The Meaning of Occupational Therapy Training and Employment for Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women

Anat Elbaz-Schneiderman, Hadass Goldblatt, Naomi Josman

Anat Elbaz-Schneiderman, PhD, Department of Occupational Therapy, Ono Academic College, Kiryat Ono, Israel. anatish75@gmail.com

Hadass Goldblatt, PhD, Department of Nursing, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel. goldblat@univ.haifa.ac.il

Naomi Josman, PhD, Department of Occupational Therapy, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel. njosman@univ.haifa.ac.il

Abstract

Background. In recent years, Israeli Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women started studying in secular academic institutions outside their self-segregated community. The encounter with the secular-academic sphere can influence the way they relate to their world. **Purpose.** The aim of the present study was to explore the personal and social change processes that ultra-Orthodox women undergo in relation to their exposure to the secular-academic world during their undergraduate program in Occupational Therapy. **Method.** This was a qualitative research study. Participants were 15 Ultra-Orthodox women, occupational therapy students (n=6) and graduates (n=9) at a college for Ultra-Orthodox students. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and analyzed using thematic analysis. **Results.** Three themes were revealed: (1) the decision to study occupational therapy; (2) the students' actual encounter with the secular-academic world, and (3) changes they underwent throughout their studies and subsequently. **Implications.** Ultra-Orthodox women may live simultaneously in academic, work, and home spheres. These findings expand existing knowledge regarding changes affecting the Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel. Culturally sensitive training programs, including occupational therapy for Ultra-Orthodox women, are recommended.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: **Anat Elbaz-Schneiderman,** PhD, Department of Occupational Therapy, Ono Academic College, Kiryat Ono, Israel. anatish75@gmail.com

Introduction

The ultra-Orthodox community comprises 8-9% of the total Jewish population in Israel, and is considered the fastest-paced, naturally growing population in that country (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Ultra-Orthodox Judaism has several salient characteristics, including high birth rate, self-segregation, a strict observance of Jewish laws, the study of the Old Testament (hereafter, The Torah) as a primarily male occupation, and an active resistance to the secular world (Krakowski, 2013; Neriya-Ben Shahar & Lev-On, 2011). Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women are responsible for household management, child rearing, and financial affairs.

Since studying the Torah is a primary occupation for men, women have been assigned the responsibility for providing for their families, in addition to their rearing demands. In recent years, in order to provide for their families, many Israeli ultra-Orthodox Jewish women have studied in secular academic institutions outside their self-segregated community. The encounter with the secular-academic sphere can impact the way these women relate to their world. The aim of this study was to understand how ultra-Orthodox women perceive their community during and after exposure to schooling and employment.

Changes within the Ultra-Orthodox Community

The primary occupation of ultra-Orthodox men is study of the Torah. As a result of this many ultra-Orthodox communities are considered poverty areas in Israel (Weiss, Shor, & Hadas-Lidor, 2013). Consequently, recent years show more willingness to change communities' reclusive tendencies, further legitimizing the integration of young ultra-Orthodox men into the workforce. Yet, this shift has occurred without shaking the ideological norms of the ultra-Orthodox world, which continues to perceive Torah study as its highest pursuit (Neriya-Ben Shahar & Lev-On, 2011).

Ultra-Orthodox Women as Part of the Community

Given the fact that the men are engaged in studying Torah, women have become the main providers in their families (Blumen, 2007; Steinmetz & Haj-Yahia, 2006). In order to support their families, they are currently working in professions which they had not previously entered, some taking place outside of their communities (Neriya-Ben Shahar & Lev-On, 2011). Subsequently, these women face a fundamental dilemma; any interaction with the secular world, even for work, is considered by their community to be dangerous and problematic. The changes in responsibilities assigned to ultra-Orthodox women place them in an uncertain position in relation to the community's expectations of them. They are expected to continue their traditional roles as wives and mothers, yet they are expected to undertake the role of the family breadwinner, financially supporting both the husband in his studies, and the children (Wolosky, 2009).

