relationship with
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other identifications. The lack of organization may cause confusion or incoherent action. He therefore posited that a developmental process necessarily ensues, with the goal of transforming these (multiple) identifications into a (singular) identity:

Identity formation, finally, begins where the usefulness of identification ends. It arises from the selective repudiation and mutual assimilation of childhood identifications and their absorption in a new configuration, which, in turn, is dependent on the process by which a society (often through subsocieties) identifies the young individual, recognizing him as somebody who had to become the way he is and who, being the way he is, is taken for granted... The final identity ... includes all significant identifications but it also alters them in order to make a unique and reasonably coherent whole of them (1968, pp. 159-163).

The process of transforming multiple childhood identifications into a 'whole' identity involves the reexamination of the former. The identifications need to be reevaluated in light of new circumstances afforded by growth and social context. Some are affirmed, and others rejected. Those identifications that following such exploration continue to be recognized as significant need to be reworked into what Erikson called a 'configuration' of identifications resulting in the individual constructing a 'unique and reasonably coherent whole'.

The bottom line of this description can be characterized by paraphrasing the motto *E pluribus unum*. Multiple identifications in and of themselves are depicted as impractical and relatively immature. Psychosocial maturity is conceived of as necessarily involving the construction of a reasonably 'whole' identity, whereas failure to do so supposedly leaves the individual in a state of identity 'diffusion', with multiple unorganized identifications, lacking a sense of 'core self' of 'sameness and continuity' and of 'unity and purpose'. The 'coherent whole', in contrast, is seen as enabling commitment and fidelity, prerequisites of the ability to act as a mature agent within a social community, and to be recognized and affirmed within it.

Note that in the passages quoted above Erikson hints at four processes involved in creating a coherent 'whole': 'selective repudiation', 'mutual assimilation', 'absorption in a new configuration', and 'altering' identifications. Later in this paper I will relate to the latter three; here I wish to focus on the first – 'selective repudiation' - because the idea conveyed by this phrase has characteristically been taken to be a focal aspect of the process of identity formation. To illustrate how this
particular process relates to identity formation, I refer to an oft-quoted passage by William James (1890/1950, pp. 309–310) describing his reflections on his own identity:

*With most objects of desire, physical nature restricts our choice to but one of many represented goods, and even so it is here. I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest. Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a bon-vivant and a lady killer, as well as a philosopher, a philanthropist, statesmen, warrior and African explorer, as well as a ‘tone-poet’ and saint. But the thing is simply impossible ... Such different characters may conceivably at the outset of life be alike possible to a man. But to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed. So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation.*

Reading this passage from an Eriksonian perspective, we can see that James is describing his own multiple identifications with a variety of social roles available in his time that seemed possible and desirable. However, these are described humorously, with the general overtone of a commonsensical 'adult' realistic understanding that actualizing such multiplicity is impossible, and that the attempt to realize all will allow none to come to fruition. The solution in James' terminology is to 'seek', 'review', and 'suppress'. This is what Erikson refers to as 'selective repudiation'. Not all childhood identifications can be included in the final identity, for they will impede the realization of another, and some therefore need be rejected following the exploration of alternatives.

James Marcia, a student of Erikson and perhaps the researcher most responsible for translating Erikson’s work into empirical research, stated that successful identity formation requires that "one must relinquish the fantasized possibilities of multiple glamorous life-styles" (Marcia, 1980, p. 160). Subsequently, Marcia’s interpretation of Erikson’s identity paradigm, widely adopted in the field of developmental psychology, conceptualized adolescent identity exploration as the evaluation of alternative options with the intention of choosing among them and committing towards one singular path. Accepting for the moment this popular interpretation of Erikson’s work, we are on good grounds suggesting that this paradigm views multiplicity of identity as posing a challenge for healthy psycho-social development. Multiplicity is
portrayed as a precarious, unstable, or problematic state that requires some sort of resolution and working through in order for purposeful effective functioning to flourish.

