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## **Lives in transition: Ethnic identity and psychological well-being in adults with a highly mobile global upbringing**

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Lives in Transition: Ethnic Identity and Psychological Well-being in Adults with a Highly  
Mobile Global Upbringing

Sutharshini (Dharshi) V. Vasikaran

A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of

Bachelor of Science (Psychology) Honours

Faculty of Computing, Health and Science

Edith Cowan University

Submitted: October 2010

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**Lives in Transition: Ethnic Identity and Psychological Well-being in Adults with a  
Highly Mobile Global Upbringing**

**Abstract**

This study explored the nature of ethnic identity and its relationship to psychological well-being (PWB) in *third culture kids* (TCKs). Ethnic identity *achievement* in acculturating individuals (e.g., migrants) is known to furnish one with a sense of belonging to one's group together with desirable psychological outcomes. Ethnic identity construction can be more complex in TCKs because of exposure to multiple cultural contexts during developmental years. Seven TCKs currently residing in Australia were interviewed. Analysis proceeded according to Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology. Two themes were elucidated: 'Making sense of identity' and 'sense of belonging and PWB'. Single and multiple (blended and alternating) TCK ethnic identities were evident. A sense of belonging was positively associated with PWB. There was no support for relationship of nature of ethnic identity to PWB. The usefulness of Ricoeur's methodology and of pictorial depictions as an aid to ethnic identity research have been demonstrated. Implications for parents, associated sending organisations (e.g., military) and the helping professions as well as suggestions for future research have been discussed.

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Submitted: October 2010

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## **Lives in Transition: Ethnic Identity and Psychological Well-being in Adults with a Highly Mobile Global Upbringing**

Ethnic identity (EI), conceptualised as that part of one's social identity derived from a common ethnic ancestry (Phinney, 2005; Verkuyten, 2005) has been shown to be important in psychological outcomes in ethnic minority groups (e.g., Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997). Increasing globalisation is seeing more children than ever before, growing up in multiple cultural contexts (Arnett, 2002; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Children who accompany parents to and spend a significant portion of their developmental years in cross-cultural situations are thought to develop a more complex cultural/ethnic identity (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Grimshaw & Sears, 2008; Fry, 2007). Studies in this area have been sparse and the nature of ethnic identity and its relationship to psychological well-being in this group of persons is not well understood. The aim of this study therefore was to address these knowledge gaps.

Globalisation, the changes occurring in cultures (defined as a group sharing a common pattern of standards, beliefs and behaviours, Phinney, 2005; Verkuyten, 2005) around the world in their progression towards homogeneity, is aided by business, migration/people movement and the "exchange of information and ideas" (Sam, 2006, p. 20). This is not a new phenomenon (Arnett, 2002). However, rapid advances in technology and telecommunications, easy access to world-wide travel and economic reliance by nations on global markets (Arnett, 2002; Hervey, 2009) have led to an increase in globalisation and greater cross-cultural contact between people. This inevitably results in cultures influencing one another more than ever before (Arnett, 2002).

One of the ways in which globalisation is being facilitated is through migration (Arnett, 2002), with approximately 175 million migrants world-wide at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Sam & Berry, 2006). Further, increasing conflict in many parts of the world has resulted in increasing numbers of people displaced across the globe (Sam & Berry). Sojourners, those temporarily journeying to a foreign culture for business or employment, as volunteers with aid/missionary organisations, for study or tourism purposes also play an important role in globalisation (Bochner, 2006). Cross-cultural contact between indigenous people groups and foreigners (Phinney, 2006), have also increased in the last couple of centuries.

### **Acculturation**

The inevitable changes that occur when cultures meet, at both group and individual levels, are known collectively as *acculturation* (Sam, 2006). In 1936, Redfield, Linton and Herskovits, defined acculturation as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (cited in Sam, p. 11). This definition allows for both cultures to influence each other, although in practice, factors such as power inequalities have resulted in greater changes in the less powerful group, thus biasing research focus on the latter (Berry, 2001; Sam, 2006).

The term acculturation encompasses all the changes that can occur when cultures come into contact with one another. This includes changes at both group and individual levels (Sam, 2006). For instance, the acculturating individual undergoes changes in identity, attitudes, values and behaviours at the individual level as well as

being impacted upon by changes at their group level (e.g., changes to group organisation or structure, Phinney, 1990; Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006; Sam).

The term *psychological acculturation* was used by Graves to describe the psychological changes that an individual experienced when cultures came into contact with each other (Berry, 2001; Phinney et al., 2006). According to Ward's culture contact model, short-term effects of acculturation include transformations in thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Bochner, 2006). This could then, according to Ward and colleagues, lead to enduring changes: psychological and socio-cultural *adaptation* as individuals try and cope with the stressors (Berry, 2006; Sam, 2006).

Several models of acculturation have been proposed and can be broadly classified as uni- (1-D) and two- dimensional (2-D) models (Liebkind, 2006). 1-D or 'linear' models emphasise change only along one dimension, resulting in only two acculturative options or strategies: *Assimilation* (host culture taken on with loss of own culture) or *separation* (host culture rejected and original culture maintained). The emphasis of 2-D models (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Berry, 2001) on the other hand is on change along two dimensions. As these are purported to take place independent of each other, maintenance of more than one culture is possible (Liebkind, 2006). A popular (Sam, 2006) 2-D model is that proposed by Berry (2001).

According to Berry's model, there are four possible strategies available for acculturating individuals (Berry, 2001; Sam, 2006). Migrants, for instance, adopt acculturative strategies depending on whether or not they choose to be involved in both or either of their heritage and host cultures (Sam, 2006). The acculturative strategies

arrived at are *assimilation*, either voluntarily or because of pressure to do so by the host culture, *integration* (or *biculturalism*, embrace aspects of both own and host cultures), *separation* or *marginalisation* (reject both cultures, Sam, 2006), although the choice of strategies may change during the process (Sam, 2006). Despite a few alternative 2-D models being proposed (e.g., the fusion model of Arends-Toth and van de Vijver) and despite criticisms levelled against it (Tardif-Williams & Fisher, 2009; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010), Berry's model enjoys research support from several studies (Phinney et al., 2006; Ward, 2008).

### **Psychological effects of acculturation.**

As mentioned earlier, acculturation may result in short term affective, behavioural and cognitive changes as well as long-term adjustment, both psychological and socio-cultural (Sam, 2006). *Psychological adaptation* can be largely thought of as psychological or affective well-being and contentment. *Socio-cultural adaptation* on the other hand is concerned with gaining public and host culture skills needed to navigate oneself in daily situations (Sam, 2006). Changes, in relation to globalisation for instance, are seen to exert their psychological effects through changes in self-concept or identity with changing environmental contexts (Arnett, 2002).

The relationship between psychological acculturation and well-being is not well understood (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). According to Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, people's self concepts are made up of personal and group or social identities; the latter draws from knowledge of one's group memberships as well as the worth and affective importance that is derived from those memberships. This includes a sense of belonging (for instance in a cultural group, Phinney et al.,

2006). Social identity theory suggests that group membership leads to a healthier identity, although it does not identify how these identities may vary according to acculturation strategies for example, *assimilation* vs. *integration* (Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, 1992).

Many studies have indicated that the acculturative strategy of integrating elements from the individual cultures concerned (*integration* or *biculturalism*) is associated with the best psychological and socio-cultural adaptation (Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, 1992; Berry, 2006; Phinney et al., 2006; Ward, 2008). Although the mechanism is unclear for this relationship, social support from both cultures has been suggested as a possible reason for this outcome (Berry, 2006). Studies on acculturation processes in children, need to take into account developmental factors as well as those relevant in adults (Sam, 2006; Costigan, Su, & Hua, 2009).

At the level of *psychological acculturation*, it is difficult to tease apart psychological changes due to acculturation from those due to normal development (Sam, 2006; Costigan et al., 2009). Thus for children, the process of acculturation can be more complex than for their parents (Oppedal, 2006). Unlike adult migrants, whose already formed constructions of thought and behaviour patterns need to adapt to the new setting, their children's constructions *form* in the context of both cultures (Oppedal). For adolescent migrant children, this would include identity formation, because according to Erikson, this is a significant aspect of adolescent development (Costigan et al., 2009; Phinney, 1990).

### **Ethnic Identity (EI)**

In both children and adults undergoing acculturation, that part of the social identity that is asserted to be a salient feature is, EI (Phinney, 2005). However, most researchers agree that EI can be both a component of social identity (Liebkind, 2006; Dandy, Durkin, McEvoy, Barber, & Houghton, 2008), as well as sharing aspects of individual identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Although there is no universal definition of ethnic identity (EI), this “self-constructed” (Phinney, 2005, p.189) entity can be broadly defined as the sense of self a person has, in relation to their *ethnic* group membership (Liebkind, 2006); the term *ethnicity* refers to the culture/s of a person’s forebears or their ancestral legacy (Phinney), such that those from one ethnic group tend to have sets of ideals, attitudes and activities distinct from another (Phinney). EI is seen to include making the meaning and implications of one’s ethnic group membership, one’s own (Phinney). It is also conceptualised as a person’s sense of belonging to this membership and the affirmative position they take in regards to it (Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, 1992).

It is thought that EI may or may not include a common culture, a way of life encompassing aspects of day to day practices, attitudes and beliefs such as dress, language, religion and values (Verkuyten, 2005). It is possible to have a strong ethnic identity, without taking part in these (Phinney 2005; Verkuyten). That is, culture content is not necessarily part of EI. Thus, EI is concerned with the knowledge of being part of an ethnic group as well as understanding and internalising the implications of this group membership. However, it does not necessarily involve practising the group’s traditions and customs.

It is important to distinguish between EI and two related terms: *cultural identity* and *ethnic self-label/categorisation*. The term *cultural identity* has been used to mean one's heritage culture (Liebkind, 2006; Sam, 2006) as well as to encompass EI, national identity (that of the larger society) and their interactions (Phinney et al., 2006). In this thesis, the term *cultural identity* will be used as a more broad term than EI to include all cultural and ethnic aspects of a person's identity, including the ethnic and national identities of immigrants.

Ethnic *self-labels* are responses to questions of ethnicity (e.g., Phinney & Alipuria, 1996) and do not necessarily reflect a person's EI (Phinney, 2005). EI on the other hand is "strength of identification" with one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1996, p. 922) and is an important determinant in psychological outcomes (Phinney, 1996) and a person's reaction to acculturation (Liebkind, 2006). *Ethnic labels* have been found to remain fairly constant over time while degree of identification showed variation (Jasinskaja-Lahti & Liebkind, 1999).

### **EI and acculturation.**

EI is thought to be a facet of acculturation (Sam, 2006) concerned with a "subjective sense of belonging" to one's cultural group (Liebkind, 2006, p.83). EI tends to become prominent only when exposed to another culture (Sam, 2006) and is thus seen as being devoid of meaning in mono-ethnic areas (Phinney, 1990). In fact, EI is found to be of key significance to the identity of ethnic minorities (Liebkind, 2006) but not to that of dominant group members, in general (Phinney, 1989; Roberts et al., 1999). An exception to these findings was a study where White high school students were a considerable minority in a US multi-cultural school (Phinney, 1992).