Employment and Education among Ultra-Orthodox Women

Until recently, ultra-Orthodox women have primarily worked in education (Ringel, 2007). Due to increased birth rates, the demand for work outpaced the supply (El-Or, 1994). Hence, ultra-Orthodox women sought additional professions, such as administrative work and secretarial jobs. They began seeking professional training in more lucrative fields, and paved paths to professions such as accounting, computer programming, and graphic design (Lupo, 2003). Today, 65% of the working-age ultra-Orthodox women participate in the workforce, which is 45% higher than the ultra-Orthodox men ages 25-64, but lower than the rates of 73% of secular women, and 81% of secular men (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014). The ultra-Orthodox community has arrived at a partial solution regarding women's employment: creating ultra-Orthodox places of education and employment, thus expanding employment options, without exposing the women to the secular world. These partial changes within the ultra-Orthodox community and in ultra-Orthodox women's status, have introduced greater awareness concerning the importance of a woman's role. This has lead to a certain openness regarding the training of ultra-Orthodox women in new professions (Shai, 2002).

Education as an Agent for Change

Among ultra-Orthodox women, 76% of graduates are employed compared to only 50% of those without a college degree.

Moreover, the average yearly salary of ultra-Orthodox women who have earned a college degree is about 71% higher than that of the ultra-Orthodox women who have not. Hence, even with government support and stipends, the income of ultra-Orthodox households in which a member has received an academic education is significantly higher than those without any degree. Therefore, academic education has a significant impact on the likelihood of the ultra-Orthodox women and their family to escape poverty (Marcus, Josman, & Zlotnik, 2015; Regev, 2013). College education is considered a means for improving the ultra-Orthodox woman's earning potential, rather than an end in its own right. In addition, academic education is considered a catalyst for change processes (Dehan, 2004).

The ultra-Orthodox community encourages segregation, and therefore, an intermittent solution has been the establishment of ultra-Orthodox employment and education sites. These have proliferated with time and receive government support. The institute is ultra-Orthodox, but the academic faculty is largely not. This educational setting acts as a background for change processes – either due to the content and lifestyle of an academic life, or due to the inter-cultural interactions happening inside of it.

To date, only a few studies have focused on the inter-cultural interaction between the ultra-Orthodox women and the secular world (Blumen, 2007; Dehan, 2004). There are almost no studies examining female ultra-Orthodox students and the changes they undergo through their education and employment. Studying the changes that ultra-Orthodox women undergo is important for several reasons (Ringel, 2007; Shai 2002). Firstly, studies have pointed to the important role ultra-Orthodox women have in their community as the initiators for change processes, due to their greater exposure to temporal influences through secular education, and due to their roles as primary breadwinners (Blumen, 2007; Neriya-Ben Shahar & Lev-On, 2011). Secondly, understanding the influence of the academization process on ultra-Orthodox women, and on the ultra-Orthodox society, can help develop this sector in areas of economics and healthcare, helping them continue providing their own services from within the community (Ilani, 2009).

The aim of the present study was to explore the personal and social change processes that ultra-Orthodox women undergo relating to the exposure to the secular-academic world during their undergraduate program in occupational therapy. Accordingly, the research

question was: "What meaning do ultra-Orthodox female students and graduates attribute to their academic studies and to their employment in occupational therapy as women, wives, mothers, professionals of the field, and as members of the ultra-Orthodox community?"

Method

The study was conducted using the qualitative method based upon the phenomenological approach, aimed at understanding and interpreting the subjective meaning of people's experiences of a phenomenon (McLeod, 2001); in this case, attempting to gain an in-depth understanding of ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women's experiences of acquiring occupational therapy training and employment.

Sample

This study's sample was purposive (Curtis, Gesler, Smith, & Washburn, 2000). The selection criteria for the participants were twofold: a religious woman from the ultra-Orthodox sector, with matriculation certificate or a with previous BA degree in another area. Fifteen women participated in the study, six ultra-Orthodox undergraduate students in occupational therapy at different stages of their degree studies, studying in a university occupational

therapy program, designed for ultra-Orthodox women, located in Mivchar college in Bnei-Brak and nine graduates who were already working as occupational therapists. Most participants were in their mid-20s, all Israeli natives. Most of them were married (n=12) and had children (n=10). They all lived in an urban area. All except one were working in different areas of occupational therapy.