The postmodern critique of Eriksonian identity theory

This portrait of identity formation has, however, been challenged over the decades since it has been presented. In what has since become known as the 'modern vs. postmodern identity' debate, the Eriksonian notion of identity, or at least Marcia’s interpretation of it, has been critiqued, described as too narrow, labeled as particular to a modern sociological context, and also characterized as morally problematic. The particulars of the varied arguments posed are too detailed to spell out within the scope and focus of this article. Therefore, I will give here only a brief sketch, concentrating on those claims that have special relevance to the issues of contemporary Jewish education that I will take up in the second part of this paper.

One variant of the critique on the Eriksonian portrait of identity argues that identity is not psychologically innately inclined towards consistency. On the contrary, individuals naturally find themselves acting in multiple contexts over time and place, and in each such context, the person's identity might be different based on the role played or constructed in that context. Furthermore, within the same context identities change and are constantly renegotiated, and the context itself continuously evolves as well. According to this viewpoint, identities do not 'exist' within the individual but are rather emerging properties and tools of social interaction. This version of identity intriguingly also has roots in William James’ discussion of self. James writes: “Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind… But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinions he cares” (1890\1950, p. 294).

Within social psychology and sociology this version of identity developed in what has become known as 'symbolic interaction' theory. Identities are naturally multiple, as social interaction is diverse and dynamic, and psychologically, individuals could seemingly adapt to such fluidity without undo concern if it were not for certain sociocultural conditions. Beginning in the late sixties of the 20th century, this idea
was embellished in new directions. Kenneth Gergen (1968, 1991) claims that the idea of a unified self-identity is the result of a Western consistency ethic and not a reflection of any inner psychological need:

Is it possible that the utility of the consistency assumption is based not so much on its reflection of inner needs and overriding personal dispositions as on the fact that consistent behavior is sanctioned no less forcibly in the psychological clinic or research laboratory than in other realms of daily life? ... The view that a person has a consistent and stabilized image of himself...is in need of modification. ... The popular notion of the self-concept as a unified consistent or perceptually “whole” psychological structure is possibly ill-conceived... A revision of the construct of self seems in order, and such a revision might profitably be directed toward a theory of multiple selves. ... It (also) seems that the more 'natural' state of the organism is one which includes numerous disparities and contradicting tendencies. (Gergen, 1968, pp. 301-307).

Thus the issue of an inner 'drive' leading away from 'multiple identities' is formulated here as a culturally bound ethical imperative rather than the result of a psychologically 'natural' tendency. In a later book Gergen (1991) further discussed how the 'unified' identity was privileged and fostered in certain traditional or modern industrialized socio-cultural contexts, whereas perhaps in today's postmodern world such an identity is problematic both psychologically and morally:

In traditional communities, with their relatively unchanging and interconnected cast of characters, coherence of personality was favored. Relationships tended to be reliable and repetitive, supporting consistency of action...Stabilized identities contributed to a soundly structured society and a structured society in turn supported a stabilized identity... The postmodern sensibility questions the concept of “true” or “basic” self, and the concomitant need for personal coherence or consistency. Why, the postmodern asks, must one be bound by any traditional marker of identity – profession, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and so on? (pp. 172-178).

Gergen’s formulation posits that stabilized, unified, ‘coherent’ identities are the result of their being particularly adaptive in the forms of social organization typical of western modernity. He points out how in contrast, within the current context of a postmodernity characterized by rapid change, the individual interacts in multiple juxtaposed contexts,
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Each with distinct modes of sense-making and normative behavior. Furthermore, postmodernity is characterized by a cultural zeitgeist eschewing grand overarching meta-narratives and embracing personal freedom. In such a landscape traditional identity markers are experienced as constricting and externally imposed. Rather than perceiving a unified identity as empowering - a sign of maturity, reliability, and dependability - it is instead experienced as limiting, a debilitating tool of social control. To illustrate, James’ perceived need to suppress and relinquish parts of his self in order to realize his one ‘truest’ or ‘deepest’ self would be interpreted by Gergen not as a natural fact of life, but as the result of the internalization of a socio-cultural imposition—a belief in a "true" essential self—which itself has no basis.