The relationship of EI with acculturation is not certain, with little research being done in the area (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001; Liebkind, 2006). Although the mechanism is not well known, EI development has been conceptualised as paralleling acculturative strategies during exposure to another culture (Phinney, 1990). When EI is positioned within an *acculturation* framework, in a 1-D model, EI is weak at one end of the scale and strong at the other, thereby eliminating the possibility of a strong EI and national (NI) or dominant group identity existing together (Phinney). According to 2-D models, both EI and NI (or another identity) can develop independently of each other such as in a *bicultural* (one that has embraced the acculturation strategy of *integration/biculturalism*).

#### **Nature of EI.**

The composition of EI is not well known (Sang & Ward, 2006). Some researchers have conceptualised EI as consisting of multiple aspects, components or dimensions (Phinney & Ong 2007; Verkuyten, 2005). These include identification with ethnic group, group-specific behaviour, knowledge of group and a subjective sense of belonging and commitment to the group (Liebkind, 2006). Phinney and Ong (2007) say that a sense of belonging or commitment, involving strong attachment and participation in a group, is possibly the most significant aspect of EI.

Verkuyten (2005) sees EI as having the four dimensions of “being”, “doing” “knowing” and “feeling” which are similar to Phinney’s four parts of EI: self-definitions/labels, “feelings”, “ethnic involvement”, “knowledge” (Verkuyten, 2005, p198). These dimensions are thought to be interrelated (Phinney & Ong, 2007). This reflects the complex nature of EI.

Although EI is a complex construct, it is also fairly stable (Liebkind, 2006), sound and secure (Phinney, 2005). For instance, when culture content dissipates as discussed earlier, EI remains stable (Verkuyten, 2005). However, EI has also been shown to be a dynamic construct, capable of context-dependent changes (Liebkind, 2006; Phinney, 2005). For instance, it is known that EI becomes more salient in multicultural contexts (Sam, 2006). Developmental approaches see EI as a person's self-constructed self-concept in relation to one's ethnic group membership that changes according to developmental factors and situation (Phinney, 2005).

Stable vs. fluid conceptualisations of EI as discussed above, maybe reconciled by viewing it as having a stable core part, which is transformed over time and context (Phinney, 2005). Indeed, Phinney (2000) situates EI development within the contexts of history, society and personal environment. She illustrates this with the narrative of Dien, who is seen to be influenced by the historical context of post World War II America, in giving up her original Japanese identity. Other contexts which have been found to affect EI are for instance, generation of migrants (e.g., first vs. second) presence or absence of migrant locales, geographical location (e.g., Umaña-Taylor & Shin, 2007), host culture attitudes and official multicultural policy (Costigan et al., 2009; Liebkind, 2006; Phinney, 1990).

The effects of further factors such as particular ethnic group, gender and socio-economic status (SES) on EI have yielded mixed results. For instance, Blacks in one study were found to have higher EI scores than Asian-Americans or Hispanic-Americans (Phinney, 1992). Other studies found that EI increase was not dependent on ethnic group, socioeconomic status or gender (Phinney & Chavira, 1992). Pahl and

Way (2006) found that gender and immigrant status did not affect levels of EI at the beginning of their longitudinal study, but that peer discrimination affected certain aspects of it. Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen and Guimond (2009) however, found a gender effect when their sample of 15 year old Latino adolescents were followed up over 4 years - females displayed a greater rate of increase than males. In general however, EI is not found to be affected by gender or SES (Phinney, 1992; Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996). Thus, EI has been shown to be fairly stable, yet flexible and changing, dependent on context. EI has also been shown to vary according to developmental states, as discussed later.

Many studies conducted with migrants lend evidence to the notion of different types of biculturalism, for instance, the integration of both EI as well as identification with the majority group or national identity (Phinney, et al., 2001; Devos, 2006). Support exists for the concept of alternating identities in *biculturals*; the salience of either identity being dependent on cultural contexts (Phinney, 2005; Verkuyten & Pouliasi, 2006). For instance, identifying as being American or Mexican was found to depend on which identity cues were more salient in the environment at that time, for bicultural Mexican-American youth (Phinney, 2005). Other studies point to a hyphenated identity, such as a blend of both ethnic and national identities in varying proportions (Verkuyten, 2005; Sala, 2009) for example, different extents to which Turkish adolescents identify as being Turkish and Dutch rather than choosing one identity over the other (Verkuyten). Further, Verkuyten and Yildiz (2007) found the emergence of an additional (religious) component to identity among Turkish migrants in the Netherlands. Such studies lend support to the simultaneous existence of a few

(mostly two) group identities (e.g., ethnic and national, or ethnic, religious and national) among immigrant groups in Western societies.

### **Approaches to studying EI.**

Psychological research on ethnic identity has largely drawn on developmental (derived from Erikson's and Marcia's research on adolescent ego identity development) and social identity theory (Dandy et al., 2008). Developmentally, as mentioned earlier, identity formation is seen as an important process of adolescence (Arnett, 2002; Pahl & Way, 2006) dependent on context and individual differences (Phinney, 2000): the need to resolve a crisis during development featuring as the driving motivation underlying change. Further, as aforementioned, social identity perspectives treat identity in terms of group memberships and the meanings drawn from them. Both approaches stress the importance of this process on psychological well-being (PWB, Dandy et al.; Meeus, 1996).

EI studies have either assessed levels of EI or examined EI in terms of stages. A popular measure of EI is Phinney's (1989) multi-group ethnic identity measure (MEIM), because of its universal applicability across ethnic groups (Dandy et al., 2008). Studies on EI stages on the other hand, attempt to assess the extent to which adolescents have or have not given thought or consideration to their ethnic group membership and whether or not they have arrived at a state of "commitment" (Phinney, 2005, p. 190) to their ethnic group (Phinney, 1989), through in-depth interviews or questionnaire measures (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Utilising EI measures, Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind (1999) found support for EI stage progression amongst repatriated Russians of Finnish origin, with increasing

length of residency in Finland. Further, Pahl and Way's (2006) study on Black and Latino 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students followed up for 3 years found that the increase in EI exploration slowed down after the 10<sup>th</sup> grade after a maximum increase in middle adolescence.

Very few studies have assessed EI stages utilising a non-survey method such as interviews. For instance, Phinney (1989) found support for three stages of EI development on 15-17 year olds from three different ethnic backgrounds in the US. Even fewer longitudinal studies utilising interviews have been conducted to explore EI stages in acculturating ethnic groups. Phinney and Chavira (1992) followed up Phinney's (1989) sample after 3 years. Later stages were associated with greater age in the follow up sample of 19-22 year old Asian-American, Black and Hispanic youth (Phinney & Chavira) lending further support to the developmental nature of EI in adolescents undergoing acculturation.

### **Stages of EI development.**

As mentioned earlier, the EI development process has been theorised to progress through stages which parallel those of ego identity development (e.g., Erikson's and Marcia's models) during the adolescent years (Dandy et al., 2008; Meeus, 1996; Phinney, 1989). Several models have been proposed such as Cross's model of Black identity development (Cross, Jr., 1978). Drawing from universal processes in these models, and together with research support from her own empirical study on high school students from four ethnic groups, Phinney (1989) put forward a model of EI development (Phinney, 1990).

According to Phinney's model, there are 3 possible stages or statuses of EI development. The *unexamined* state (made up of Marcia's *foreclosed*, those who are committed to their group, without thought or understanding and *diffusion*, no thought given and not interested) is characterised by a lack of exploration (Phinney, 1989; 1990). The foreclosed and diffusion states were not distinct enough to be separated. Those who are currently *searching* (Phinney, 2005) are categorised as being in the *moratorium* stage, while those who have explored and had committed to their ethnic group are categorised as *achieved* (Phinney, 1989). An *achieved* EI is characterised by being "clear about their ethnicity and comfortable with it" (Phinney & Tarver, 1988; p. 267). Phinney (1990) stresses that an *achieved* state does not necessarily mean there is significant involvement in ethnic group activities nor that it is irreversible, but that the statuses are open to movement back and forth between them.

### **EI and psychological well-being (PWB).**

The sense of belonging derived from an *achieved* EI (i.e., being proud of and deriving self-worth from, their ethnic ancestry; Bennett, Jr., 2006) is known to be important for the PWB of adolescents from minority ethnic backgrounds (Roberts et al., 1999; Phinney, 2005; Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow, & Fuligni, 2006). Studies assessing EI levels as well as those researching EI stages have shown support for a link between EI (high scores on measures or higher EI stages/statuses) and positive psychological and health outcomes.

Phinney (1992) with her new MEIM measure found that EI levels had a positive relationship with self esteem in both a high school (ages 14-19) and a college (ages 18-34) sample of various ethnic groups, in the US. She did not find this relationship

amongst the White students in the samples. Roberts et al. (1999) also in a study with MEIM, found support for a moderate link between EI, positively with coping ability, mastery, self-esteem and optimism, and negatively with depression and loneliness amongst youth from diverse ethnicity in the US. The moderate effect indicates that EI is not the only, but an important factor, in PWB (Roberts et al.).

Similarly, Kiang et al. (2006) found higher ethnic regard by Chinese- and Mexican-American adolescents to be associated with less anxiety and greater happiness. In another study, Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2009) followed 323 Latino adolescents over a 4-year period. There was a significant increase in *exploration*, *resolution*, and *affirmation* for girls, and *affirmation* for boys (utilising their 'Ethnic Identity Scale') over the 4 years. Increase in exploration forecast increase in self-esteem, showing support for a strong variation in self-esteem with varying EI in the expected direction. Thus there is general consensus among researchers for the association between EI levels and psychological outcomes.

Studies of EI statuses and PWB have found an *achieved* status to be associated with good psychological outcomes (Phinney, 1989; Verkuyten & Brug, 2002). This effect was found amongst Surinamese but not Dutch adolescents (aged 14-17 years) in the Netherlands (Verkuyten & Brug). Due to the cross-sectional nature of such studies, inferences regarding associations over time cannot be drawn.

Longitudinal investigations have also been carried out on the EI-PWB relationship. Phinney & Chavira (1992) found that not only significantly more adolescents moved up to higher stages over time, but that there was a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and EI at both times of observation.

The current consensus is that the *achieved* state is associated with the best psychological outcomes, *foreclosed* second, *moratorium* next and *diffusion* least (Phinney, 2005). Phinney and Alipuria (1996) suggest that an important factor for the positive psychological outcomes seen with ethnic group membership is the process of ethnic identity *achievement* (Phinney, 1989). Phinney further explains that through the changing course of EI, adolescents form knowledge of their ethnic group and internalise it, which gives them a sense of belonging to that group. This, according to Phinney (2005), is the reason behind findings of positive psychological outcomes associated with ethnic identity (Phinney, 2005). Thus there is support for EI to be at least one factor (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997) of vital importance to the PWB of individuals from ethnic minority groups (Liebkind, 2006).

