**“The World’s in Crisis… and Us?”**

**The Covid-19 in a Collectivist Society’s Teacher Training**

**Abstract**

This study examined the narratives of young ultra-Orthodox teacher trainees during the COVID-19 crisis. The education system constitutes one of the central elements of this collectivist society, as it is responsible for socializing children to uphold and perpetuate the norms of the community. This longitudinal qualitative study investigated the changes that have unfolded in this community since the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they were experienced by the teaching trainees and those who trained them. The findings revealed that the outbreak of the epidemic was experienced as a turning point, an opportunity that had no place in the old scholastic routine. The findings indicated differences between the older generation, representing the establishment, and the young trainees. The older group’s discourse was fueled by anxiety in terms of responsibility toward community institutions and a fear of being called to order for failing to maintain community norms and routine. However, the narratives of the young trainees pointed to a positive COVID-19 experience. They learned to be flexible, to change, to think without relying on rules and structures. They experienced personal choice, less adapted to a uniform framework of a consensus; yet being characterized by a collectivist sense of mission and adherence to community norms. While the teacher training institutions experienced a period of a crossroads and faced questions of both training methods and challenges to their identities, the crisis opened some opportunities for change and transformation in the society’s structures.

**Keywords**

changes; collectivist-society; COVID-19; crisis; ultra-Orthodox; teacher-training

**Introduction**

Epidemics serve as a mediating factor in the process of cultural change (Fincher & Thornhill, 2012; Hamamura & Park, 2010). Has the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a catalyst for sociocultural processes and changes? The present study traces a narrative of the uncertainty and volatility that have unfolded during the COVID-19 crisis in a collectivist society’s structures, through the stories of young teachers.

Collectivist societies are characterized by “we-oriented” thinking and emphasize conformity to social responsibility and concern for others. In collectivistic cultures, people’s behavior is motivated by social norm adherence, conformity, and social harmony. People in collectivistic (vs. individualistic) cultures are more likely to value the welfare of the greater group. Individualistic cultures, in contrast, are self-focused and emphasize “me-oriented” thinking (Kitayama et al., 2022).

The literature about collectivist societies following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has focused on quantitative research, attesting to the advantages of collectivist cultures in dealing with the crisis (Rajkumar, 2021). They emphasize that collectivist cultures perceive the pandemic as a community crisis, while the individualistic approach sees it as a personal crisis (Maaravi et al., 2021). Individualistic and collectivist cultures have different coping strategies for dealing with crisis (Kitayama et al., 2022). It has been suggested that during the COVID-19, the emphasis on harmony in collectivist societies promoted inclusion and social support (Chalk, 2020), whereas in individualistic societies, the propensity for introversion might have amplified loneliness (Sethi, 2021).

The present qualitative study presents yet another perspective, seeking to reveal the multifaceted social layers that exist within a collectivist society, as well as the changes brought about and amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside new developments in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, the spread of the pandemic has accelerated processes that began much earlier (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020). Among the cultural changes that have taken place in recent decades (Huang et al., 2018), we observe the rise of individualism in collectivist cultures and the decline of collectivism in individualist cultures (Parker et al., 2009). This process has been mediated by economic development, modernization and crises. Today, while some countries are dominated by collectivism or individualism, traits of both can be found in all of them. With individualism and collectivism not dichotomous but rather the endpoints of a spectrum (Triandis, 2018), this research focuses on the mosaic of different aspects of collectivism and individualism in societies and the changes in them following the COVID-19 pandemic.

We examined these concepts within the case of a society that constitutes a conservative collectivist enclave—the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel—while investigating the impact of the pandemic on this society. Israel is a multicultural country that presents a unique case for exploring the role of culture in times of crisis, and one of its most interesting cultural groups is the ultra-Orthodox community (Slobodin & Cohen, 2020).

**The Ultra-Orthodox Community**

The ultra-Orthodox community is a collectivist religious group. Israel’s ultra-Orthodox population is one of its most prominent and well-defined minority groups, consisting of about 1.2 million people, and represents 12.6% of the Israeli population (Malach & Cahaner, 2021). The ultra-Orthodox (also known as the Haredi) society is characterized by stringent adherence to Jewish Orthodox law, rigid cultural and behavioral codes and norms and self-segregation from Western influences (Shomron & David, 2022). This is a closed authoritarian community with separate education frameworks, sensitive toward maintaining its boundaries and insulation from the surrounding secular modern culture, which is perceived as a threat to religion. It is characterized by large families, close community ties, high geographic concentration and powerful social support system.

The COVID-19 pandemic have had particularly significant consequences for this group in Israel, having the highest levels of infection and mortality during the first and second waves, with some predominantly ultra-Orthodox cities and towns reporting more than 30% of their population testing positive, assumingly on account of crowding, communal lifestyle, habitual close communal activities, and a paucity of health information (Muhsen et al, 2021; Shomron & David, 2022). on the other hand, a study about ultra-orthodox population in Israel during COVID-19, mentioned their highest life expectancies in Israel and good mental health, resilience and growth, attributed to the high social capital of this population: close relations with family and friends, active community involvement, trust in religious leaders, and the positive side of religious rituals (Levinskyet al, 2022).