It is important to distinguish two intertwined points raised above. The first is that aspiring to a "self-consistent" identity may not be as psychologically adaptive in contemporary postmodern societies as it used to be in modern societies. The need to function in multiple changing roles has supposedly become more prevalent. Therefore, from the perspective of individuals, in contemporary society they might be better off if they "construct" a loose form of identity that enables multiplicity and flexibility. The second point is a moral-ethical one. The ability to function well with a multiple and flexible identity is supposedly primarily dependent on whether society, through its institutions, 'legitimizes' or condemns such an identity, and not on some inner psychological imperative. This constructivist perspective implies that if social science, knowingly or implicitly, asserts that a "self-consistent" identity is the normative and mature form of identity, it marginalizes and/or pathologizes individuals who do not conform by way of fitting themselves into society’s pre-formed and fixed identity alternatives. If, for example, society is more comfortable with a dichotomous polar typology of individuals as either male\female, straight\gay, black\white, etc., individuals not 'finding' themselves as one or the other are problematized (see Josselson & Harway, 2012). The implication is that perhaps such social science unknowingly participates in reproducing oppressive or stagnant social structures by essentializing psychological identity structures that are in fact socially constructed, and by causing individuals to internalize a view of their natural multiplicity as problematic rather than as something to celebrate. Alternatively, a postmodern social science that embraces multiplicity would empower individuals and enable new and dynamic ways of living.
The critique of the critique

In slightly different ways, Dan McAdams (1988) and James E. Côté and Seth J. Schwartz (2002) point out the dangers of this supposed liberating postmodern perspective. McAdams claims that there is indeed a psychological need for a unifying purposeful identity, and that this need becomes even stronger due to the fragmenting influence of postmodern social conditions. Rather than embracing a fluid identity, he claims that individuals in such a society need to work harder to maintain an integrative identity that enable individuals to navigate the social context of multiplicity with a sense of purpose and meaning. Similarly, Côté and Schwartz also discuss how navigating multiplicity in postmodern society becomes a more difficult task, requiring more of what they term "identity capital" – psychological and other more tangible resources that enable an individual to negotiate their life-course, choose preferred identities, and set goals. Based on Beck’s theory of individualization, which describes cultural destructuring processes characteristic of contemporary society, Côté and Schwartz write that "institutional supports for making certain developmental transitions have become increasingly deficient, leaving many individuals largely on their own in terms of negotiating their life courses, particularly with regard to setting and achieving goals" (p. 574). Contrary to the idea that a postmodern society that legitimizes multiplicity enables all individuals more freedom to try out and express identities, Côté and Schwartz claim that only a select group of individuals with "identity capital" benefit from these advantages. Most youth, however, simply become estranged or easily manipulable. Being without the kind of stable identity afforded and maintained by stable communities, while at the same time experiencing an inner drive for the benefits such a stable identity brings—for example, a sense of belongingness or meaning—causes them to adopt superficial identities, often based on consumer choice of brand names, or on being fans of media celebrities. Such fluid identities are easily manipulable by corporations interested in profit. Thus the celebration of fluid identity, rather than being empowering, undermines the cultural work of social institutions that provide structure and itself becomes an impediment to meaningful living, stripping individuals of deeper cultural resources that require a degree of sacrifice, promising instead the possibility of multiple identities unencumbered by commitment.
Softening the dichotomy

The presentation above portrays two dichotomous perspectives regarding identity. A closer look at the theories reveals possible points of congruence, although it is important not to obscure the distinctions made. As noted above, Erikson recognized and emphasized the psycho-social basis of identity, and did not conceptualize identity in an essentialist inflexible manner. Furthermore, Erikson’s notion of mature identity is not solely based on a rigid choice between childhood identifications and the repudiation of parts of self not chosen. Erikson also mentioned processes of mutual assimilation, the altering of identifications, and the ability to absorb childhood identifications in a new configuration. Without going into details regarding each of these processes (see Schachter, 2005a) it is apparent that Erikson acknowledged and espoused the possibility of change and creativity enabling the individual to include in his or her identity more than one aspect of the self, and even to bring about social and historical change. The concept of 'configuration' recognizes that multiple identities and/or identifications are not problematic in and of themselves; rather, what is required is some kind of organization that enables the individual to achieve 'relative coherence'. Integrity is not characterized solely by inner coherence between identifications but also by the property of the retention of significant identifications from the past. Note also that Erikson did not place the sole responsibility for configuring different identifications on the adolescents' shoulders. He implicated that societies and sub-societies are also responsible for recognizing and affirming creative identity configurations. Thus Erikson did not champion a monolithic identity, but rather a relatively coherent organized identity, integrating the individual’s past, that can be recognized and affirmed, and thus be a basis for adaptive social functioning.