#### **Adults with a highly mobile global upbringing.**

Most studies on EIs and multiple ethnic/cultural identities have focussed on migrants. Ethnic and national identity issues can be even more complex for individuals who are exposed to multiple cultural contexts during their developmental years.

The burgeoning of multi-national companies, advances in technology (including improvements in travel and communications), and greater flow of humanitarian and military aid to poorer nations has increasingly seen personnel being thrust into cross-cultural situations as a result of globalisation (Bochner, 2006; Nadeau, 2003). This has led to an increase in the number of children “growing up among worlds” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, title page) and leading highly mobile lives during their developmental years (Gerner, Perry, Moselle, & Archbold, 1992; Pollock & Van Reken). For example, approximately 70% of expatriate workers have accompanying



children (Bochner, 2006), and a 1992 estimate put the total number of children of sojourners at over 1 million globally (Gerner et al., 1992). High mobility refers to the frequent cross-cultural travel (usually between home and host countries, between different host countries, as well as leisure travel) and the frequent meetings and partings that expatriates/sojourners experience (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

“Growing up among worlds” (Pollock & Van Reken, title page) or a global upbringing refers to the experience of growing up in cultures different to that of ‘home’ culture (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

Many children of sojourners who return to their home (passport) country as adolescents and young adults find themselves struggling to establish a sense of belonging to their culture (Fail et al., 2004; Klemens & Bikos, 2009), but shared a sense of belonging with others from a similar background (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Such persons end up feeling like foreigners on home soil (Fail et al.) in spite of possessing high levels of cross-cultural adaptability and a global world-view (Selmer & Lam, 2004). In the literature, such persons are varyingly known as “global nomads” (McCaig, 1992 cited in Fail et al., 2004, p. 320) “third-culture kids” (TCKs; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. xi), “internationally mobile adolescents” (Gerner et al., 1992, p. 197) and “global gypsy” (“Are you a third culture kid?,” 2010) amongst others. David Pollock (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009) offers the following definition for a TCK:

A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK’s

life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background (p. 13).

Research amongst those with a global upbringing points to the complex nature of identity development in these groups (Fry, 2007; Grimshaw & Sears, 2008). This complexity is reflected by Oppedal (2006) as discussed earlier, when he states that *psychological acculturation* is more complex in children growing up at the interface between cultures; the lack of a sense of belonging to an ethnic group or of possessing a “multiple sense of belonging” to many groups by TCKs has been cited (Fail et al., 2004, p.333) as reasons. Some researchers have theorised that these people combine elements of home and host cultures to form a “third space” or “third culture”, or an “in-between” state of hybrid identity (Grimshaw & Sears, p.262), feeling a sense of belonging only in relation to others sharing their global upbringing experience (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). Further, an alternating identity has been suggested in relation to bicultural TCKs which has been equated with the notion of Pollock and Van Reken’s “cultural chameleon” concept (Fry); the ability for context-dependent switching between various cultural norms (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p.100). Grimshaw and Sears question whether the multiple identities are all of equal salience, or if one (a core self) is more dominant. Thus a consensual understanding of the nature of this construct has been elusive amongst researchers of this topic.

In addition to the nature of identity, less than desirable psychological outcomes associated with a global upbringing have been documented. For instance, these people have been known to be unable to adapt to their home/passport culture on return, becoming socially marginal (Fail et al., 2004). Fail’s group also found lower self-

esteem in their sample of TCKs compared with mono-cultural peers. Also associated with this group of people is the notion of *delayed adolescence* (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009); some researchers conceptualising this phenomenon as a slowing of the identity development process due to continually directing their energies towards how to behave in new and often-changing cultural contexts, leaving less time to focus on questions of identity such as “who am I?” (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009, p. 763). Such findings raise concerns of well-being in those with a global upbringing.

To summarise, EI is conceptualised as being a stable yet dynamic construct, capable of change over time and contexts (Liebkind, 2006; Phinney, 2005). EI has been studied extensively in migrants and ethnic minority groups such as African-Americans, Latinos and Chinese, especially in the US (e.g., Phinney & Chavira, 1992). EI formation is purported to go through stages or statuses paralleling ego identity development in adolescence (Phinney, 1989). An *achieved* sense of EI after a period of *search* is known to furnish one with a sense of belonging to their ethnic group, as well as with desirable psychological outcomes (Phinney, 2005).

Further, there is some support that the TCK identity is complex, and its nature is largely unknown (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008). These *global nomads* are purported to have a sense of belonging to others who share the third culture experience as well as in all cultures, yet not fully in any (Fail et al., 2004; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Further, less than desirable psychological outcomes such as low self-esteem have been identified in TCKs (Fail et al.; Pollock & Van Reken).

Although TCKs who return to their passport countries are not classified as immigrants (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009), they may have missed out on important

culture acquisition (Minoura, 1992) and have been considered to be *hidden immigrants* (Pollock & Van Reken). Given the centrality of EI for psychological outcomes amongst minority groups (Phinney, 2005) and the possibility of losing out on appropriating 'home' cultural norms by this rapidly growing *global nomads* world-wide (Fail et al., 2004), there is a growing need to research such constructs in this group of people. Due to the flexible and context-dependent nature of EI, a qualitative inquiry would be more appropriate in capturing its essence and its relationship to PWB, than a one-off questionnaire measure, for instance. Understandings gleaned about the 'world of the TCK' and issues faced by them, especially on re-entry 'home' is needed in order to better prepare parents and educators, sending organisations, and the helping professions associated with this population.

The aim of the present study therefore, was to explore the nature of ethnic/cultural identity and its relationship to PWB in adults who have 'grown up global', currently residing in Australia.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the nature of ethnic/cultural identity in those with a highly mobile cross-cultural upbringing?
- 2) What is the relationship between EI and PWB in this sample of participants?

These questions were explored in a hermeneutic phenomenological (Ricoeur, 1975) study with in-depth interviewing. This guiding framework and methodology allows for interpretive explanations of underlying phenomena beyond the understandings of the participants (Moloney, 1992; Ricoeur) through the finding of

common *categories of shared meanings* (Crist & Tanner, 2003) or themes. This methodology was thus considered suitable for the elucidation of underlying phenomena like EI and the EI-PWB relationship. Although this methodology has been used in nursing research in recent years (e.g., Charalambous, Papadopoulos, & Beadsmore, 2008; Svedlund, Danielson, & Norberg, 2001), it has not been widely utilised in psychology (Sandage, Cook, Hill, Strawn, & Reimer, 2008).

Criteria for participant recruitment for this study included not being familiar with material that identified them as TCKs, *global nomads* or similar. Such exposure may possibly have led them to strongly identify (i.e., reach an *achieved* identity) with such a group, with possible associated PWB outcomes (Phinney, 2005). Therefore, such persons were excluded from this study.

## Method

### Research Approach: Epistemology and Assumptions

This study utilised a phenomenological qualitative approach in order to understand the lived experience of *third culture kids* (TCKs). This approach, with its assumptions of subjective meaning-making, lends itself well to exploring the core of concepts and phenomena (Creswell, 2007) such as ethnic identity (EI) in TCKs. Specifically, I have used Ricoeur's (1975) hermeneutic phenomenology which is both a theoretical framework as well as a methodology guiding research (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Phenomenology of the Husserlian tradition seeks to describe the essences of lived experiences regardless of contexts. Heidegger's hermeneutic tradition on the other hand, is concerned with meanings and interpretations which take into account the

limitations of people's contexts (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). According to the hermeneutic phenomenology of Gadamer, however, people can expand their knowledge beyond these limitations which is their *horizon*. When the horizon of a research participant and that of the researcher meet (*fusion of horizons*), *understandings* and interpretations (*explanations*) of the phenomenon, are co-created (Moloney, 1992; Sharkey, 2001).

Ricoeur took hermeneutic phenomenology further than Gadamer by proposing the possibility of arriving at interpretations of phenomena, beyond participants' self descriptions and understandings, to what the text itself throws forward (Moloney, 1992; Ricoeur, 1975). Meanings revealed by the text are therefore not hidden but can be understood, in a sense, by viewing it objectively (Moloney). The sphere of the text thus revealed provides the link between *understanding* and *explanation* which was lacking in Gadamerian thought (Moloney). The text is seen as stand-alone: independent of the creator's objective, the particular interview or discourse situation and the audience (Ricoeur).

A further feature of Ricoeurian, and hermeneutical phenomenological philosophy in general, is the treatment of presuppositions. Unlike some branches of phenomenology (of the Husserlian tradition) where assumptions and pre-judgements are *bracketed* (Sharkey, 2001) or set aside, hermeneutic phenomenology allows for the existence of assumptions, presuppositions and experiences, enabling the researcher to be an active part of the research process (Charalambous, Papadopoulos, & Beadsmoore, 2008; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Moloney, 1992). However, the presence of such assumptions needs to be acknowledged (e.g., by keeping a self-reflective journal)

to eliminate any undue influence of these on the research process (Christ & Tanner; Moloney). This reflexive phase has been described as the *forward arm* of the *hermeneutical arc* by which hermeneutical phenomenological analysis proceeds (Christ & Tanner; Moloney).

The first stage of interpretation or the *return arm* is initial *understanding*. Here an attempt is made to capture the meanings conveyed by the text overall and at best amounts to an approximation (Moloney, 1992). In the second stage or the ratification of initial understanding (*explanation*), there is a movement away from the subjectivity of the participant (*distantiation*) to an almost objective, systematic analysis of the text (Moloney; Ricoeur, 1975; Svedlund, Danielson, & Norberg, 2001). The text aids the researcher's long distance communication with the participant's lived world (Ricoeur), not the participants themselves (Moloney). The process of interpretation involves a subjective logic on the part of the researcher in arriving at probable interpretations ("convergence of probabilities", Moloney, p.125). Rigorous repetitive movement through the analysis cycle takes place (Crist & Tanner, 2003) leading to a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon (Charalambous et al., 2008).

The stages of this process do not follow sequential steps necessarily, but include repeated movement back and forth between researcher and text resulting in rich and deep understandings of the phenomenon (Charalambous et al., 2008). In the final stage of the research process, understandings gained are taken in (*appropriation*; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Moloney, 1992, Ricoeur, 1975), furnishing one with a different perspective on the world.

## Participants

Seven participants, aged 25 to 62 years were recruited. Participants had spent a considerable proportion (3 ½ - 14 years), of their developmental years (between the ages of 5 to 17 years), in a culture/s different to their parents' and had experienced a highly mobile and transient cross-cultural lifestyle (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). All were living in Australia (Alice Springs, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney) at the time of the interviews. The sample characteristics are summarised in Table 1. There were two sets of siblings (all women) in the sample. All participants were English-speaking.