Research Design

Data collection. After receiving the approval to conduct the study from the University of Haifa Committee for Ethical Research with Humans, and from the college Board of Directors, the first author, who was the principal researcher, sent preliminary letters to all students in all years of the degree. Two weeks later she phoned each willing participant to explain the research goals. She emphasized that their participation is entirely voluntary, and ensured their confidentiality and privacy. Prior to each interview, the researcher provided a written explanation of the study, and repeated her guarantee of confidentiality. Participants were asked to sign a consent form in order to participate in the study.

Data were collected using an in-depth semi-structured interview conducted in Hebrew, based on an interview

guide that included several topics such as deciding to study (e.g., "Whom did you consult about the decision to study?"); the studies themselves; the experience of being an occupational therapist (e.g., "How does it feel to be an occupational therapist and an ultra-Orthodox woman?"). Data included a retrospective look at the interviews. The interviews lasted for between one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours. They took place at different locations – at the college, at work places, or in the participants' homes. All interviews were audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed.

Data analysis. Data analysis was performed inductively in Hebrew. For this article, the participants' narratives were translated into English by a professional translator. Findings were analyzed using thematic content analysis (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015). The principle researcher conducted the entire data analysis process thoroughly. First, she read the interviews one by one, in their entirety, performing open coding, during which she marked significant content units that arose from the interviews. The principal researcher then implemented coding across the interviews, looking for significant relationships between significant emerging categories, and comparing the experiences as described by numerous study participants. In this way it was possible to identify the main themes that represent the essence of the experience of the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994). Subsequently, she conceptualized main themes that arose from participants' narratives (King & Horrocks, 2010), which provided a higher level of understanding of the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The principal researcher organized the data based on themes that arose from participants' narratives (King & Horrocks, 2010), and separated her interpretive notes from the descriptive narratives. Hence, these themes were assumed to represent participants' experiences, rather than views presumed a priori by the principal researcher. By distinguishing clearly between interpretations and descriptions, she was able to obtain an immediate understanding of the phenomenon under examination.

Rigor. To achieve rigor in this study (Morse, 2015), the principle researcher attempted to set aside her personal values and biases. She performed a comprehensive thematic analysis of the entire data, whereas each of the other two researchers, separately, conducted a similar analysis on only part of the data. Then, to attain inter-rater reliability, all researchers met to compare and discuss similarities and differences among analyses and interpretation of meanings,

until agreement was reached about the emerging themes. The researchers were outsiders to the culture under study—the ultra-Orthodox community therefore in order to avoid potential cultural "blind spots" throughout the study, the principle researcher conducted an ongoing reflective journal and met regularly with the research team members, who overviewed the data analysis. Adherence to these procedures enhanced the study's credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Results

Data analysis revealed three central themes, describing the axis of time passed in relation to the decision to study, and to the duration of the studies themselves: (1) Prior to Entering the Program; (2) During the Program, and (3) After the Program. In the following study participants' names were changed to secure confidentiality.

Prior to Entering the Program

This theme includes topics that are directly related to the ultra-Orthodox world. Undertaking academic studies appears as a first encounter with the secular culture, which is conceived as foreign and significantly different. The first negotiations (in this article, the term `negotiation` is used to describe the inner and outer dialogues the students are involved in. This will be the term in use throughout the article) which will characterize all of the later phases of their studies, are already apparent in this theme: The negotiation between the students and their communities, and the secular-academic world. The students experienced a desire for personal growth and professional advancement, beyond the traditional role assigned to the ultra-Orthodox woman as a housewife. Rachel emphasized the aspects existing in her studies as complementing a lack in her community:

> "In occupational therapy I like the fact that there is. . . a lot of choice. . . I can express myself in the way most suitable to me. . . I think it's important for a woman to work; to feel like she's doing something . . . they are not all built to be housewives."