Conversely, Gergen’s notion of multiple selves, enabling flexibility and personal freedom, need not be interpreted as a call to adopt chaotic "anything goes" fragmentation. The concept of 'multiplicity' itself that he suggested can be seen as a semiotic device or a meta-narrative that provides an overarching, though flexible, structure for configuring multiple identifications. Gergen's recognition of the importance of social science accepting the notion of multiple selves is itself recognition of the psychological use individuals make of such socially based meta-narratives in providing themselves with a semblance of wholeness. Thus we might grant that individuals have a need for some degree of consistency and coherence, without negating the need for flexibility, freedom, and openness. I have previously suggested (Schachter, 2005b)
such an intermediate position and claimed that such basic identity needs vary across contexts and individuals, and that cultures and societies tend to stress one over the other at different times and in different situations for a broad range of reasons.

**Multiple Identities and Jewish Education**

In this section I would like to preliminarily raise a few issues that the above theoretical observations and debate pose for Jewish educators and policymakers. As mentioned in the introduction, my premise is that this debate can provide conceptual tools with which to examine and reflect on issues relevant to multiple identities and Jewish education. I hold that although the descriptions above might seem like abstract theoretical concepts far away from everyday experience, they are actually experience-close. Beforehand, however, a caveat. The possibility to apply theory from one discipline to another or to concrete local situations is enticing but possibly hazardous, due to different basic assumptions, or local complex issues. For example, one of the problems in translating work originating in psychology to the educational sphere is that psychological research often attempts to neutralize specific content so as to purportedly get at an abstract universal level of psychological structure. Specific ideational content is supposedly "off limits" for psychologists, as opposed to structural elements deemed true for all. Thus the 'problem' posed, for example, by the 'multiple identity' which expresses affinity to Judaism and Roman Catholicism could hypothetically be portrayed from a psychologically informed perspective as structurally equivalent to that posed by a multiple affinity to Belz and Breslav Hassidism. And whereas there might indeed be some psychological similarity between these two cases, there is also a world of difference necessitating caution and local knowledge of nuance. Alternatively, scientific psychology might sometimes claim a dispassionate stance when discussing commitment, for example, as to whether it is commitment to Judaism or to Buddhism, whereas presumably for Jewish educators this is not the case. Furthermore, and relatedly, it is important to note that a debate originating in psychology and sociology should not, and cannot in and of itself, determine educational policy divorced from educational, moral, philosophical, and even religious concerns (Schwab, 1958). Given these concerns and others, psychological theory can only *inform* ongoing debates within Jewish educational circles, not *determine* policy divorced from local complexities and communal values. This observation leads to
the logical conclusion that in this second section I can only offer certain examples of how such conceptual issues could be relevant and applied. Hopefully, Jewish educators might recognize this relevance and discuss the best ways to apply the conceptual perspectives offered, based on careful deliberation considering other disciplinary perspectives as well.

I will now discuss a few issues that the above theoretical observations and debate pose for Jewish educational leaders with the help of a recently presented model dealing with Identity Education (IdEd). IdEd (Schachter & Rich, 2011) is a conceptual framework intended to provide terminology to discuss educators' purposeful involvement with students' identities and identity processes, based on the assumption that many educators do see themselves as being involved in student identity processes. Without going into the details of this model, the basic premise is that in order for educators to formulate a sound educational position regarding their involvement with students' identity formation processes, they need to clarify, among other issues, a) the social context in which such educational interventions take place and b) the goals and purposes which fostering a particular type of identity serves. I choose these two aspects of the more inclusive model as these are especially pertinent to our particular topic.