None of the participants was overly familiar with material that identified them as TCKs, *global nomads* or similar, although some had heard of the term/s. They did not belong to any support groups for TCKs. This was ensured so that participants did not strongly identify with or have a sense of belonging to others with the same experience (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009), which could potentially affect EI and PWB outcomes, as outlined earlier.

Participants were recruited via advertising (see Appendix A) through ECU research groups, and through relevant organisations (e.g., Bible College). Further recruitment was also made through the researcher's social network (excluding immediate family members) together with 'snowballing', where initial respondents referred suitable and interested potential participants amongst their social circles to the researcher.

## Materials

Open ended interview questions (see Appendix B) were used as a guide to elicit participants' stories in order to explore how their cross-cultural experiences shaped



Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Characteristic	Nicola	Maxine	Sangeetha	Kaye	Roger	Tamara	Regina
Gender	F	F	F	F	M	F	F
Organisation affiliation	Military <sup>a</sup>	Military <sup>a</sup>	Expatriate	Military	Missionary	Expatriate	Missionary
Country of origin	UK	UK	Sri Lanka	UK	Australia	Sri Lanka	Australia
Continent of sojourn	Africa Europe	Africa Europe	Africa	Europe	Africa	Africa	Africa
Sojourn ages	2 ½ years <sup>b</sup> 6 ½ - 17	5-7; 12-17	13-17	2 years <sup>b</sup> 8-11; 11-13	6-10	10-16	Birth-5; 7-16
Sojourn years	12 ½	7	5	6	3 ½	5/6	14
Years since sojourn	26	31	24	33	15	24	46
Years in Australia (migrants)	10	10	24	13	N/A	24	N/A
Moves during sojourn	2	2	2 <sup>c</sup>	3 <sup>d</sup>	2 <sup>c</sup>	2	2 <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Civilian attaché.

<sup>b</sup>Number of years spent in sojourn country during infancy; exact ages unknown.

<sup>c</sup>Attended boarding school during part of sojourn.

<sup>d</sup>Moved within same country of sojourn.

their view of, and how it related to how they felt about themselves, in terms of their cultural identity. Interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder. Paper and pen/pencil were provided to participants for pictorially depicting their identity, as described below.

### **Procedure**

Potential participants contacted the researcher by telephone or e-mail to arrange a suitable time and venue for the interview. An information letter (Appendix C) containing an outline of the project aims and procedure, as well as any risks or discomfort involved were e-mailed or given to the participants prior to the interview. The locations of the face-to-face interviews were at a mutually convenient place. Three participants were interviewed in a quiet corner of ECU's Joondalup campus library, and one participant in her home. Interstate participants were interviewed over the telephone. All interviews were audio recorded and lasted approximately between 35 minutes and one hour and 15 minutes. Interviews were conducted from July to September, 2010.

Issues of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation were reiterated verbally to the participants at the interview. They also received a list of appropriate services and websites to access, in the event of any discomfort (Appendix D); interstate participants were e-mailed a copy soon after the interview. Participants were also given the option of receiving the research results at the conclusion of the study. Informed consent was obtained on the appropriate form (Appendix C) prior to interview commencement (interstate participants posted these to the researcher, before the interview).

Audio recorded semi-structured, in-depth interviews began with demographic questions to build rapport. Participants were then asked to talk about their sojourn experiences, how they viewed their ethnic/cultural identity and how they felt about themselves (see Appendix B). Conversations continued until participants had described these as completely as possible (Beck, 1996). Later interviews drew on earlier ones to direct with probing relevant leads as documented by other interpretive phenomenological researchers (e.g., Crist & Tanner, 2003). Hand-written notes supplemented the audio recordings. As part of the interview participants were also requested to draw a pictorial representation (on paper) of how they viewed themselves in terms of cultural identity and describe it verbally (Creswell, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2007). A thank you gift of an ECU pen valued at \$4/- was given/posted to each participant.

### **Analysis of Data**

Analysis of data proceeded according to Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology (Moloney, 1992; Ricoeur, 1975). All taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to gain an initial *understanding* of the overall sense of the text, with any appropriate notes written in margins. Further reading was carried out by focussing on the text only; without considering the participants or their particular circumstances in accordance with Ricoeur's *distantiation*. Key-words/-areas for each text that directly pertain to the research questions were identified systematically and summarised for each participant's text. Other recurring key-words/areas, including previously documented TCK characteristics projected by the text, were also taken note of. This was then followed by identifying and summarising common ideas/explanations (*shared*

*meanings* or themes), within and between participants' texts (Crist & Tanner, 2003). The process was repeated several times, until all logically possible meanings of and explanations for the phenomenon were identified (Crist & Tanner; Moloney). My personal experience and knowledge of relevant literature were also brought into the analysis to arrive at a rich and deep understanding of ethnic identity construction and its relationship to PWB in these participants. This allowed me to compile a comprehensive description and explanation of the phenomenon, as pertaining to the research questions.

Pictures have been used in the past in ethnic identity research, but have been analysed separately (e.g., Sirin & Fine, 2007). In this study, they were used as an aid to consolidate participants' thoughts on their experience of ethnic identity construction in multiple cultural contexts and the relationship to PWB. Their verbal descriptions of the pictorial depictions constituted part of the text for analysis. Participants' pictorial depictions of their cultural identities are included in Appendix E.

### **Rigour/Trustworthiness**

Several steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the study. I ensured faithful transcription of the interviews and continually went back to the text (Crist & Tanner, 2003) to check for meanings, during the analysis phase of the research, always keeping the research questions in mind.

In hermeneutical phenomenological studies, the researcher is required to acknowledge their assumptions and expectations in the *forward arm* of the analysis phase (Crist & Tanner, 2003, p.203; Moloney, 1992). As I have accompanied my expatriate parents to live for part of my developmental years in a different culture, I am

aware of personal assumptions and experiences that I bring into the study. Further, I held expectations of research outcomes based on knowledge of relevant literature. Therefore, to ensure scientific rigour, I kept a reflective journal throughout the data collection and analysis phases of the study, acknowledging these biases and assumptions.

Four of the transcripts and summaries were checked by a person who shares the global upbringing experience with participants, and feedback was given on whether I had captured the essence of the text. A further three transcripts were not subjected to this procedure in order to maintain confidentiality of those participants, who were personally known to the checker. Discussions with my supervisor during the analysis phase of the study further contributed to the trustworthiness of the research.

An audit trail was kept of the process of elucidating themes from the text, enhancing trustworthiness of the study. This comprised key word summaries with reference to text (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Due to time constraints however, I was not able to include them in the Appendix.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

Two major *categories of shared meanings* (themes) were identified from analysis of the texts. The first theme was, making sense of identity while the second theme was sense of belonging and psychological well-being (PWB). The themes shared some degree of overlap with each other. Several sub-themes were identifiable within these categories, as shown below.

### **Theme I: Making Sense of Identity**

Participants varied in how they made sense of their cultural identities, from single to multiple identities. These possibly reflect some of the many ways in which adult *third culture kids* (TCKs) make sense of their identities. Three sub-themes were evidenced for this theme: Relationship to 'original' identity, reconciliation of multiple identities and 'outsider'.

#### **Relationship to 'original' identity.**

All participants displayed some degree of relationship to their original or parental EI: maintenance or a strengthening of, as well as a diminishing of original EI. Four of the seven participants displayed a maintenance or strengthening of, their original identity. For instance, Kaye's EI remained relatively unaffected over the years, displaying a strong single (English) EI despite several years' sojourn in Germany. This continued to be maintained during subsequent taking up of an Australian national identity, since immigrating to Australia:

*I do see myself as an English...person and*

*I just see myself as...British with...an attachment to Germany...but...basically...*

*I'm Australian*

Maxine's EI on the other hand, strengthened over the years. She says: "I'm British first...probably got worse as I've got older". This finding is in accordance with literature on the impact of early socialisation on EI formation such as family (e.g., Bennett, Jr., 2006; Knight, Cota, & Bernal, 1993). Further, the impact of organisational systems on TCKs, such as was evident in some of the participants in this sample (army environment) has also been expressed (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). The historical

context (post war Germany) could also have contributed towards a stronger British EI.

Phinney (2000) stresses the importance of historical, societal and personal

environmental contexts in EI formation.

A further participant, Sangeetha displayed a strengthening of original EI on exposure to the culture of sojourn:

*...my ethnic and cultural identity as a Sri Lankan was heightened, because...the contrast was so great...I guess it made us feel more Sri Lankan...*

This finding is in accordance with Brewer's (1999) optimal distinctiveness model of social identity, where balancing the needs for being included as well as being distinct from others, especially when confronted by a much larger social group, drive people towards an in-group.

A diminishing in strength of the original EI is seen in two of the participants as a result of the sojourn. For instance Tamara says:

*...when I left Sri Lanka, I was very Sri Lankan...but being in Africa...moderated that*

Roger's diminishing EI at least in terms of values, is evident in the contrast he noticed of his and other Westerners' values while at boarding school during his sojourn.

Further, he missed the interaction with the locals. These could indicate that his

'Western' identity was diminishing. He says:

*...the sheer lack of generosity...kind of blew me away...most of the time I was there longing just to be back in the village...we had a few times...we were allowed to go into the town...and interact with the locals and go to the*

*markets there, which I really enjoyed but, unfortunately probably only once a term and*

*...we had a bit of interaction with the locals they would come in and help with the cooking and the cleaning...but even that I found a bit confronting...just seeing them,...it kind of felt like we were taking advantage of them*

### **Reconciliation of multiple identities.**

Participants utilised several ways of reconciling their multiple identities: a blending of various identities as well as arranging identities according to various levels of significance (hierarchical).

An example of a hierarchical arrangement of EIs was demonstrated in Maxine's text:

*I'm British first...then European...and Australian and  
I feel in some respects European, but within that, very British... UK...  
comfortable...which I still don't feel in Australia 10 years...*

Maxine's extract indicates a relative slowness of change to the hierarchy over the years. From the interview it was apparent that Maxine's core British identity remained strong, she became "more European" while in Germany, and was slow in taking on an Australian identity. Maxine's construction of her EI is similar to Liebkind's (2006) concept of a hierarchy of ethnic selves with very slow change occurring to the hierarchy, if at all. A similar concept of multiple and overlapping levels of selves has been discussed by Verkuyten (2005). Maxine's sister Nicola also showed a similar



encompassing of British identity into a European identity during her sojourn in Germany.

Sangeetha seems to have consolidated her identities by blending the various ethnic aspects together when she expressed:

*I see myself as a world citizen...I suppose that's the way  
I...reconcile my identity, I don't see myself purely as Sri Lankan,  
purely as Australian, just...a mixture*

The finding of a blending of the various EIs in this sample has similarities to the process by which some *bicultural* migrants integrate elements of both their ethnic and dominant cultural identities into the one self (Verkuyten, 2005).