Maybe this community's biggest challenge at the period of the COVID-19 pandemic was the need to use digital platforms, which were a major means of communication throughout the period of lockdown and isolation (Shomron & David, 2022). One expression of this community’s fear of modern culture is its leaders’ opposition to “new” technologies and in particular to internet use, as they threaten the preservation of a traditional existence. For that reason, mainstream ultra-Orthodox community members would adopt technology innovations only after having the leaders' approval (mainly for valued endeavors such as professional objectives), and have been traditionaly avoiding using the internet by choice (Neriya-Ben Shahar, 2020).

 Along with the changes that have taken place within this community in recent decades, the COVID-19 pandemic has plunged it into crisis and sharpened the existing sociocultural gaps, with the need to use the internet. On the one hand, there was a dramatic increase in internet use in the ultra-Orthodox community; from 28% of its members using the internet in 2008, the percentage increased to 64% in 2020, which is still relatively low compared to mainstream society in Israel (93%). On the other hand, only 13% of ultra-Orthodox children and youth used the internet in 2020, compared to 75% of their non-Orthodox peers (Malach & Cahaner, 2021). This figure is understandable in light of the ultra-Orthodox community’s sense of devotion to their children’s education, considered by them as the keystone of socialization and internalization of the community’s values.

The education system constitutes one of the central elements of collectivist society, as it is responsible for socializing children to uphold and perpetuate the norms of the community. Accordingly, in the ultra-Orthodox sector, the teaching profession and the education system present a major field of study, that can reveal changes this society underwent in the course of the pandemic. We focused on exploring the narratives of young teaching trainees in the ultra-Orthodox society—a collectivist religious minority group in Israel—aiming to open a window to and provide insights about the changes that have unfolded since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**the education system During COVID-19**

The global education system has undergone an upheaval in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to UNESCO (2020), COVID-19 has posed the greatest disruption in the education system in generations. With the eruption of the pandemic, teachers and schools were required to be flexible, adaptable, and agile under unanticipated circumstances (UNESCO, Educational Sector, 2020). In Israel’s education system, in March 2020 when the country entered into lockdown, frontal teaching was discontinued, schools were closed, and there was a sharp transition to online learning. This social distancing teaching included 2.3 million pupils at all education levels and 320 thousand students in all higher education institutions, of which 44,000 study in the twenty-one teaching colleges (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020).

While the unprecedented practice of lockdowns forced the general education system to experiment with a new reality, teachers and students had to adapt themselves, under the uncertainty as to how long the distance learning would last. One of the more vulnerable groups in this context were teaching students, who during the epidemic period initially experienced challenges as students in a teaching college, and later - upon entering the position of novice teachers - were required to shape a professional identity and apply professional skills. As learning how to teach in a teachers’ college requires a high level of engagement and peer interaction, and a key component of their teacher education is the practical experience in educational institutions, concerns have been echoed about preparing teachers who know much about theory and little about practice (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020). When this cohort of students graduated and entered their first year in the teaching profession on 2021, during the continuing uncertainty in the educational world, this period of crisis offered these novice teachers challenges and opportunities to examine their values and positions as they reconstructed their professional identity (Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020).

During this time, the idea of learning in the online space encountered opposition in the ultra-Orthodox society, whose leaders point to the use of the internet as a threat that could break down the walls of the community. In light of this, a unique outline for distance learning was formulated. The leadership of mainstream ultra-Orthodox educational institutions chose to conduct distance learning via live and recorded telephone communication between teachers or kindergarteners and students (Weissblai, 2020). An extreme minority of institutions decided, after much hesitation and doubt, to resort to online learning., while teacher training institutions experienced a period of a crossroads and faced questions of both training methods and challenges to their identities (Dvir & Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2020; Flores & Gago, 2020), teacher training in ultra-Orthodox society became more complex, revealing issues of widening disparities and inequalities in training opportunities.

using a qualitative longitudinal research methodology we examined the narratives of young ultra-Orthodox teacher trainees, charged with continuing the community’s tradition during the COVID-19 crisis, from the last year in teachers college (2020) to their first year as novice teachers (2021). We questioned, has the catalyzing factor of the pandemic led to a turning point in the professional development of these young women, and what does their narrative reveal about the changes that have been taking place in this collectivist community in the face of the crisis?

**Research Methodology**

This is a narrative case study that examined the professional accounts of teaching trainees, using multiple triangulation (Thurmond, 2001). We collected data from the young women and those who trained them for the teaching profession, at two points in the COVID-19 period: 1) the last semester of training at a teacher training institution, when the trainees undergo a practical internship at schools and kindergartens accompanied by the college program and their instructors; and 2) one year later when they had completed their first year as acting novice teachers. This qualitative longitudinal research methodology provided us with the opportunity to examine the narratives as they were experienced chronologically by the participants in order to determining not only if the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a turning point, but to also investigate processes of change and preservation over time (Hermanowicz, 2013).

Given that narratives represent the personal and the social in a cultural context, we found this method particularly appropriate for the goals of the present study, enabling us to elucidate how professional identity developed in the course of conflicts and decisions during the crisis. Professional narratives can provide insights into individual choices and deliberations among different ideologies, conflicting commitments, reality versus aspirations and dreams, and individuals’ personal perceptions of themselves and their culture (Hong et al., 2017).