Regarding context, as noted, sociologists have pointed out that many individuals today live in a postmodern context characterized by continuous rapid change and by the reality of the need to interact in multiple environments, each with distinct modes of sense-making and normative behavior. Taken together, these characteristics breed multiple and changing images of self. If this description is correct, then of course Jewish educators today educate individuals growing up within and into such a context, and are themselves part of this context. Furthermore, as a result of the challenge brought about by the postmodern perspective, new ideas of what types of identity structure exist, and what purposes these particular types of identity structure serve, have also been raised. Thus, in order to guide practice and policy an educator needs to ask what type of identity Jewish education should envision and aspire to foster; whether the supposedly novel postmodern sociological situation hinders or fosters this desired vision of Jewish identity; and what practical educational options are viable.

If the desired mature identity is conceived of as progressing towards an integrative coherent committed state, along Eriksonian lines, then the postmodern fragmentary context could easily be perceived as problematic, due to its complicating such progression. Educators
would thus seemingly need to exert more effort in attempts to forestall the problematic effects of such context. Specifically, if mature Jewish identity is conceived of as progressing towards commitment to living a life guided exclusively by Jewish principles and bound to Jewish communities, then the postmodern context indeed seems at first glance to pose a serious challenge to the construction of such an identity. Jewish educators inclined to accept this perspective might then feel the need to find pathways to strengthen those elements perceived as countering fragmentation and diminished commitment.

One such alternative path might be to construct more homogeneous educational environments less permeable to ‘outside’ influence. Thus educators might attempt to create modern or traditional community contexts nested within, yet protected from, a broader postmodern context. Another path might be to strengthen the educational message that mature identity need be consistent, and thus have students internalize a self-regulatory reflective mechanism that will guide them towards inner consistency.

To illustrate how such a mechanism works psychologically and educationally, consider this excerpt from an interview with Tali, taken from a study of Israeli orthodox religious youth interviewed about their religious and sexual identities (Schachter, 2004). Tali is a 25-year-old woman who grew up in a religious environment. Outwardly she presents an orthodox identity, although at the same time she has been engaging in premarital sex. Tali narrates the debate she held regarding her identity with her secular boyfriend, someone she was, at the time, considering as a prospective husband:

…we had lots of discussions on the subject, because his brother became a baal tshuva [a Jew who newly turns to a religious way of life] and he really admired his brother because for him, it was everything or nothing. His brother became ultra-orthodox and married someone ultra-orthodox. And he said to me “Like with you it’s all meaningless, you pick out what’s easy for you to observe and what’s not”. And I said, “Yes, I choose”. Here I always had this kind of conflict between is it all right to do what I feel like, to embrace tradition, to call myself masoratit [traditional], to pick out the attractive things, or maybe such an option doesn’t actually exist. It’s like they always told me, “there are rules, and you have to abide by these rules, it’s either everything or nothing.”

This excerpt shows the socially negotiated nature of identity
formation and of the psychological processes involved. Tali is in fact dealing with the issue of what constitutes a 'good' identity structure. Both the secular boyfriend and an amorphous unidentified "they" present the idea that "it's either everything or nothing". An identity not characterized by such a quality is 'nonexistent' or 'meaningless'. Thus the quality of "consistency" works as a constraint on the identity Tali can consider adopting. I suggest here that the unidentified "they" is, at least in part, a representation of educational agents. Accepting this self-regulating mechanism will steer her towards one of the two conflicting identities. Tali wishes to resist such an idea, and raises the alternative option that "picking out the attractive" is "all right". Accepting this type of self-regulating mechanism will enable her to maintain both identities simultaneously. However she finds this difficult in the face of the 'consistency ethic' which is presented as an 'admired' quality and as a forceful imperative that has been consistently laid down by an authoritative "they". In line with the previous discussion, we might say that the reason for this is that Tali has internalized a powerful socio-educational regulatory constraining 'voice' that negates the possibility of a flexible identity based on personal choice. Recall that this type of internal mechanism is expressed in James' account of his own identity issues, and is also exactly what Gergen refers to critically when discussing self-consistency as a Western ethic that serves to reproduce and reify existing social identities. Tali's narrative demonstrates how the educational option of fostering an internal mechanism to counter multiple identities might work – if educators choose to foster it. It is important to understand that this is not a theoretical or abstract issue, but rather, a mundane one, taking place in youths' lives today with effects on their behavior, decisions, and well-being.