Nevertheless, participants' reports indicated a strong connection between themselves as individual women, and as members of the ultra-Orthodox community, who believed in maintaining this connection. Esther explained:

> "I am not trying to get used to things that I find unacceptable. The college lecturers' ideal is that I will gain

*the experience of treating a man.
It's clear to me that I'll do that,
but it presents me with all sorts of
personal dilemmas and it's not easy.
. . . it's being on guard all the time."*

Esther's dilemma regarding the professional training was that this training demands encounters and behaviors that do not comply with the modesty values of the ultra-Orthodox society. Situations like the one mentioned above are necessary professionally and encouraged by the department faculty ("they"). She feels as though she is standing on one side of the barricade, facing the "they" on the other side. Consequently, she feels the need to constantly stand on-guard, protecting herself and her values.

When the option to study arose, the reactions from family and close circles were divided. Rivka's family supported her, both in spirit and in practice: "My parents supported me. . . my husband really tried to help out. He also allowed us to accept outside help, nannies, and a maid." Conversely, Zippora described her family's resistance, their fear was that a woman would forget which values matter most:

*"My father was angry. . . now he
is proud of me. . . he realized that
it didn't ruin who I was. . . I stayed
the same Zippora. . . It's becoming*

*more common. He sees other women
going out to study."*

Hence, after negotiations and a deeper familiarization with the topic, the ultra-Orthodox community understands that there are advantages to academic studies for women.

In addition to the personal and family processes that the students underwent before beginning their studies, they described a process of change that the ultra-Orthodox community is undergoing. Firstly, the ultra-Orthodox community is being more exposed to the secular world. Secondly, given the decline in the existing job supply for ultra-Orthodox women, there is a general understanding that education and employment opportunities for women are necessary. Yocheved described:

*"Today the trend is slowly changing.
Girls look for study opportunities
after graduating from high-school
. . . The community realizes. . . that it
needs to adapt."*

The participants faced various challenges, stemming from the desire to combine individual desires, with their community's expectations. Their negotiations with the secular-academic world involved fundamental questions related to personal and professional

development versus building a family and providing for it.

During the Program

This theme is rooted in the actual encounter between the ultra-Orthodox students and the secular-academic world, containing a variety of negotiations. For example, the participants negotiated between personal and community spheres, and the demands and perceptions of the academic world. They faced the challenge of starting a family while studying in an intensive program, which was time and energy-consuming. They needed to choose what to prioritize during their exams period: Is it studying, and then their domestic responsibilities and fulfillment of their role as ultra-Orthodox women, or vice versa?

The most fundamental challenge was the need to preserve and protect the 'old' world from the temptation of opening up to the 'new world.' The fear with this challenge is losing the ultra-Orthodox way due to exposure to the secular world. Bracha described:

"I thought that if this is an ultra-Orthodox college. . . and then I realized that the curriculum is contradicting my everyday life. . . I skipped classes a lot".

Throughout her studies, Bracha dealt with course material that contradicted her beliefs by actively avoiding being exposed to it. This perspective, shared by others, reveals a certain insecurity regarding Bracha's ability to set boundaries and protect her way of life and beliefs.

Another negotiation involves personal and the secular-academic dimensions. This process is expressed through continuous dialogue, thus broadening the value system instead of choosing one over the other. Hadassa depicted how she and her husband started placing a higher value on academic education, following her studies:

"For the ultra-Orthodox community, academy is not so highly valued. [But] academia has entered my value system. It is not more valuable than family, the Torah, the care for others. But it is part of the value system. . . I need to always keep a balance, to double-check it doesn't become too valued. . . I walk a fine line, between academia and ultra-Orthodox life. But I've come a long way. . . it was exhausting, requiring self-control".

For Hadassa, academia is still second to her values from home. She invested energy in maintaining that hierarchy and the delicate balance between being ultra-Orthodox and being in academia.

It seems like Hadassa was negotiating between her wish to get closer to the secular world, and the demand to obey the requirements expected of an ultra-Orthodox woman.