 The present study focused on an ultra-Orthodox institution for teacher training, a conservative institution well-embedded in the mainstream of the community. Its model of teacher training practicum uses the “clinical triad” approach, in which emphasis is placed on reciprocity and cooperation between the parties in the process: the students in the teacher's college, the pedagogical instructors on behalf of the college faculty, and the training teacher at the educational institution where the student is interning (Naifeld, & Nissim, 2020). The interning institutions included schools and kindergartens, within the community and outside it. Due to this, focusing on this institution allowed us to explore the high-intensity encounter with what was happening inside and outside the enclaved community during the pandemic.

**Participants**

We used data-source triangulation to examine the path of the Ultra-orthodox young women becoming teachers under the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, through the eyes of themselves and the eyes of the staff that had an ongoing interpersonal escort process to accompany and guide them throgout that path. Three groups participated at the first time point in the study (n = 26): 15 female **students** from various tracks of specialization in the teacher's college (elementary and early childhood education, special education), aged 21–23-years-old, half of them were interning in educational institutions outside their community; 6 **training teachers** from the schools and kindergarten where the students were interning, belonging to various sociocultural currents; 4 **college faculty pedagogical instructors** and members of the administration at the teaching college.

At the second time point, 12 of the abovementioned students, who became to be **novice teachers**, agreed to participate in the second phase of the study (9 served as novice teachers and kindergarteners in institutions outside their community and 3 within their community), as well as the 4 pedagogical instructors and members of the administration at the teaching college.

**Tools and Procedures**

To allow for methodological triangulation, the data were collected in a number of ways. Data collection included in-depth narrative interviews, with the training teachers and with the students (and in the second phase with the same students who had by then become acting novice teachers). In addition, focus-group interviews were conducted in both phases with the college faculty pedagogical instructors and members of the administration. Each of the interviews opened with a question inviting the interviewee to share their story concerning professional development in teacher training during the COVID-19 period. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and transcribed.

In the first phase, we also analyzed the studens' internship journals, which took place in the year of the COVID-19 outbreak. The internship journals were collected from the studentss after obtaining their consent to have them analyzed for the purpose of the study.

In the second phase of the study, at the end of each interview, we asked the novice teachers to describe a timeline: “Please describe a timeline that represents your professional development process. It is up to you to decide on the points at which the timeline begins and ends.”

We assured participants that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. Participants were told that they could leave the study at any time and that their data would be kept secure until the end of the study, when it would be shredded.

The contents were analyzed using the categorical content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998) and discourse analysis (Tannen et al., 2015) methods.

**Findings**

The study’s findings point to the role played by the COVID-19 crisis, in the professional development of the teaching trainees, as part of a broader occurrence in society:

College faculty focus group (Phase 2): Suddenly, the issue arises. The world is becoming more and more complex. Suddenly things that were obvious to us are in question. It’s not easy, and we need to reinforce the old clear rules of conformity. What’s happened now?

In the findings section below, we will try to understand “what’s happened” through the eyes of the interviewees, as a narrative that begins before the COVID-19 outbreak and continues up until the present, while still in the midst of the crisis.

The description of the central themes that emerged will be accompanied by a quantitative measure of their appearances, which should indicate their prevalence in the context of the overall data set (bearing in mind that it does not indicate their prevalence in the population, in accordance with the study’s qualitative methodology).

כדי לשמור על אחידות, להלן בכל ציטוט במקום trainee אם מקורו בפעימה הראשונה צריך לכתוב "סטודנטית", ובפעימה השנייה novice teacher.

**COVID-19 as a Turning Point**

The outbreak of the epidemic was described as a turning point, that divided the training narrative into two separate periods:

Trainee (interview, Phase 1): My story at the kindergarten can be represented as two paths. The first path, up until COVID, is delightful and flourishing. It is the story of satisfaction, confidence and ability, finding my place. Then COVID comes along, and I switch over to a whole new path that did not exist in the universe before.

Novice teacher (interview, Phase 2): There are two stories here, chapter one and chapter two.

About a third of interviewees referred to the wake of the COVID-19 crisis as an obstacle turning point, a perception that was expressed in the usages of images such as “blockade,” “stop sign,” “switching to a lower gear,” “lights out,” “freeze,” and “black hole”:

Trainee (interview, Phase 1): COVID was a period of a 'black hole'. I was taken out of the story, I couldn’t communicate, it was more about theory, going back to theoretical learning. Suddenly everything froze.

The central point of crisis was defined as “the intersection of COVID times with the ultra-Orthodox norms,”, particularly as a result of the state’s demand to transit to online teaching. In this situation, the trainees confronted the growing divide between the outside world and community values. Those who were interning in educational institutions within the community could uphold the ban on internet usage by teaching via the telephone. However, those interning in institutions outside the community but determined to uphold the community’s norms, found themselves facing a moral and practical conflict, as described in the following interview:

Trainee (interview, Phase 1): During COVID, my learning and development came to a halt. Total blockade. There was no solution, I had no choice, everywhere I turned I was stuck. I did not participate in the live Zoom meetings. I would record and film. I did not film myself with my face showing, for the sake of modesty; how do I know who’s going to watch it and where it can end up?! It’s not useful to me if I don’t take part. In the intersection between COVID and religious differences, that’s where everything gets stuck.