Consider for the moment that the "all or none" message is indeed one that students hear in educational settings. This might not be due to a deep belief in the Eriksonian model of a unified identity per se; rather, it might be due to a principled (albeit tactical) approach attempting to keep children 'in the fold' by fostering a certain psychological identity structure. Importantly though, whereas the "all or nothing" educational message might lead to "all", it might also lead to "nothing". An educator conveying the consistency message, intending to bolster serious commitment on the part of his or her students, may end up witnessing attrition of those who find it difficult to configure contrasting identities and who subsequently choose to repudiate those identity elements the educator wishes to foster.
If the overarching guiding principle of Jewish educators is to foster long-lasting commitment to Jewish identity, we might alternatively ask whether educators choosing to adopt and foster a 'fluid' postmodern version of identity could paradoxically work well due to its not 'forcing' youth to make an 'all or none' choice. As another interviewee stated:

I [purposefully] permit myself to transgress so as to stay religious. The difference between me and my friends from high-school [who are not religious anymore] is that they saw this all as 'black and white'. I [however] truly believe, but I also like what a nonobservant life has to offer. I always felt OK with this [middle point], even a winner – because I didn't drop it all, I found a way to deal with this.

This interviewee has rejected the "all or none" identity constraint. In other words, it is, perhaps, paradoxically the very ability to adopt an identity structure that is inclusive of contrasting elements that enables continued commitment, albeit of a different kind. Educators might hold that the postmodern identity model is to be embraced as it actually enables individuals to retain Jewish commitments in the face of fluidity thereby freeing them from the yoke of presenting an all-encompassing identity that is an alternative to all other identities. Instead, they can present Jewish ideas, knowledge and ways of being, as possible identity elements that can reside alongside other sets of ideas, knowledge, and ways of being.

Furthermore, given the postmodern context, the "all or nothing" educational message coming from educators might be rejected as irrelevant and cumbersome by individuals growing up in contemporary societies. As interviewees in another study said: "These days you don't need to have a clear-cut identity"; or: "I only define myself so that others will know how to digest me" (Hadad & Schachter, 2011). Thus educators need to consider whether their message regarding identity structure coheres with other prevalent societal messages, and 'makes sense' to contemporary youth.

However, before rejecting the modern version of identity formation as a viable educational option for those guided by the goal of Jewish continuity, educators need to consider the alternative. What might a postmodern Jewish identity look like psychologically, and how does it indeed fare in regard to commitment? We saw above that the notion that individuals "have" a singular overarching identity (one provided by socio-cultural groups), which is then used to organize and coordinate all aspects of the self, is being contested. Presumably, if there is no such
overarching identity, then there is no need to formulate and promulgate a comprehensive Jewish identity and present it as an alternative to other competing comprehensive identities. Instead, we might view and accept Jewish identity as one component of a continuously evolving self, existing alongside and interacting dialogically with other identities, and not out to triumph over the rest or be overcome by them. Such an identity can perhaps allow for constant renewal, and the enrichment of spiritual and religious life. However, we do not know how well this type of identity will stand up to the derivative erosion of commitment. Recall, also, that some researchers still reject the notion that fluid or inconsistent identities are beneficial for all, and that there may be many individuals who thrive on the firm structure provided by modern identities. Others might reject a fluid identity structure, finding its openness too superficial or relativistic, preferring and seeking out voices that extoll consistency and stability, viewing this as a sign of integrity (see Schachter, 2005b).