After the Program

The third theme relates to the change processes that the students underwent during and after their studies. This theme is divided into five sub-categories, according to the focal points of changes they experienced:

(A) Change in the students' worldview. Acquiring knowledge through the academic program led to an expansion of perspective, involving both increased breadth of knowledge and refinement of high-order thought processes, such as judgment, screening, and increased ability for tolerance and containment. Participants indicated a clear sense of feeling professional, and attaining a different status in the ultra-Orthodox community. Yocheved said:

"Today I look at my friends differently. I feel like I'm in a different place—having the knowledge and tools to look at everything differently. Becoming an occupational therapist means having a different set of eyes and knowledge".

As an academic, Yocheved perceives herself more advanced than her non-academic friends, due to knowledge and skills that she has acquired.

(B) The value of higher education. Throughout the interviews, the students described a change in the value they attribute to education, currently ranking higher in their value system than previously. Yet, this change did not come at the expense of prior values. Ruthi noted:

"I'm not the same person, before and after. I kept my values, but . . . my studies, which were ranked lower, now have a higher value for me." Ruthi expressed the importance these studies have by moving them to a more worthy category, in her opinion, which demonstrated the change she has undergone.

(C) Internal change in self-perception. Participants noted change in self-perception as the most significant change, describing a positive shift in their status, behaviors and choices. An experience of surprise accompanied these revelations. Zippora recounted:

"It increases self-confidence; it's a feeling of importance. . . Having a profession in hand, feels more respectable and stronger. . . enabling

you to deal in all kinds of areas, with professors, with projects, with deadlines, with commuting. All the things you have to handle later with work, we got in the three and a half years of studies".

Apparently, despite the relatively low value of academic studies in the ultra-Orthodox value system, a wider range of choices is now accessible to the students, entailing a greater sense of control. The years of studying in the program are described as a microcosm where skills are practiced and improved in preparation for going out into the real world. These experiences, and the participants' discoveries of their competencies, resulted in a positive self-perception.

(D) Change in the perception of the other. During their studies, the participants expected to receive professional knowledge and concrete tools. The expressed that they also underwent a process of fundamental internal change. Rivka explained:

"It affected me. You learn to analyze situations. . . On a relationship level it's very helpful, assisting me a lot with my children's education. I read their behaviors as reflecting what it's like at that age. It also allows me to accept other people because I've met with all kinds of people—Arabs,

seculars, religious, with interesting beliefs. It opens you up a great deal".

The studies enabled positive changes in participants' behavior towards their families, as women and mothers. Additionally, the exposure to different people allowed the participants to expand their openness to others, increasing their empathy.

(E) Development in the perception of secular-ultra-Orthodox relations. The participants discussed a process of familiarization with the secular world, which led to a positive change in the perception of this world. Tikva said:

"In our community, secular people are still perceived as more permissive. I met with secular female professionals who had amazing personalities, and were also amazing at maintaining their household, their children, their views on life. It's hard to get out of my little world. The studies helped me discover a world that is now less intimidating than what you're told".

Tikva and other participants realized that through the encounter with different populations, they could find a common language with those most foreign to them. A true connection between the

fundamental worlds of human beings becomes possible by overlooking prejudices.

Discussion

The ultra-Orthodox women in Israel are going through a process of entering the academic world, whether for their own desire or for necessity. For a therapeutic profession as occupational therapy, it is of great importance to understand what those women undergo during their studies, in order to adapt the academic program to their personal needs. Therefore, the research question was: What meaning do ultra-Orthodox female students and graduates attribute to their academic studies and to their employment in occupational therapy as women, wives, mothers, professionals in the field, and as members of the ultra-Orthodox community? Data analysis revealed three central themes: The first theme included the decision to study occupational therapy, the families' reactions to the decision and the beginning of the negotiations between the students and their community, as well as with the secular-academic world. The second theme highlighted the different negotiations and dialogues, internal and external, between the students and their community expectations on one hand, and the academic demands on the other hand. The third theme described the change processes that the students had undergone with respect to themselves, to other people, and to the secular world.