Nevertheless, in the eyes of approximately two-thirds of interviewees, the COVID period was an opportunity to develop, to grow, and to flourish:

Trainee (internship journal, Phase 1): I gained a lot from the COVID period. COVID was a point of unexpected change that presented me with a lot of new possibilities. It was not always easy, but I am very enthusiastic about this period. I felt like I was finding myself precisely during this time. It was during COVID that I spread my wings!

An analysis of the interviews, the internship journals, and the timelines revealed that for a significant part, the COVID crisis opened up opportunities to break glass ceilings, develop, and express individual skills that had no place in the old scholastic routine. They reported flexibility, change, necessity as the mother of invention, and self-discovery on the field rather than the familiar old frameworks:

Trainee (interview, Phase 1): I had to learn how to manage. To be flexible, to change on-the-way, to think in other ways. Because it’s different, for example, teaching math lessons to young children over the phone, including asking questions and getting answers. This is a different kind of learning. I accomplished a lot. I gained the ability of flexibility, mental flexibility too, not just practical.

Trainee (internship journal, Phase 1): Following the constraints of isolation and support bubbles [learning modules], I ran the classes alone. You’re in the fray alone, and you have to deal. I was allowed to manage on my own, and I made it work! That was it! I knew that it was my calling to be a teacher!

Novice teacher (interview, Phase 2): As I see it, COVID was the greatest gift I could have asked for, with all the tragedy involved, for my first year of teaching COVID worked out perfectly for me. I felt that I was also developing socially. How to structure the class, how to teach. I learned a lot.

Novice teacher (interview, Phase 2): I moved between classes as needed. COVID was a big doorway. I learned to make contingency plans that I would have in my bag for different classes. When COVID struck, they couldn’t always give me enough time to prepare.

It seems, however, that the experience was perceived differently by the trainees than by their instructors, as seen below.

**A New Generation?**

The study’s findings indicate differences between the older generation, representing the “establishment,” and the young trainees, representing a different approach to the COVID-19 crisis in the professional context. In the older group’s discourse, the COVID-19 period was described as a “war,” with the main goal being to maintain the framework of stability and routine:

College faculty focus group (Phase 1): There was a feeling of enlisting in a war. A war to protect the children, the school routine.

Instructing teacher at a kindergarten (interview, Phase 1): They had to learn how to deal with a different, non-routine situation that was sudden and lasted a long time. They had to learn how to maintain structure, stability, and security for the kindergartners. That’s the kind of learning we had to do here.

The main concern expressed in the college faculty focus group was about the very idea of change. In both Phases 1 and 2, the question of whether it was worthwhile to make changes stood out. Doubts about the incentives to bring such changes about were conveyed in their questions: “Who knows if the situation will continue?”, “Is this the future?” One position with regard to changes invoked the fear of dismantling traditional structures:

College faculty focus group (Phase 2): During this period, some students had the idea that “the world’s gone mad, so let’s get crazy and party too. Let’s break free.”

In a collectivist society, trainees who “get crazy and party” may be seen as posing a threat to the “we” who adhere to the norms of the community. After this statement was made, the focus group made suggestions to increase supervision, which raised questions among the participants: “Do we not trust them that much?”; and “To what extent do we want to take responsibility for this?” The deliberation was fueled by anxiety in terms of responsibility toward community institutions, and the fear of being called to order for failing to maintain community norms:

College faculty focus group (Phase 2): The question is whether to return to the way things have always been or to continue on with the change? But then we might be called to order for making changes!

As a mirror-image of the attitude of the older generation described above, the narratives of roughly a third of the trainees described situations of oversight and restrictions:

Trainee (interview, Phase 1): The principal refused to allow us to hand in a lesson without the instructing teacher’s supervision. The oversight interfered with our ability to handle things.

College faculty focus group (Phase 2): The group of trainees, which was trained at [a name of a highly reputable special education institution], was not allowed to make phone contact with the homes and the families, both because of confidentiality and probably for fear that the trainees would make mistakes when there was no possibility of oversight.

Yet despite the establishment’s fear of change, the narratives of approximately two-thirds of the trainees pointed to this very change, as the very main factor behind their positive COVID-19 learning experience:

Trainee (interview, Phase 1): I learned to be very flexible, to change, to think, to plan the classes without relying on rules and structures.

Trainee (internship journal, Phase 1): For me, COVID was an experience of personal choice, of doing things as I see fit, less adapted to a uniform framework of a consensus, more freedom to work as we on the field think is best.

Contrary to the outlook of the older teachers who doubted the need for change, the trainees described the pandemic as something that could happen again—in an interviewee words: “Today it’s COVID, tomorrow it’s something else,”—and saw COVID as an opportunity for experimentation driven by necessity: “I learned that you have to deal with the challenge whatever the reality”; “A different kind of learning, we learned that there was another way”; “We mustn’t stop but beat a path to a different process.” It should be noted that the pandemic was perceived by the trainees as a generator of change, but not in terms of their religious-conservative outlook:

Novice teacher (interview, Phase 2): I think, and also the people around me have told me that I have changed somewhat. It’s a change that I’m still undergoing. I was taught differently. Only now am I internalizing the concept of teaching in groups. The main changes I went through were not around religious matters but in terms of methods of teaching and flexibility.