Rather than just examining the appropriateness of conveying educational messages regarding identity from a perspective focused on Jewish continuity, it is important that educators also evaluate such messages from a moral, and perhaps also theological, one. Perhaps Jewish educators might wish to adopt a perspective that views a consistent and committed identity as a moral or even religious imperative. Such a perspective might herald back to Elijah’s proclamation on Mt. Carmel (Kings II, 21): “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” Monotheism’s creed itself can be seen as originating from a moral contestation of fluid multiplicity. Conversely, we might ask whether the reification and sanctification of socially constructed identities is not in itself an act of idolatry – of giving fixed form and essence to that which is by nature without fixed form. In so doing, it creates dichotomous moral identity options of good and evil that prevents individuals from imagining new possibilities or recognizing moral shades and nuance. We might ask whether rejecting multiplicity goes against the Jewish idea of the dynamic of interpretation and reinterpretation of the Torah. Trained as a psychologist, I fear treading in such territory as an amateur and forwarding simplistic ideas in this regard. Obviously philosophers and theologians have dealt with such issues in greater depth (e.g., Kepnes, Ochs, & Gibbs, 1998). I mention such options not to advocate any particular idea, but rather to demonstrate that Jewish educators cannot allow themselves to deal with the issue of psychological identity based on a supposed neutral psychological perspective void of moral and
theological considerations, and so attempting to use psychology as a purely technical tool for ‘engineering’ commitment. This might not only be wrong from an educational perspective, but it would now also be recognized as wrong by many psychologists from a psychological point of view, due to the understanding that basic psychological processes are not universal in nature but are rather socially constructed or at least characterized by a large degree of plasticity.

**Intermediate perspectives**

At the end of the first part of this paper, I mentioned that the dichotomous presentation of a modern vs. postmodern identity debate within psychology serves to obscure possible ‘middle’ positions. The same is true in the educational field. The position that educators interested in student identity need to promote either (i) a drive towards a ‘whole’ identity, characterized by steadfast commitment and a consistent worldview as the only avenue towards a meaningful life; or conversely, students’ (ii) critical attitude towards existing identities, revealing them as means of oppression, encouraging instead a multiplicity unencumbered by commitment, misses out on possible intermediate positions worthy of consideration.

One such position might be to recognize that students are simultaneously embedded in traditional, modern, and postmodern contexts, each with its own impact on student identity structure and content, with each context both reflecting and strengthening existing psychological tendencies such as the need for meaning, integrity, or flexibility. Furthermore, such a position might recognize the ethical and moral value of both commitment and consistency and of openness and change. Thus, the question educators would need to ask would be how to create an educational environment that helps students, families, and communities navigate the complexity such a stance requires, thoughtfully balancing and constantly rethinking the pros and cons of different approaches. Obviously, this requires students having the opportunity to engage with identity issues seriously, in relatively protected environments that can alert them to the complexities involved with the help of educators who are themselves attuned to such complexities. This also requires that students be guided through, and become proficient in, meaning-making processes related to the self. In other words, it requires students to be able to reflectively examine what new knowledge, experience, or encounters with others can offer to their self-understanding (and what new
understandings might mean in relation to previous self understandings that perhaps then need to be reassessed). Such a position acknowledges the importance of identification and processes of commitment, but also acknowledges that such processes need to and will be constantly reevaluated (for example, see Glaser, 2008). As Glaser states: "education is by nature both conservative and generative; conservative in the sense that it is concerned with the transmission of existing traditions from one cohort (or generation) to the next, and generative in that it needs to develop in individuals the capacity for innovation and renewal" (2008, p. 153).

Interestingly, such middle positions have been shown to be employed with regard to Jewish studies. Teachers of Jewish thought in the Israeli non-religious sector teach Jewish canonical texts in ways that raise identity issues with adolescent students, using traditional ways of study, but also in ways that trigger and scaffold identity processes of identification and exploration (Galili-Schachter & Schachter, in press; Schachter & Galili-Schachter, 2012). Hevruta learning is conducive to raising identity issues in relation to textual learning, due perhaps to its dialogical nature (Holzer, 2006; Kent, 2010).

Perhaps there are also other directions that educators might take. My point is not to endorse any specific educational position but rather to point out that the debate regarding modern vs. postmodern identity formation processes does not require choosing one position over another, as complex middle points are available and offer interesting possibilities that are in fact highly adaptable to the study of Jewish curricular material as well as to traditional ways of Jewish learning.

References