At the beginning of the program, the students were ultra-Orthodox young women with relatively clearly defined concepts, values, and expectations, corresponding to their native ultra-Orthodox world. By being exposed to new worlds of content, different kinds of people, and other experiences throughout their studies, they coped with the need to adapt to a new world, while trying to preserve their native one. This encounter resulted in conflicts and dilemmas (Freund & Band-Winterstein, 2013), but also generated dialogue and negotiations that involved intense emotions. The students experienced a shift in their perspectives of the ultra-Orthodox and the secular worlds, reflected in their current interaction with these worlds. This exposure may involve unwelcome dangers, like moving away from the ultra-Orthodox religion and mode of life. Nonetheless, the students felt competent to handle this temptation, keeping their ultra-Orthodox mode of life, while simultaneously empathizing with secular individuals' concerns.

For the ultra-Orthodox women, studying meant leaving the familiar zone of life, and moving between completely different communities.

The ultra-Orthodox community is all-encompassing, while the secular community is open. Contrary to the ultra-Orthodox society, where the community interests take precedence over those of the individual and the community bonds are tight, in secular society the individual takes precedence, and social relations are contractual (Krenzler, 2012). Doron (2013) discusses these profound differences between the two societies, relating to the three circles of an individual's identity: the personal, the familial, and the communal. The transition between these circles requires the students to deconstruct and reconstruct certain layers of their identity anew. In the present study, too, these identity circles and the changes occurred as a result of participants' studies:

1. In the personal identity circle, the ultra-Orthodox female student faces the challenge of forming a new identity (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000). She has acquired new academic knowledge, which provokes thought patterns and beliefs that until then were taken for granted (Doron, 2013). Consequently, the student experiences confusion when facing the differences between the worlds, asking herself who she is, what her place is, and how should she behave given her new status.

2. In the family identity circle, the student is asked to redefine her relationships with her family members (Davidov & Grusec, 2007). Before starting college, she was a conventional ultra-Orthodox family member, progressing in the well-known and well-defined path. Upon entry into the academic world, the family deals with a daughter or mother who symbolically allows the secular world to invade the home. In families where higher education is common, studying is considered natural and the students' personal development is more seamlessly integrated (Gilboa, 2014). In families where the student is considered a pioneer, her personal development raises questions concerning her place in the family, and her place in relation to the other family members who did not pursue higher education (Neriya Ben-Shahar, 2015).

3. In the community identity circle, the student needs to function simultaneously in two communities or worlds (Schachter, 2005), each with entirely opposite characteristics. The pressure on her doubles: in the academic world she is required to behave openly and individualistically, to think creatively and independently. In the ultra-Orthodox world, she must behave according to strict pre-determined codes of conduct, where there is no room for independence (Gilboa, 2014). Existing simultaneously

in both worlds exacerbates the conflicts between them, presenting the student with questions regarding her freedom of choice when it comes to her own life, and her status in the community (Doron, 2013).

The present study findings indicate that all identity circles pertaining to the students are influenced by the encounter with the secular-academic world. Accordingly, issues such as the difficulty of integrating academic demands with those of the community, or the gap between values that guide them as ultra-Orthodox women versus the academic world's values, are brought to the forefront in these encounters. However, differently from Doron's (2013) findings, the present study findings reflect the encounters among circles (e.g., the negotiations between the personal, communal and academic-secular dimensions), rather than just the circles themselves (i.e., the personal, communal and secular-academic circles). The family identity circle does not appear in a distinct manner in the findings, but appears occasionally as part of the personal identity circle, and at times – as an inseparable part of the community circle. Therefore, in relation to the present study's findings, using the term 'dimension' is more suitable than the term 'identity circle.' A dimension represents a specific part of a phenomenon to which it

belongs, as opposed to an identity circle, representing clearer and more distinct phenomenon (Soanes & Stevenson, 2005). The encounter among the identity circles in this study may imply that all of them are part, or dimensions of, the students' established identities. Figure 1 represents these dimensions of identity, and the interactions between them.