The trainees’ narratives describe the young women’s satisfaction and fulfillment as a result of the freedom, independence in teaching, and new opportunities they enjoyed during the COVID-19 crisis. At the same time, all of those who referred to this issue emphasized the importance of upholding the rules of modesty, restricted and supervised use of technologies, and an unwillingness to compromise on religious aspects:

Trainee (interview, Phase 1): This whole situation came about to teach us something, we need to be careful not to stumble or become less virtuous, to resist temptations. If we regress it will mean losing everything.

Novice teacher (interview, Phase 2): [In describing her avoidance of the teachers’ lounge] I would rather stay in the classroom or occupy myself with my own business sometimes rather than overhear a conversation that I don’t think is suitable.

The trainees went so far as to express anger at the college or the instructing teacher when these made compromises regarding religious norms:

Trainee (interview, Phase 1): [Following the college’s request to use email for communication purposes] We talked about it among ourselves, the students, and it’s very frustrating that this was coming from a college that’s supposed to be protected and conservative.

A few trainees described the processes of change as ones affecting the formation of their identity outside the professional sphere:

Novice teacher (interview, Phase 2): I wanted to test out my true self, without conventions. Without fear. To do what I think is right and proper without being judged, without being asked questions, without being afraid of reactions. Just to be me. I was not afraid to examine the society in which I find myself. There was also an opportunity here to get to know myself, who I am regardless of work. What I really want.

In analyzing the findings, we discovered a disparity between the rigidity that characterizes veteran teachers, and the freedom from commitment to structures, flexibility, and creativity of the younger teachers. The training staff perceived these differences, and described the younger generation as having more flexibility and openness to learning:

Instructing teacher (interview, Phase 1): The students are much more confident, with a more fluid approach than mine. Our rigidity may be a bit of a hindrance. They, on the other hand, were open to everything. They came in with a lot of courage and good will.

College faculty focus group (Phase 1): They took initiative, they flourished, they acted. Many testify to their self-confidence as a leader having grown during this period. They had a chance to experiment, to come in with things that we would not have encountered if not for COVID. We, the staff, were very scared, but the students got along much better than we thought. They are the “okay” element in the story. They are young, they have a young spirit, an open mind, they’re not set in their ways.

The trainees also attributed the differences to the age gap, both in comparing themselves with the older staff (novice teacher, interview, Phase 2): “For me, the other teachers are from ten generations ago,” and in describing themselves as “old” (novice teacher, interview, Phase 2): “I’m like an old woman who’s never been exposed to computing.”

The new generation, therefore, is perceived as one that dares and spreads their wings in welcoming the change. As such, it may require supervision, but receives approval in the wake of success.

Blurring of Boundaries

The findings point to changes in the norms of hierarchical deference and impersonal distance that are traditionally typical of the relationships in this society, as revealed by the interviewees in Phase 1 and in Phase 2.

Trainee (interview, Phase 1): COVID came along and it was a chance to try something different. Something no one has experienced, not even the veterans. Together we learned how to teach from a distance. There was a kind of evolving, creating something new together with the instructing teacher.

The word “together” recurred in the descriptions of the female students and of the instructing teachers. The breaking of hierarchical boundaries occurred not only between the trainees and the instructing teachers, but also—untraditionally—between the trainees and the parents:

Instructing teacher (interview, Phase 1): COVID caused connections to deepen, between the trainees and the pupils, but also between the trainees and the pupils’ mothers. The parents consulted with them, and it came from a very respectful, professional place. We worked together as a team and discussed the pupils.

In Phase 2, under the pretext of the pandemic as a “different” kind of situation, the novice teachers described the relationship between teacher and pupil as diverging from the teacher-pupil relationship familiar to them:

Novice teacher (timeline, Phase 2): Distance learning made me develop the skills to do it right. It made the teachers into something like the pupils’ parents. I would stay for fifteen minutes longer, sometimes more, they could call me whenever they wanted, the parents would also contact me. There were some tough moments when I felt I had no energy left, but I knew that they were COVID children and I saw how hard it was on them.

Novice teacher (interview, Phase 2): I’m used to there being distance between student and teacher. But when I got there, I didn’t need this boundary so much. The girls would hug me in the morning, it was a very strong and close bond. At first it was difficult for me to accept.

The changes brought about by the COVID-19 crisis in the hierarchy between teachers and pupils, the findings show, stemmed both from a change in the relationship between adults and young people following the outbreak, and from a collectivist concern for the “COVID children.” In this context, we found a high recurrence of the word “mission” in the statements of the trainees in both phases, as well described by this trainee (interview, Phase 1):

COVID came along and it was a chance to try something different. Something no one has experienced, not even the veterans. Together, we learned how to teach from a distance. The girls were scared. Some told me that they never left the house, that they were scared for their grandparents. There was a kind of evolving, creating something new together with the instructing teacher. What ended up happening is that I worked much more than what was required, I felt like I was part of the class. The students would call me for help with school work, but mainly just to chat. I was a teacher figure to them, one who’s always there and you can always turn to. It gave me a good feeling of having a sense of mission. Like a real teacher. I know I did something great, the students chose to talk to me, I was the adult in charge, the one who’s present and listening.