Unlike Sangeetha's EI, the component parts of Tamara's EI seem to be distinct from one another. Tamara illustrated it in the picture (Fig. 1) and said:

*...part of me is Australian,...part of me is Sri Lankan part of me is Chinese,  
part of me is African*

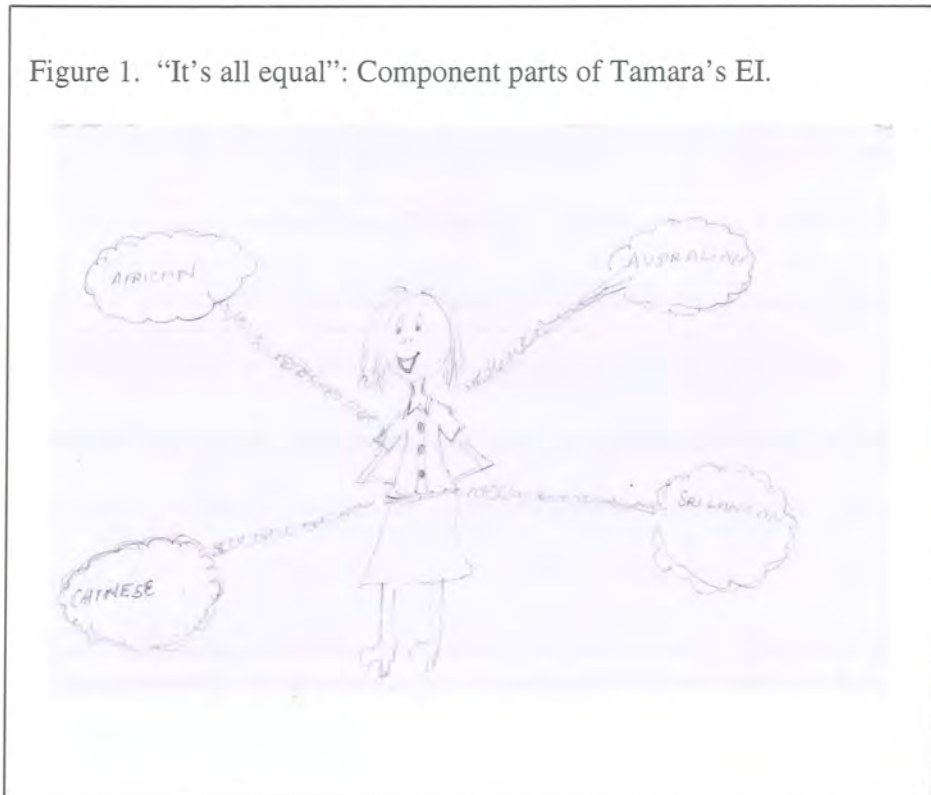
There is an allusion in Tamara's text to the possibility that these four ethnic identities maybe alternating, depending on cultural context. For instance Tamara said she fitted in easily in Vanuatu, the locals bearing a close resemblance to Africans in her mind, during a recent trip there:

*...they're Melanesians...a number of them look...like Africans...  
I just felt so comfortable...I could fit easily with the local(s)...*

She also related well to the other ethnic groups that on the whole represent her component parts, as long as they are not too traditional in their values. For instance she said:

*...majority of my very close connected friends are Chinese...and I've got a very very close Greek friend and I feel equally comfortable with her...and of course Sri Lankan friends too...but when they become excessively culturally proud...I can't fit in...*

Figure 1. "It's all equal": Component parts of Tamara's EI.



Tamara also related well to many of her friends on a “one on one basis” which could possibly indicate that she is comfortable relating to each person from a different culture by activating that part of her EI that corresponds to their EI. The concept of alternating identities in bicultural migrants where various identities assume ethnic context dependent salience, has been reported in the literature (Phinney, 2005; Verkuyten & Pouliasi, 2006).

The process of reconciling multiple EIs in this sample is consistent with conceptualisations of EI as having a stable core once achieved, but which is still subject to slow change, with time and context (Phinney, 2000; 2005).

All TCKs who subsequently migrated to Australia also utilised Berry's (2001) *integration* strategy in reconciling ethnic and national identities. For instance, Kaye integrates her English EI and an Australian national identity. She says, "...I just see myself as...British with...an...attachment to Germany because I was born there. But then, basically you know, (now) I'm...Australian". Maxine on the other hand demonstrates a much weaker NI when she says, "I'm British first...probably got worse as I've got older ...which I still don't feel in Australia 10 years..." This could indicate that the strengthening of her EI has progressed at a greater rate than the NI, which is consistent with a two-dimensional model of acculturation (LaFromboise, 1993).

### **'Outsider'**

Five of the participants expressed varying degrees of being different, feeling like an outsider, or not fitting in, especially on going back 'home' to their passport countries. For example, Roger said:

*...I really didn't feel like I fitted in with any...of the...groups at school or any of the friends that I had...I made friends...we got along well but, I never truly had a sense that I was completely part of the group...didn't feel to the extent like a leper...but...I did kinda feel like there was something that made me stand out... just an internal sense of feeling like an outcast...more how I felt inside...*

For Nicola re-entry into the UK included feeling part of neither 'home' nor sojourn cultures:

*...totally an outsider...very confused...but Norfolk...stabled me...but ...I felt quite outsider at university...*

She described her EI at the time of the interview as:

*...I do feel like an outsider, for sure...I don't feel part of a cultural group and I think therefore in a way my identity is almost as an outsider... I often have my own thoughts and opinions...because I see myself as an outsider...I don't see myself following the pack... so, yes, I think confused outsider...*

Tamara's *outsider* identity seems to take on a context dependent salience, namely when amongst people who are overly culturally traditional in their outlook. She stated:

*I don't feel Sri Lankan, Sri Lankan... so sometimes socially...I don't fit in...when they become excessively culturally proud...I kinda feel an outsider...with my Chinese friends too, when their parents (are) excessively Chinese...I can't fit into that group either....*

An *outsider* identity has also been documented by other researchers studying TCKs. For instance, Walters and Auton-Cuff (2009) found that many in their sample expressed feeling "different", or being an "outsider" (p. 764).

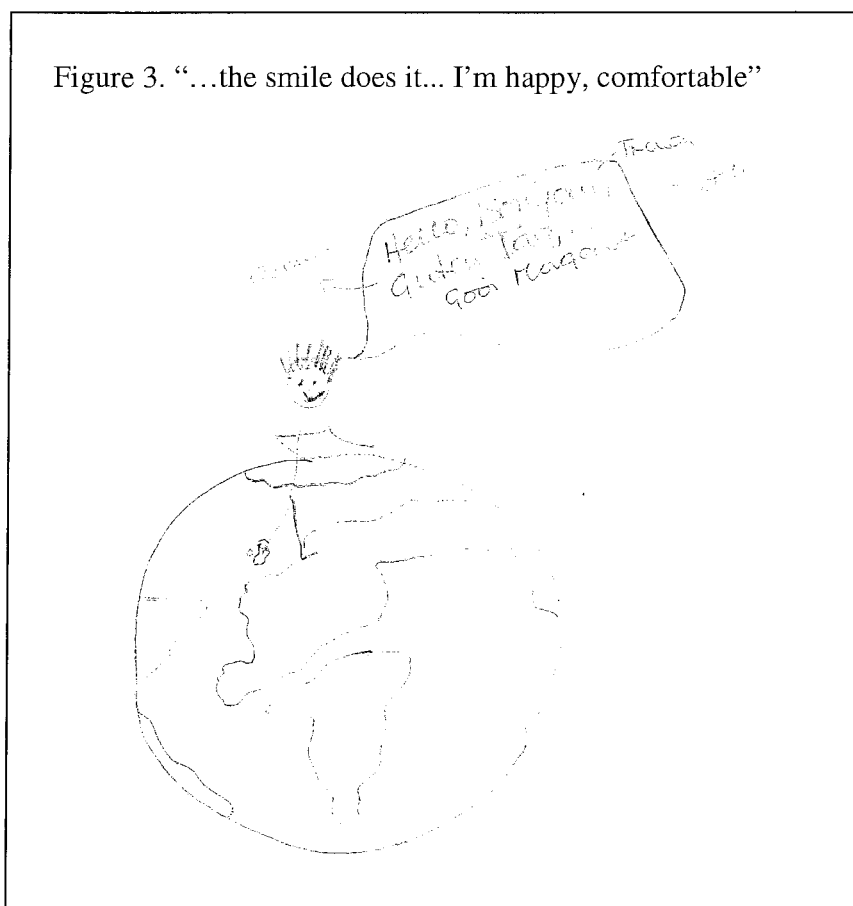
## **Theme II: Sense of Belonging and PWB**

### **Positive outcomes.**

A positive association of a sense of belonging and PWB was evident in the texts of all participants. Maxine, Sangeetha and Regina were comfortable with themselves.

There was support for a process akin to EI *search* or *moratorium* (Phinney, 1989) in the past, for Maxine and Sangeetha. For instance, Maxine became “more European” during her sojourn and Sangeetha tried to “reconcile (her) identity”.

Maxine displayed a secure sense of British-European EI resembling Phinney’s



(1989) *achieved* status, associated with a strong sense of belonging to Britain and desirable psychological outcomes. As discussed earlier, a secure sense of EI or EI *commitment* is being “clear about their ethnicity and comfortable with it” (Phinney & Tarver, 1988, p. 267). Maxine illustrated these in the figure below (Fig. 3) and said:

*Every time I go back to the UK, it's like slipping into a...comfy cardigan or a pair of slippers*

A secure sense of EI was also evident in Sangeetha. She saw herself as a “world citizen” or “a mixture”. Sangeetha’s sense of belonging was “firmly” in Australia and she had friends from many cultures. She displayed good psychological outcomes. These are seen in the following extract:

*I feel very, very comfortable with my identity...comfortable in my skin  
...happy with what I am...and  
Australia is my home...I don't see Sri Lanka as my home at  
all...anymore, Australia is firmly my home and I love it and...I feel  
blessed to be here and I have a loyalty and...pride in it...and  
...I don't feel a sense of inadequacy or insecurity...I've been  
blessed...confidence in myself...I am very happy in my own skin...  
...confident in myself...happy with...where I am*

These are in line with findings in EI research, for instance, an *achieved* sense of EI furnishes one with a sense of belonging to one’s group and is associated with good psychological outcomes (e.g., Kiang, et al., 2006; Phinney, 2005).