The most significant period in their development is during the students' academic studies, catalyzing change processes (Dehan, 2004). Such change is not only external, in the sense of technical and concrete adjustments made by the ultra-Orthodox students to fit the academic framework, but also an internal one, in the sense of a shift in priorities and values. Such change also does not occur in a vacuum, but in a changing ultra-Orthodox world (Gilboa, 2014). Both modifications influence each other simultaneously, expressing the change undergone by the entire ultra-Orthodox society (Blumen, 2007).

From a personal perspective, the encounters between the students and different populations and worlds of content initiate a journey of personal and professional development and growth. This journey prompts change in many areas: in relation to the value of academic studies and women's traditional roles,
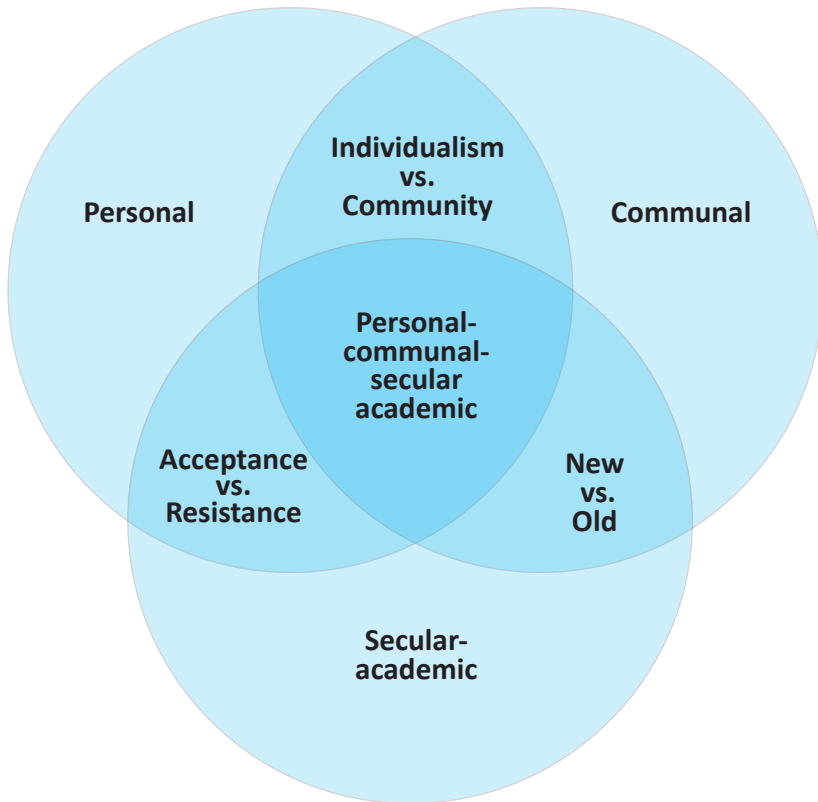
Figure 1. Dimensions of Students' Identity and the
Interactions between Them

personality traits (having greater tolerance and emotional containment), and achieving a higher social status among peers along with an increase in self-confidence. It also includes change in the form of a transition from an egocentric point of view to a point of view that incorporates the other in general, and their perception of the secular individual, in particular, and the consequent personal growth. At the same time, the students have experienced changes in their daily occupations and in how they divide their time between them. These changes caught them by surprise, as they expected to receive concrete tools and professional knowledge, but in fact discovered that they had undergone an internal and

vital change (Gilboa, 2014). Hence, the college serves as a kind of hotbed, providing comfortable and relatively safe conditions for practicing the negotiations that stem from the various encounters, integrating the ultra-Orthodox world with the secular-academic one. Eventually, most of students described an experience of having developed a strong backbone that enables flexibility in managing external situations, without damaging or tarnishing original ultra-Orthodox priorities and values.

The change that the students underwent is not only a personal one, but one that also promotes change in the community. In the family circle, families gradually accepted the studies, and most students received both material and emotional support during all or part of their studies. Apparently, the change that the students experienced also influenced their family members: as seen in an increased sensitivity towards their children's needs or in negotiating with the husband about the division of responsibilities (Gilboa, 2014). Thus, the change expands beyond the students, creating waves that impact broader circles in the family and the community.