**Personal Courage**

As the crisis grew more prolonged, the main struggle of the establishment, dubbed in the focus group the “big story,” was the question of intercultural training: should trainees continue to be sent to do their practical experience in institutions outside of the mainstream community? The findings show that following the COVID-19 crisis, the room for maneuver and possibilities narrowed in the eyes of the college staff, the differences in norms grew more pronounced, and their sense of threat and responsibility for preserving the community increased. Due to the socioreligious dilemmas and the intensified challenges posed by COVID-19 in 2020, the college opted to culturally insulate, at least in the short term, and, in fact, decided to avoid intercultural placements of trainees ahead of the new academic year 2021:

College faculty focus group (Phase 1): Processes that we did not anticipate and did not expect to have to deal with were laborious. We did not think we would have to devote time to joint discussions on how to deal with distance learning or with different perceptions within ultra-Orthodox institutions. We need to take into account that there is a whole year of this ahead of us. No one can say when it will end. We should continue to offer diverse experiences, but pay attention to both text and sub-text, to avoid unnecessary difficulties later [...] The big story is in the gaps. The college needs to see how it copes. We need to understand the story better. We also need to see what the story is and be a part of it.

A year later, in the second phase, the same subject was raised in the college staff focus group and the argument in the decision in favor of temporary insulation received additional validation and was renewed:

College faculty focus group (Phase 2): We don’t know what the next year will bring, in terms of COVID. We received a clear demand from one principal to only send them trainees who identify with the school’s community. She doesn’t want to deal with intercultural training again. We will stick to the same policy this year.

On the other hand, a different narrative emerges from the analysis of the interviews, diaries, and timelines of the trainees, according to which intercultural integration was not hindered:

Trainee (interview, Phase 1): The pupils accepted the diversity and variety very quickly. The feeling of otherness was soon dissipated. It was a matter of the first few days and weeks.

The same trainee (internship journal, Phase 1): I dealt with all sorts of difficulties and pressures this week, but, thank G-d, I was able to persevere despite all the challenges. I think it’s not for nothing that G-d has made us face this situation I find myself in.

It is interesting to note the combination of first-person singular and first-person plural statements in her description of handling challenges: “it’s not for nothing that G-d has made **us** face this situation **I** find **myself** in.” This might attest to her eclectic perception of the situation as an individual who is facing challenges as part of a collective. Indeed, although there were those who described difficulties and dilemmas, the trainees commonly unfolded a narrative of dealing positively with the intercultural challenges that emerged. Adherence to the traditional religious outlook did not prevent them from progressing and developing, and contrary to the decision of the establishment, did not cause them to relinquish their desire to integrate into intercultural work. In Phase 2, as they were taking their first steps into the teaching profession, most of the young teachers’ stories convey their ability to be flexible and find creative solutions they developed during the COVID-19 period. Consequently, they were able to opt for intercultural teaching, a choice that does not depend on the attitude of the establishment:

Novice teacher (interview, Phase 2): Having no choice, the workplace agreed to my terms, for example, regarding Zoom. We had an argument. They said, “you want to do an internship, you want to succeed, so you have to do what you’re told.” I replied that I wouldn’t comply with anything that went against my values. They loved it. They told me: well done. I’m going to stay. We agreed on email availability. I use the Zoom only when I’m at the school. I don’t intend to let it into my home. I found creative alternatives; instead of teaching classes via Zoom under the terms of isolation, I taught classes outside the classrooms, or switched between the teachers. They put a lot of pressure on me, but I did not give up. I found solutions.

The statements of this novice teacher can be seen as part of the process of professional development undergone during the COVID-19 period, which we have gleaned from the findings. “Necessity is the mother of invention,” said an instructing teacher during a Phase 1 interview in describing the main change that took place in teacher training under COVID-19 – the development of leadership, initiative, and self-confidence among the trainees. And indeed, the story of this novice teacher is an example of a religious values conflict resolved thanks to confidence and determination, together with the ability to find solutions “on the field.”

In terms of choosing their workplace after they had finished their training at the college, some teachers refrained from choosing the intercultural route following the pandemic, out of the fear of disparities in teaching methods, especially as a result of the increased use of technology:

Novice teacher (interview, Phase 2): I was afraid that if I integrated in a non-ultra-Orthodox institution, I would have to use the internet following its widespread use during COVID. That’s my limit: I don’t want to have to do things against my will, against my worldview.

On the other hand, there were those who said they actually preferred to work in non-ultra-Orthodox institutions. Their statements appeared to be another example of the younger generation spreading their wings in the face of the supervising establishment’s position:

Novice teacher (interview, Phase 2): I liked it better there in [a name of a non-ultra-Orthodox institution] than in a standard ultra-Orthodox place. Even though, in terms of my religion, I found some of the things there shocking. But I like the place of the students, the fact that I could talk to them openly and they want to listen and absorb.

Concerning intercultural work, hesitation was mitigated by the tendency toward independent thought, which seemed to have been amplified among the young generation of teacher trainees during the COVID-19 period. This tendency was also joined by an affinity for diversity and change among the ultra-Orthodox teacher trainees who did their internships during this period, a reaction prevalent throughout the findings:

Novice teacher (timeline, Phase 2): I work at a secular school. I love the beautiful things you can enjoy, even those different from yourself. It is a chance to experience and get to know another style, another society.

