

# RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL REFLECTION

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## FROM A “SOCIETY OF SCHOLARS” TO A CREDENTIAL SOCIETY? THE PERCEPTIONS OF ULTRA-ORTHODOX STUDENTS IN ISRAEL, REGARDING HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WORK AND FAMILY - A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract.** Higher education, the heart of the credential race, is a threatening challenge for ultra-orthodox students (Paredes-Collins, 2014). For these students, who live in sectarian religious communities, higher education is viewed with suspicion, as it is associated with forces of destructive potential for their community and identity (Bowman and Smedley 2013; Cole and Ahmadi 2010; Dey et al. 2010; Hartley 2004; Mooney 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini 2011; Zhao 2017). Quite strangely, despite a growing corpus of research on highly religious students pursuing higher education, very little is known about their motivation and experiences and about the policies adopted by academic institutions to cater for their needs.

In this paper, we present findings from a study conducted among Ultra-Orthodox students at an academic college at the center of Israel. The fieldwork was conducted during 2016 and consists of interviews with 132 students, 77 women (58,3%) and 55 men (41,7%). Findings presented here highlight the perceptions of these students, regarding higher education and its influence on work and family. The students come from “a community of scholars” (*Hevrat Lomdim*), where most men devote their lives to the study of the sacred texts, while women are entrusted with the dual role of caring for the home and supporting the family. However, due to increasing levels

of poverty, they are also part of a growing flux of Ultra-Orthodox Israelis, who pursue academic degrees in order to join the labor force.

Our data show that Ultra-Orthodox students, both women and men, pursue higher education mostly for economic purposes, i.e. in order to support their family, together with intrinsic motives such as self-fulfillment and intellectual curiosity. However, gender differences were found in students' perceptions of the contribution of their academic study to integration into the labor market. It was found that Haredi women more than men perceive academic studies as a path that will contribute to their integration into the labor market. These findings reflect the growing impact of credentialism among *Haredi* women.

After analyzing the implications these findings may have for the students, the *Haredi* community and educational policies in Israel, we refer, in our conclusion, to the impact credentialism has on religious communities in the "Global Village".

**Keywords:** Higher education, ultra-orthodox students, gender, credentialism

### **Introduction**

The ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) are a growing sector of the population in Israel, about 11% of the Israeli population (CBS-Israel 2017; JPPI 2017). They typically live in segregated neighborhoods or towns, and are characterized by separate educational systems, a highly distinct modest dress code and gender segregation in the public sphere (Novis & Rubin, 2018).

In the past two decades, *Haerdi* society in Israel has undergone a comprehensive change that relates to the growing integration of ultra-Orthodox women and men into the labor market and academia. This change is part of a government effort to increase *Haredi* participation in the labor market by making higher education accessible to this population by offering separate academic tracks for women and men within the campuses.

### **Objectives / Purpose of the study**

Higher education, the heart of the credential race (Cowan, 2018), is a threatening challenge for ultra-orthodox students. For these students, who live in sectarian religious communities, higher education is viewed with suspicion, as it is associated with forces of destructive potential for their community and identity (Bowman and Brandenberger, 2012).. In this paper, we present findings from a study conducted among Ultra-Orthodox students at an academic college at the center of Israel. This study examines the question of whether there are gender differences regarding the considerations of academic choice and their implications for the family and

society among ultra-Orthodox students (Dehan, 2013; Almond & Perry-Hazan, 2011).

**Research Questions:**

1. What are the considerations for choosing academic studies among ultra-Orthodox students?
2. What are the perceptions of Haredi students regarding the implications of academic studies on family life?
3. Are there gender differences in considerations of academic choice?
4. Are there gender differences in the perception of the implications of higher education for family life?

**Methodology**

Data. The data were collected using a questionnaire distributed to students during the course, in one of the ultra-Orthodox campuses in the center of the country, during the academic year 2016. The questionnaire distributed is known and accepted in the field (Ayalon, Yogev, 2006). The data file includes 132 interviewees. 55 men (41.7%) and 77 women (58.3%) who studied in gender-segregated classrooms.

The research method. Factor analysis - to reveal considerations of academic choice and perceptions regarding the impact of academic studies on family life.

Compare Means: to examine the gender differences in relation to considerations of academic choice and the impact of studies on family life

**Results / Findings**

Our data show that Ultra-Orthodox students, both women and men, pursue higher education mostly for economic purposes, i.e. in order to support their family, together with intrinsic motives such as self-fulfillment and intellectual curiosity. However, gender differences were found in students' perceptions of the contribution of their academic study to integration into the labor market. It was found that Haredi women more than men perceive academic studies as a path that will contribute to their integration into the labor market. These findings reflect the growing impact of credentialism among *Haredi* women.

**Discussion**

Higher education, the heart of the credential race, is a threatening challenge for ultra-orthodox students (Edelstein et al, 2017; JPPI, 2017). These students, experience the contrast between traditionalist values and academic ones. Higher education is viewed with suspicion, as it is associated with forces of destructive potential for their community and identity. Quite strangely, despite a growing corpus of research on highly religious students pursuing higher education, very little is known about their motivation and

experiences and about the policies adopted by academic institutions to cater for their needs.

Findings presented here highlight the perceptions of these students, regarding higher education and its influence on work and family (Blumenfeld & Klein, 2009). The students come from “a community of scholars” (*Hevrat Lomdim*), where most men devote their lives to the study of the sacred texts, while women are entrusted with the dual role of caring for the home and supporting the family (Rubin, and Novis-Deutsch., 2017, Novis Deutsch, & Rubin, O. 2018.). However, due to increasing levels of poverty, they are also part of a growing flux of Ultra-Orthodox Israelis, who pursue academic degrees in order to join the labor force.

Our data show that Ultra-Orthodox students, both women and men, pursue higher education mostly for economic purposes, i.e. in order to support their family, together with intrinsic motives such as self-fulfillment and intellectual curiosity (Blumen, 2007). However, gender differences were found in students’ perceptions of the contribution of their academic study to integration into the labor market (Bryant, 2007). It was found that Haredi women more than men perceive academic studies as a path that will contribute to their integration into the labor market. These findings reflect the growing impact of credentialism among *Haredi* women.

After analyzing the implications these findings may have for the students, the *Haredi* community and educational policies in Israel, we refer, in our conclusion, to the impact credentialism has on religious communities in the “Global Village”.

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