The relationship between the constructs of EI, a sense of belonging and PWB in Tamara did not follow the pattern seen above (for Maxine and Sangeetha). Tamara’s sense of belonging was “divided” but certain. EI was not *achieved* yet, but she demonstrated desirable well-being outcomes. Her text indicates that although she has given thought to her EI, she may not have fully reached a secure sense of her EI yet. She expressed what her EI possibly was:

*Cultural identity... I don't know...In terms of cultural identity, I guess I feel  
like, I'm just floating! Because I don't know...cultural identity, probably a*

*bit mixed up...I can't say I feel Sri Lankan...I don't feel Australian...don't feel African either...so I would say I'm kind of part everything...and I don't fully fit into any culture that is exclusively that culture...but I guess I have a bit of all...in one way or the other...*

As noted earlier, Tamara's psychological outcomes are good, in spite of not fitting into some traditional groups. She cites her sense of belonging to multicultural Australia and close friendships as reasons for it:

*...what satisfies me is...that...on a one on (one I have) family and friends I can relate (with)...I don't feel like I need to be fitting into a group...it doesn't bother me...I'm not fussed... it doesn't make me feel bad about myself...and I think the fact that I am in a multicultural society helps...*

Tamara's text shows that good PWB outcomes can co-exist with an EI that is not *achieved* yet. It is possible that Tamara's firm sense of belonging (although divided amongst many groups, mainly within multicultural Australia), may have played a role in her desirable PWB outcomes. In findings in EI and acculturation research, a sense of belonging to one's ethnic group is associated with an *achieved* identity in migrants, affording them with desirable psychological outcomes (Phinney, 2005). A possible reason suggested by Berry (2006) for the sense of belonging and PWB relationship, is the protective effect of social support derived from membership in such groups. It is possible in Tamara's case that the sense of belonging to the groups that she did belong to, afforded her with good well-being outcomes as evidenced in the above extract.

Although Tamara doesn't articulate it, it is possible that her strong faith may further contribute towards good PWB outcomes, as for her sister, Sangeetha. In this

regard, Sangeetha says, "...I was a very, very insecure teenager...my (Christian) faith has had a huge impact on that journey". A faith identity has also been reported by others (Walters and Auton-Cuff, 2009) in their sample of TCKs. Faith can be seen to present one with a different worldview (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007) and can influence well-being outcomes (Martin, Kirkcaldy, & Siefen, 2003).

Kaye also did not display the earlier pattern of relationships between EI, PWB and sense of belonging that the majority of the participants did. Kaye's well-being outcomes were mixed: her adaptability (she made friends easily both during childhood moves as well as during settlement in Australia ) co-existed with depression. She expressed her adaptability in the following extract:

*...the whole experience...made me a lot more independent. I think having moved around a lot...I didn't find it as hard as, some people do when they come here...I just think you've got to adapt to people...*

However, it is possible that her depression was related to family problems when growing up, as well as other family issues.

Although Regina showed positive outcomes (PWB) and a firm sense of belonging, she found it hard to speak about herself in terms of her EI or CI. For instance, when asked how she saw her identity in terms of ethnicity or culture, she said:

*I'm not quite sure...I think perhaps...various things have a different ...value in life...people in their needs become more important I think, than possessions...maybe that's one thing that stands out a bit...you can have the world and live in your own little world but you can be awfully self-centred as a result whereas if you put yourself out to, for people and recognise the*



*need of your neighbours or...friends or, elderly folk...they add a quality of life and a friendship that you know, it would be a shame to be missed*

On further questioning Regina said, "...I think being away from Australia makes you very grateful to be an Australian". It was difficult to determine if her EI or CI (Australian identity) was *achieved* or *unexamined* (Phinney, 1989, 1990). There was no evidence in her text for a process similar to *EI search*. It is also possible that Regina's self concept is more collectivist in nature, making EI descriptions more problematic for her. Markus and Kitayama (1991) distinguish between the independent and interdependent selves. The independent self, typically from individualistic societies, defines self as separate from others, while the latter is expressed in terms of relationships and is commonly observed in collectivist cultures.

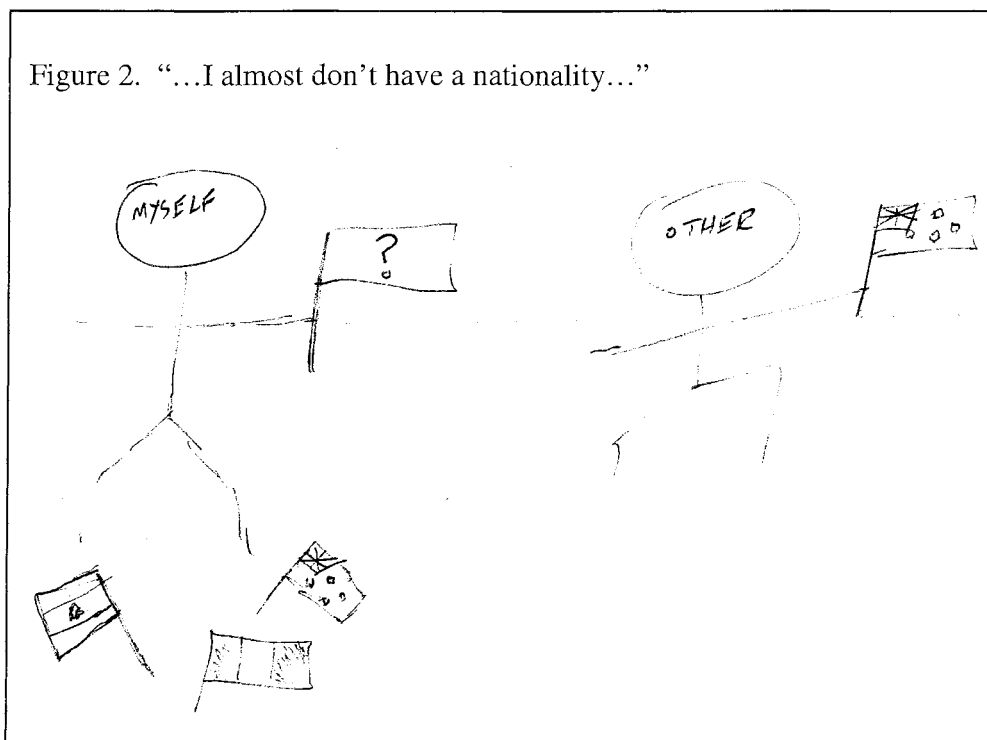
### **Lack of belonging.**

Two of the participants indicated lack of a firm sense of belonging. Roger's text indicated that he was not clear about his EI (Phinney, 1989):

*...in one sense I don't really have a cultural identity... part Australian, part African, part this, part that but I don't... completely identify with any of them...I probably feel a bit lost in terms of ...an ethnicity for myself*

This was illustrated by him in Figure 2. He indicated *EI search* when he said:

*...I probably actively started...when I was (about) 18 and probably ...till about 22, 23...before I actually got to a place where I was reasonably comfortable with who I was and ...there's a lot more satisfaction and a lot more comfortableness...but ...I wouldn't say that I am completely comfortable still...*



He expressed that his feelings about himself “fluctuates” and said:

*...sometimes I feel...in some senses...there's a little bit of pride...I guess proud that I have, some (what) of my own identity...at the same time...I feel, somewhat insecure...not really knowing...who I am...I don't feel like I fit...into a particular place...so that does lead to some insecurity...in terms of my identity like where do I actually fit in, where do I actually have a place...*

Thus Roger linked his lack of a (secure) identity to a lack of sense of belonging to any place and saw them as leading to feelings of insecurity. Together with these, Roger also displayed a fairly prominent *outsider* identity.

For Roger, re-adjusting to Australia (his passport country) at the conclusion of his sojourn, included hiding some parts of himself:

*...I think part of me is just learning ...the things I have in common with people to...develop friendships with, but then also recognising that...my differences (and) my values I'd probably be able to live them out for a...career rather than through friendships*

This finding is consistent with the notion of *hidden immigrants* (PolVan model, Pollock and Van Reken, 2009), TCKs who remain similar in outward appearance to their peers in the dominant culture, but differ in their values, beliefs and behaviours. This could at least in part be due to missing out on 'home' culture learning during his sojourn (Minoura, 1992). Roger, displayed this aspect of the re-adjusting TCK, and had hopes of utilising other avenues for legitimate expression of these hidden parts, consistent with TCK literature (Pollock & Van Reken; Selmer, 2004).

Again, one participant, Nicola, did not display an association of PWB, a sense of belonging and a secure EI in the same direction. She reported a sense of belonging to "nowhere...(and) anywhere", a common finding in many TCKs (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). This existed together with a prominent *outsider* identity, ("...in a way my identity is almost as an outsider...") perhaps stronger than that seen in Roger. She views her EI as core British (in which she takes pride, "...I do take pride in it") with sojourn cultural influences, which she has amalgamated in Australia. She says:

*...maybe I feel I've been able to amalgamate both in Australia, which is a mish mash of culture itself, isn't it?...*

There is some ambiguity in relation to her PWB; she reports confusion ("confused outsider"), as well as good psychological outcomes:

*...much more stable now...I really have taught myself some lessons...much more stable now...sure of myself...whereas now feel proud of being an open person...(then, at 17) was totally confused...just didn't know who I was...probably only in the last 10 years...I think, while I have been here*

Further, a faith identity is also present in Nicola's case, and could have made a positive contribution (gives her "strength") towards PWB. Nicola thus seem to display a secure sense of EI together with an *outsider* identity, ambiguous PWB and no firm sense of belonging (except perhaps to immediate family: "...my immediate family's very important to me...").

Fail et al. (2004) state that identity issues come to the fore during a TCKs repatriation 'home'. However, the findings in this study of a lack of a sense of belonging seen to co-exist with less than desirable PWB outcomes do not support the assertion of Fail et al. that an *outsider* identity, not a sense of belonging, is the cause of confusion. They interpret an attachment to the sojourn cultures as a sense of belonging and that it was possible to have an *outsider* identity as well as such an attachment. In this study, Roger and Nicola had an attachment to their sojourn countries. Yet they lacked a firm sense of belonging to any place or group, together with displaying confusion.

The finding that two participants (Roger and Tamara) had not yet arrived at an *achieved* sense of EI, well into their adulthood is consistent with findings by other researchers: TCKs who identify themselves as coming from "multiple cultures" had lower levels of EI *commitment* on the Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) than non-TCKs who were exposed to multiple cultures (I. Gorman, personal

communication, July, 25, 2010). The findings also support the notion of *delayed adolescence*, a TCK characteristic reported to be present in a number of TCKs (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

### Conclusions

This study explored the nature of ethnic identity (EI) and its relationship to psychological well-being in adults with a highly mobile global upbringing (*third culture kids*, TCKs, Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Two themes relating to the research questions were elucidated. In the first theme, making sense of identity, TCKs' identity construction varied from single to multiple identities. In the second theme, there was a positive association between a sense of belonging and PWB. Any possible relationship between an *achieved* EI status and psychological well-being (PWB) seemed to be mediated by a sense of belonging. No direct relationship was found between the nature of EI and PWB in the sample. Additional findings of interest included an *outsider* identity and a faith identity. The study also demonstrated the appropriateness of Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenological framework and methodology for EI research and the usefulness of pictures as an aid in consolidating participants' thoughts on the natures of their EI.