Let us conclude the theme of personal courage, with the words of a trainee (interview, Phase 1) in response to the question of what she had gained from the pandemic period:

I gained a lot of confidence and the strength to integrate into the field of education with full intensity. COVID threw you in at the deep end, you kind of had no choice but to take responsibility and initiative and be more involved and influential. That means self-confidence and professionalism, courage and will.

**Discussion**

The current study focused on young women in ultra-Orthodox society—a collectivist religious minority group in Israel—and produced insights about the processes that young teachers have gone through over the year and a half, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The education system constitutes one of the central elements of collectivist society, as it is responsible for socializing children to uphold and perpetuate the norms of the community. The COVID-19 crisis emphasized and accelerated the processes of redefinition of the pedagogical attitudes and practices of teachers in this community, particularly following the transition to online pedagogy. That being said, the changes are not limited to pedagogy (Pelosi & Vicars, 2020), the teaching space has transformed dramatically in the wake of the crisis, which has also led to a shift in the power balance. Accordingly, the present study found that the response of the ultra-Orthodox “establishment” to changes consisted of increased supervision of teaching trainees. The response of the young trainees themselves, however, was fundamentally different.

Our research revealed disparities in the narrative between the old and young generations in the education system in this collectivist society. The older generation, representing the establishment, seeking to maintain stability and preserve the existing routines, were fearful of change and expressed commitment to and responsibility for maintaining community norms. By contrast, the new generation of teachers, the young trainees and then the new teachers, bemoaned the limitations placed upon them and perceived the forced crisis as an opportunity for creativity, initiative, and personal and professional development. The college resorted to self-containment and insulation during this period and upheld the collectivist strategies, of maintaining harmony and avoiding open confrontation with the community (Parker et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the young trainees, by and large, paved their own way independently.

At first glance, it would seem that the young women to some extent expressed individualistic perceptions, which include the definition of personal goals, fulfillment, and independence (Parker et al., 2009). However, the motives attributed to these goals were often a sense of mission that characterizes collectivism, and even among the more “independent” trainees there was a marked adherence to community norms (it should be noted that Triandis & Gelfand, 1998, distinguished belief in the importance of the group from adherence to norms as a separate component of collectivism). The young women preserved their religious conservative perceptions but combined them with an openness to change and renewal. It is possible that this finding reflects a trend that has been reported in recent years of an increase in individualism in collectivist cultures and a decline of collectivism in individualist cultures (Parker et al., 2009; Triandis, 2018). It may well be that the outbreak of the pandemic served as a catalyst for these sociocultural changes, in line with research that shows epidemics to be a mediating factor in processes of cultural change (e.g., Fincher & Thornhill, 2012; Hamamura & Park, 2010). This explanation is reinforced by the finding of an additional marked change that occurred as a result of the COVID-19 crisis—the blurring of hierarchical boundaries that traditionally characterize the collectivist ultra-Orthodox society. Future research will have to examine whether this shift constitutes a sociocultural trend and whether it is accelerating or becoming more widespread.

Another explanation for the difference in perceptions between the two age groups is that, in the age of globalization and global change, even societies that are considered collectivist in nature undergo cultural processes in which the younger generation preserves the values of traditional society while incorporating the emerging modern characteristics of adulthood, a process known as “individualistic collectivism” (Schwartz, 2016). For members of this young adults age group, times of deep crisis can precipitate the invention of an alternative future, by interweaving knowledge with both practical experimentation and building on past experiences (Porta, 2020). A possible explanation for the emerging processes provoked by the crisis among the young women, may be the combination of the emerging characteristics of adulthood, with ongoing cultural-global changes and a global crisis, which created a situation in which young people perceive changes and fluctuations as an opportunity for growth, learning, and development. This is an encouraging finding that corroborates other international findings about collectivist-oriented young women who have shown themselves more prepared to fit into the environmental changes linked to COVID-19 (Germani et al, 2020).

In the encounter between tradition and modernity, a person can independently accept and represent multiple cultures (such as individualist and collectivist ones). It is, therefore, conceivable that three-quarters of the young women who were forced to find solutions on the ground when faced with the challenges of modernity as brought on by the COVID-19 crisis were able to not only withstand but also benefit from the intercultural encounter.

The young women’s sense of mission was expressed in their concern for their pupils. Considering the conceptual distinction between institutional collectivism and in-group collectivism (Kumar, 2021), their concern seems according to the findings more of a manifestation of in-group collectivism as expressed in loyalty and concern for the immediate group, such as the immediate family or, in this case, the young teacher’s class. In contrast, the establishment's concerns were informed largely by institutional collectivism, reflecting the submergence in the larger collective.

The trainees’ concern for their students is consistent with the literature maintaining that collectivism entails concerns for others in the community (Germani et al., 2020), and a tendency to use social coping strategies of emotional and instrumental support more frequently than in individualistic societies (Chalk, 2020). Similarly, it has recently been found that teachers from Arab society, which is also a religious-collectivist minority community in Israel, reported feeling much more pressure from factors related to their jobs as teachers, such as maintaining interpersonal contact with students and taking care of them, than personal factors (Zadok-Boneh et al., 2021).