Indeed, the students acted as agents of change who enabled the gradual penetration of the secular-academic world into the ultra-Orthodox community. Like other enclosed traditional communities, it appears that this community is taking careful and measured steps towards the secular world, and that despite its claims for seclusion and avoidance of secular culture, it is adopting parts of it (Dwairy et al., 2006). This conclusion is consistent with Krakowski's (2013) study, which examined the changes that occurred within the ultra-Orthodox community in the United States as a result of secular influences. He concluded that the ultra-Orthodox community's need to close the gap between itself and the secular world has created institutions which simultaneously use secular worlds of content, thereby allowing the ultra-Orthodox population to remain inside its own community. This solution satisfies the ultra-Orthodox need for independence since it allows them to enjoy an expanding supply of services, and a higher level of service, all while being able to remain within their protected community environment.

Implications

The present study's findings contribute to the knowledge about the ultra-Orthodox community, the processes of change it undergoes, and its encounter with the secular world. The findings support other relatively few studies' findings, pointing to the changes undergone by the ultra-Orthodox society through the ultra-

Orthodox female students who act as agents of change. By understanding how these women allow the community to examine itself and make decisions about certain changes, we can comprehend how change processes occur inside enclosed and traditional societies, such as the ultra-Orthodox community. In addition, these processes could be examined among other self-segregated communities to better understand and communicate the needs of both sides. This study's findings also enable a deeper understanding of the implementation of inter-cultural sensitivity during encounters between ultra-Orthodox students and college secular academic staff, colleagues, and future employers at work places. Such sensitivity includes, among other things, keeping a 'clean' language and avoiding street jargon or curses; trying to avoid as much as possible the presence of a female ultra-Orthodox occupational therapist and a male patient in the same room, behind closed doors; respecting the rules regarding Kosher food, and avoiding references to intimate male-female relationships.

The present study has two clinical implications. The curriculum for ultra-Orthodox women should take into account cultural sensitivities. In addition, the findings indicate the need to train other ultra-Orthodox female professionals, in order to continue enhancing the services used by the ultra-Orthodox community. These implications go beyond the particular ultra-Orthodox community and should be taken into consideration when training other minority groups in other cultures.

Limitations

Given the specific study population and the modest sample size, generalizing the findings to other ultra-Orthodox populations in Israel must be approached with caution (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Secondly, the principal researcher is a secular woman. Measures have been taken in order to avoid personal bias by means such as writing reflexive diaries throughout the entire research process, and receiving the supervisors' critical feedback. Yet, the researcher, as an outsider to the study's culture, may have missed certain meanings and nuances to which the participants referred to in their narratives. A third limitation relates to participants' academic status. To provide a broad perspective at different time periods, participants were purposefully selected from every academic year in the program. However, those differences may have influenced the participants' experiences, whereby first year students could provide narratives from narrower perspectives than those of more experienced students and graduates.

Recommendations for Future Research

There is a need for future continuing research from the perspective of the students and their perception of their academic studies' period, and the changes they experienced after a significant amount of time. Additionally, a comparative study is needed that can examine the effect of academic studies on ultra-Orthodox women in diverse professional frameworks, to understand what changes are similar and different across various professions. Finally, it is important to study the perspective of the college management and academic staff towards the academic studies of ultra-Orthodox women.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand how ultra-Orthodox women perceive their community during and after exposure to schooling and employment in occupational therapy. Apparently, participants were involved in different kinds of negotiations between their personal wishes and ambitions, their desire to accommodate to their community's expectations and the demands of the secular academic world to which they entered. These negotiations resulted in a significant change in participants' values, thinking patterns, and their perceptions

of themselves, their community, and the secular world. Such change enabled these ultra-Orthodox occupational therapists to become mediators between members of their community and the secular world, hence bringing them closer together. This improved relationship has the potential to improve occupational therapy health care services in the ultra-Orthodox world.

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