In the first theme, participants' attempts to construct their TCK identities varied from single to multiple (both alternating and blended) identities. Single identities were the same as parental or original identities, with all participants in the sample maintaining at least some aspect of their original EI. The importance of early socialisation on EI formation as well as on the TCK identity has been stressed in the literature (Knight, Cota, & Bernal, 1993; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). The current

findings of maintenance of the relationship to original EI lend support to this assertion. Multiple identities included hierarchical, blended and alternating components of EI and were similar to those observed by researchers in *biculturals* (Phinney, 2005; Verkuyten, 2005). There was also evidence for migrant TCKs utilising strategies consistent with Berry's (2001) acculturation strategy of *integration* in incorporating their TCK identities into an Australian national identity.

The second theme related to the second research question and showed relationships between a sense of belonging and PWB. There was no support for a relationship between EI nature (i.e., type of EI constructed) and PWB. Contrary to EI literature, there appeared to be no consistent relationships of EI status with PWB (Phinney, 2005): one participant did not display an *achieved* EI together with good psychological outcomes, although she displayed a firm sense of belonging to several groups within multicultural Australia. Another participant displayed ambiguous PWB and an *achieved* EI, together with lack of a firm sense of belonging. Phinney asserts that a sense of belonging to one's ethnic group is the important factor in the relationship between EI and PWB in migrants. Thus, it appears that in these participants, PWB may be linked to their sense of belonging, regardless of the EI status. This is also consistent with the suggestion that social support derived from group memberships is responsible for positive psychological outcomes in acculturating individuals (Berry, 2006).

Additional findings of interest include the emergence of a faith identity and an *outsider* identity in many participants, as well as the notion of being a *hidden immigrant* (PolVan Model, Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Faith could potentially have a

positive influence on well-being (Martin, Kirkcaldy, & Siefen, 2003) and possibly played a role in this regard in the lived experience of some participants in this sample.

Findings of an *outsider* identity have been documented in the TCK literature (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). In this study, a strong *outsider* identity was associated with a lack of firm sense of belonging to a particular place or group in two of the participants. This finding is not consistent with Fail et al. (2004) who asserted that identity issues amongst TCKs returning to their 'home' country was not related to a sense of belonging. However, they seem to be categorising feelings of attachment that TCKs feel for sojourn cultures, as a sense of belonging. It is possible a firm sense of belonging may not be present in all such cases.

There were two sets of siblings in the study. To my knowledge, this is the first time TCK siblings have been compared in a psychological study. Siblings were similar in some respects (e.g., in one set both displayed a hierarchical multiple EI) but differed in others (e.g., differed with respect to EI status, or displayed alternating vs. blended identities). A factor responsible for similarities seen could be early socialisation (Knight et al., 1993). Differences could be related to individual differences, or contextual differences such as schools attended (e.g., boarding school vs. day school).

Overall, findings such as EI *search* continuing well into adulthood (which is similar to observations in TCK literature of *delayed adolescence*, Pollock & Van Reken, 2009) support the notion that EI construction is more complex or harder in TCKs than in bicultural migrants (e.g., Fail et al., 2004; Grimshaw & Sears, 2008). The nature of EI in this sample of TCKs varied from single to multiple, which is further indication of the complexity of these identities. The TCK identity was also seen to

assume context-dependency in some participants, as well as changing slowly over time and context (e.g., an English EI becoming “more European” during sojourn in Germany), consistent with EI literature (Phinney, 2005).

The participants with the TCK experience studied in this research were all residents of Australia at the time of the interviews. Three of the five TCKs who subsequently migrated to Australia found this country's multicultural society to be conducive to amalgamating their TCK identities or to furnish them with a sense of belonging.

This study also demonstrated the usefulness of pictorial depictions in consolidating participants' thoughts regarding their EI construction as well as to illustrate their verbal descriptions. Pictures have been previously utilised in EI research but have been subjected to analysis separately to text (e.g., Sirin & Fine, 2007).

Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology has not been widely utilised in psychology (Sandage, Cook, Hill, Strawn, & Reimer, 2008) and to the researchers' knowledge, it has not been hitherto used in EI research. This study therefore also demonstrated the suitability of this methodology in researching this construct.

### **Limitations**

A few possible limitations of this study need to be highlighted. One potential limitation was the small sample size (7 participants). However, there was no indication that *saturation* was not reached, as no new themes emerged in the later samples (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Further, a wide range of ages and a good representation of sending organisations, as well as migrants and non-migrants (see Table 1) were present in the sample, which would serve to increase the *transferability* of the findings



(Miles & Huberman, 1994). The emergence of negative instances of aspects of the phenomenon (e.g., an *achieved* EI status associated with lack of a firm sense of belonging and less than desirable psychological outcomes) further served to increase the *credibility* (Miles & Huberman) of the study. However, this possible limitation needs to be borne in mind in considering the implications of this study.

Another possible limitation of a study of this nature is its reliance on participants' descriptions. Interview data are post-hoc constructions and thus could be edited from the view of the present (Fail et al., 2004). This might be especially so in participants with a long time-lapse since their cross-cultural experiences. These too should be taken into consideration during any applications of this study.

Possible confounds for the construct of psychological well-being in the sample were the co-occurrence of depression (possibly due to family problems during childhood) and abandonment issues. These were taken into account when interpreting the findings.

Another possible limitation is the sample bias towards females. EI research has yielded mixed results regarding gender effects. However, the general consensus is that gender does not play a role in EI construction especially in areas of EI inquiry pertaining to the research questions of this study (e.g., Pahl & Way, 2006; Phinney & Chavira, 1992).

### **Implications and Future Directions**

TCKs present researchers with a complex instance of EI formation due to their upbringing in multiple cultural contexts. They are also becoming more common in an increasingly globalised world, together with other children growing up in cross-cultural

contexts (e.g., children of mixed marriages and migrants, Arnett, 2002; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). The findings of a complex nature and process of EI formation in these *global nomads*, together with the relationship of a sense of belonging to psychological well-being have implications for ethnic identity theory.

Relationships between a sense of belonging and PWB, EI *search* continuing well into adulthood, and relationships to parental EI have practical implications for educating parents of TCKs, sending organisations (e.g., governments, mission organisations) and the helping professions as well as for developing support systems for TCKs (especially on returning 'home'). Further, the finding that some migrant TCKs viewed Australia's multi-cultural society as a suitable place in which to establish a sense of belonging could be useful in strategies for linking *hidden immigrants* with others with similar cross-cultural experiences (e.g., second generation migrants).

Future research could endeavour to uncover possible relationships between a sense of belonging and an *outsider* identity following current findings of an association in two of the participants. If they are related, it would be interesting to find out whether or not they are causally related, which in turn would be useful in implementing ways to help TCKs deal better with their identity issues.

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## APPENDIX A

## Volunteers Needed For Research

- *Are you aged 18 years or over?*
- *Have you grown up (minimum 3 years) in a culture/s different to that of your parents/guardians (e.g., children of personnel working/serving overseas such as the military, missionary, aid-workers, diplomats and other professionals)?*
- *Don't belong to any support groups for expatriate children?*
- *Can you spare between 1 to 2 hours of your time?*

A Psychology Honours student at Edith Cowan University (WA) would like to hear the stories of persons who fit the above description for a research project, as part of course requirements. The research project is seeking to investigate aspects of identity in this group of people.

**If you are able to help, please call Dharshi on [REDACTED]  
or e-mail: [svasikar@our.ecu.edu.au](mailto:svasikar@our.ecu.edu.au) for further information.**

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

Age: No. of years overseas/in different culture:

Ages overseas/different culture: No. of moves:

Are you currently living in your parents' country/culture:

How long have you been back (if back in Passport country) or settled here:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Please tell me about your experiences in (country/countries or culture/s) .
  
- 2) How did those experiences shape how you see yourself now, in terms of your ethnic/cultural identity?
  
- 3) How does (your identity/ the way you see yourself ) relate to how you feel?

Further prompts:

In terms of :

- happiness
- how you feel about yourself (e.g., feeling good about yourself)
- satisfaction with life
- pride in who you are, your ethnicity/culture

### PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY

Please draw as best you can, a picture of how you see yourself (in terms of ethnic/cultural identity).

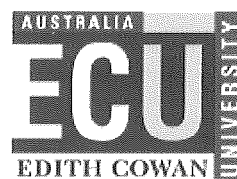
Further prompts: Tell me about what you've drawn OR could you clarify what you mean by (what you've drawn)?

### CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

Do you have anything to add that I may have missed?

Do you have any other questions?

## APPENDIX C



Lives in Transition: Ethnic Identity and Psychological Well-being in Adults with a  
Highly Mobile Global Upbringing

Participant Information Letter

Thank you for your interest in this research project, which is part of my Psychology Honours course at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia.

The project will be investigating how those who have lived for a significant portion of their childhood years in a culture/s outside of their parents' culture/s see themselves in terms of ethnic/cultural identity and how this might be related to how they feel about themselves.

As part of the study you will be asked to attend an interview with me, which should take approximately one hour, at a mutually convenient time and place. Interviews will be audio recorded together with the taking of hand-written notes. You may be contacted after the interview if during the analysis I am unclear about any meanings conveyed by you at the interview.

All data collected will be handled with the strictest confidence and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Audio recordings will be transcribed without identifying you in any way. The recordings will be erased at the conclusion of the project. Transcriptions of the interview will be held for 5 years in a locked filing cabinet in the School of Psychology at the Edith Cowan University. Information collected will be used in my research report and in any other publication that may arise as a result of the research. You will not be identified in any publication, unless specific consent has been obtained from you. This research project has been approved by the Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Human Research Ethics Sub-committee.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to terminate the interviews at any time if you are not comfortable to continue. You are also free to withdraw your consent to participate in the study at any time (and if you so wish, request any material collected to be destroyed) without giving a reason and without any penalty. In the unlikely event that talking about your experiences proves to be distressing and you would like to talk to a professional counsellor in confidence, a list of counselling services and support groups will be given to you.



If you have any further questions please feel free to contact either myself or my project supervisor. If you have any complaints or concerns about this project and wish to speak to an independent person, Professor Craig Speelman (Head of the School of Psychology and Social Science) may be contacted.

If you wish to receive feedback on the results of the study, please let me know.