Therefore, it appears that, faced with the crisis, the collectivist society we examined experienced a powerful emergence of two dominant characteristics of collectivism, albeit separately for two distinct groups within this society. The first was a sense of mission and the concern for one’s close circle, which may require a certain degree of courage in a period of crisis and in the encounter with elements that are “beyond the boundaries” of the community, as expressed by the young trainees. The second was responsibility and concern for the collective while adhering to society’s norms and ensuring that they are upheld, as expressed by the older teachers and staff representing the establishment.

The sense of threat experienced by the establishment as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, which led to a withdrawal and move away from intercultural training, raises an important question about the effects of the pandemic (and perhaps of crises in general) on collectivist societies. While there are many quantitative studies that attest to the advantage of collectivist cultures in dealing with crises such as COVID-19, there is a need to examine the implications of these communities’ coping strategies—i.e., their increased concern for the community and insulation—on intercultural relationships. Do these implications apply only to intercultural integration in education systems—the core of the community’s socialization mechanism, having its importance widely supported by the literature (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017)? Further research in needed to examine this question. Another question that arises is whether we are witnessing only a temporary change. At the applied level, the avoidance of the intercultural challenge during these times can teach us about the many resources required to tackle it. Further research will be needed to develop our understanding of the appropriate processes and assistance required to overcome the emergency period and to adapt programs to the new realities of life while providing appropriate training for life in a multicultural society, both in times of crisis and in normal life, within the education system and in general.

There is an abundance of quantitative research regarding the interaction between collectivism-individualism and the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study seeks to address the scarcity of qualitative studies on the subject and the scarcity of studies examining changes within the collectivist societies themselves during the COVID-19 crisis. This research opens a window onto the world of a highly guarded society that is usually not very accessible as a field of study. Yet, while it presents the diverse viewpoints of the participants, using a range of research tools and at two different time points, it is limited, given the restricted study population. Different cultural groups, education systems, and individuals were affected differently by the COVID-19 crisis (Moorhouse, 2021); therefore, similar studies among other societies are required for a broader perspective. We recommend that future studies combine quantitative and qualitative research methods to contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of the coping strategies employed in this unprecedented period of uncertainty and confusion, as well as of their consequences, and to provide comparative information between groups from different cultures, ages, and professions.

We opened our study with the question raised by the college faculty in Phase1: “What’s happened?” The outbreak of the pandemic heralded as a turning point that divided the narrative of the study participants into two separate periods—before and after the eruption of the crisis. We learned that the changes remained a year and a half after the beginning of the crisis. While similarities can be found between our findings and the body of knowledge already available in the literature about the teaching practicum experience during COVID-19, such as the crisis as an opportunity for educational-emotional rather than just teaching emphases (Kidd & Murray, 2020), in our study, the pandemic presented some of the participants and the ultra-Orthodox college with dilemmas along with unexpected opportunities. Study participants did not report loneliness, which was a major struggle for most of the world population during this period. Their main predicament came in the form of the intersection of COVID with religious differences, the conflict between the values of a community that avoids unfiltered use of internet technology and the challenges of the hour, which included a sharp and sudden transition to online learning. This transition posed an increased threat to the community’s “walls.”

The present study contributes to the understanding that the development of individuals and communities during periods of disasters, crises, and epidemics is shaped by a variety of intersecting factors (Kitayama et al., 2022). We found that, at the community level, it is important to discern the different strata within the community and thoroughly investigate how its members deal with the narrative of uncertainty and tremors in social structures.

Are these new developments? Or is it an acceleration of processes that had begun long before? Are we witnessing the first gusts of the wind of social change? Time will tell. Nevertheless, regarding tensions between conservative and innovative trends alongside intercultural polarization, which are prominent in social discourse at this time, we may have identified opportunities at the heart of this crisis.

**Statements and Declarations**

**Contributions**

All authors whose names appear on the submission

1. made substantial contributions to the conception, design, acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data in the research;

 2. drafted the work or revised it critically for important intellectual content;

3. approved the version to be published; and

4. agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related

to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and

resolved.

**Funding:** The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

**Financial interests:** The authors declare they have no financial or no-financial interests.

**Data availability:** It has been agreed with participants not to share research data publicly.

**Ethical statements:**

1. The purpose and course of the study were explained to the participants.

2. Participants' data was kept secure in the researchers' password-protected computers until the end of the study.

3. All the research data will be used for this research purposes only.

4. Confidentiality and anonymity maintained.

5. Participants were invited to receive additional information about the study and were offered the opportunity to contact the researcher by phone or email.

6. All participants signed the consent form:

Participant Consent Form

“The World’s in Crisis… and Us?” The Covid-19 in a Collectivist Society’s Teacher Training

• I……………………………………… voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

 • I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

• I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

 • I understand that participation involves a 1-2 hours of interview.

• I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

 • I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

 • I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous.

• I understand that signed consent forms and the interview transcripts will be retained and kept secure in the researchers' password-protected computers and they only will have access to data; Details that allow the identification of the data will be permanently deleted immediately upon completion of the processing required for the purposes of the study.

• I understand that I am free to contact the researchers to seek further clarification and information.

Names, degrees, affiliations and contact details of researchers (and academic supervisors when relevant).

Signature of participant ……………………… Date…………………….

Signature of researcher ……………………… Date…………………….

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