Your participation in this project is much appreciated. This study will increase understanding of the experiences of those growing up in multiple cultural contexts: how those experiences have shaped their identity and the relationship to well-being. Your involvement would provide an avenue for your voice to be heard and perhaps to learn more about yourself. If you are willing to go ahead, please sign the attached consent form and return to me at the interview.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely

S. (Dharshi) Vasikaran

Tel: [REDACTED]  
E-mail: [svasikar@our.ecu.edu.au](mailto:svasikar@our.ecu.edu.au)

Project Supervisor

Dr Justine Dandy  
Edith Cowan University  
270 Joondalup Drive  
Joondalup WA 6027

Tel: (08) 6304 5105  
E-mail: [j.dandy@ecu.edu.au](mailto:j.dandy@ecu.edu.au)

Head of the School of Psychology and Social Science

Professor Craig Speelman  
Edith Cowan University  
270 Joondalup Drive  
Joondalup WA 6027

Tel: (08) 6304 5724  
E-mail: [c.speelman@ecu.edu.au](mailto:c.speelman@ecu.edu.au)

Informed Consent Document

Research Student: Dharshi Vasikaran  
Project Supervisor: Dr Justine Dandy  
(School of Psychology and Social Sciences, Faculty of  
Computing, Health and  
Science)

I, \_\_\_\_\_ ,  
(Name of Participant)

- Have read and understood the information provided in the accompanying Information Letter and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Any further questions I may have will be answered by the researchers.
- Understand that I will be required to attend an interview which will be audio-taped together with the taking of hand-written notes.
- Understand that all information I give will be kept strictly confidential (within legal limits) and that I will not be identified in any report or publication resulting from the research without my consent.
- Understand that I am free to withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without giving any explanation and without being penalised in any way.
- Freely give consent to participate in the research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature) (Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Researcher) (Date)

APPENDIX D

LIST OF COUNSELLING SERVICES AND USEFUL WEBSITES

**Lifeline WA**

57 Murray Street

Perth WA 6000

Tel: 9261 4451

**Lifeline WA (24 hour crisis telephone counselling):** 131 114

**Psychological Services Centre**

Joondalup House

8 Davidson Terrace

Joondalup WA 6027

Telephone: 9301 0011

**Websites for 'Third Culture Kids'/'Global Nomads'**

(For useful information on those who share the experience of a global upbringing):

[www.tekid.com](http://www.tekid.com) (also an on-line forum)

[www.interactionintl.org](http://www.interactionintl.org)

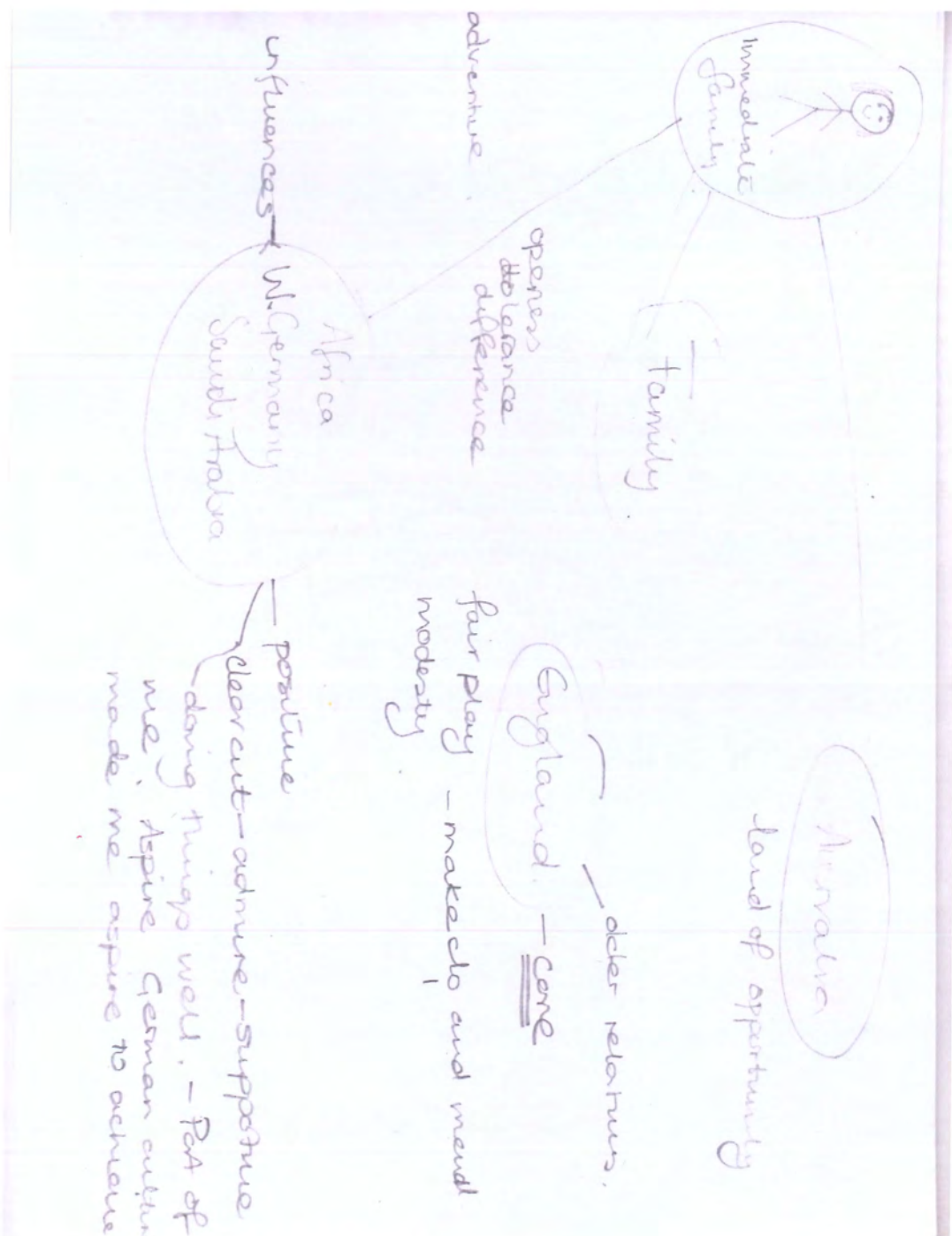
[www.worldweave.com\GN.html](http://www.worldweave.com\GN.html)

**Book on 'Third Culture Kids'**

Pollock, D. C., & Van Reken, R. E. (2009). *Third culture kids: Growing up among worlds*. Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

APPENDIX E

Nicola



Maxine



Sangeetha



Mostly an assimilated member of Australian multicultural society.

Enjoy a range of multicultural foods. Don't desire my ethnic food daily & actually find it a nuisance to prepare.

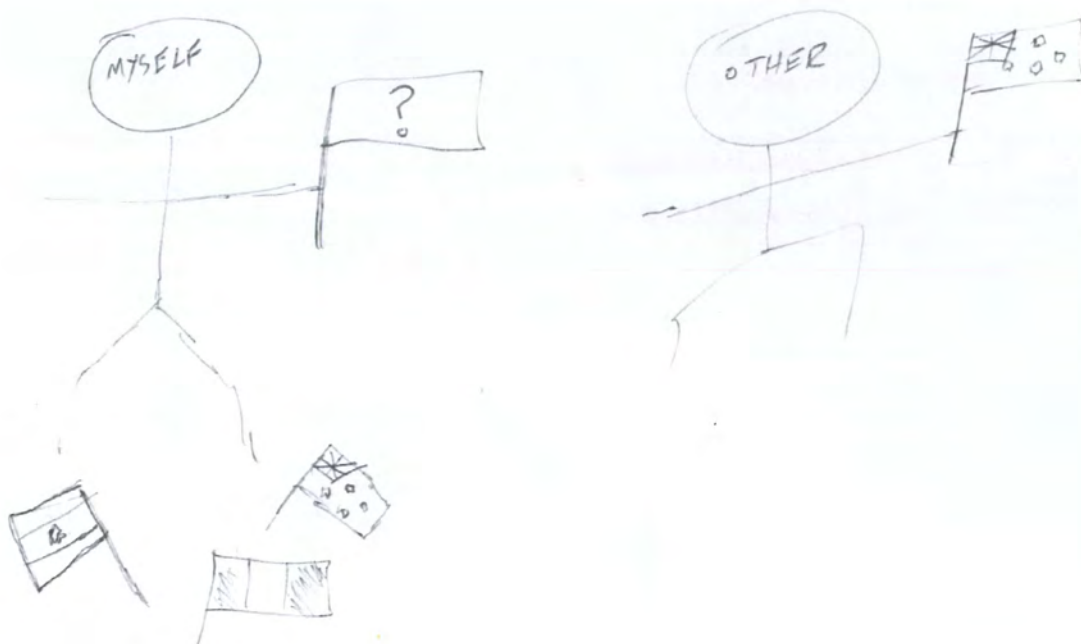


Occasionally taking pride and pleasure in the trappings of my Sri Lankan Tamil culture, particularly in terms of wearing saree for special occasions & eating traditional food.

Kaye

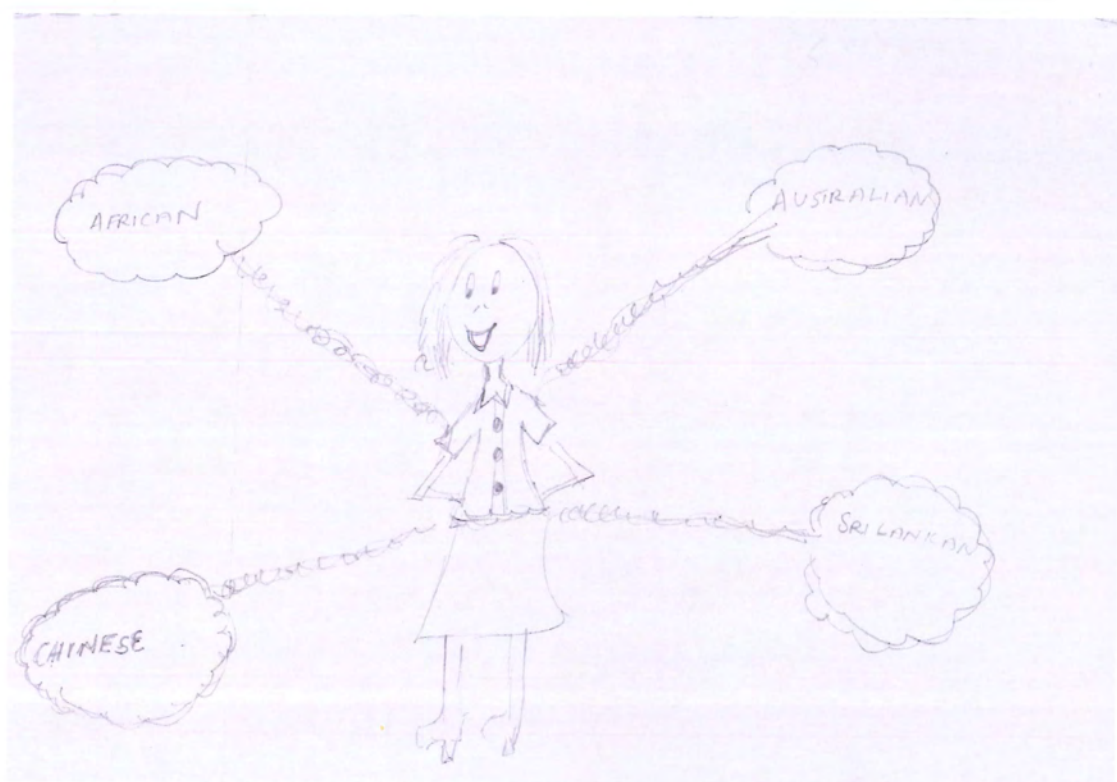


Roger





Tamara



Regina

