

# Ego-Identity Status and Life Satisfaction in Emerging Adult Third Culture Kids and Individuals with Multicultural Identities

Melody G. Young, Steven V. Rouse, Social Sciences Division, Pepperdine University

## Participant Categories

*Third Culture Kids* (TCKs) are defined as individuals who lived for a significant amount of their developmental years (i.e., before high school graduation) in a country that their parents did not grow up in and that have a culture different from that of their parents' native country. Thus, they create a personal cultural identity, or "third culture," that is different from both their host culture and their parents' culture of origin.

The use of the term "kid" does not imply anything about the current age of a person. Instead, this reflects the person's cultural experiences during childhood. Common examples of Third Culture Kids include children of diplomats, international business professionals, military personnel, and missionaries.

*Multicultural Individuals* (MIs) are defined as individuals who live in a culture different from their parents' culture of origin (which is the individual's heritage culture), thus having ethnic and national identities. They have had significant exposure to and identify with more than one culture. Their initial identity is formed from one or more heritage cultures in addition to the culture of their origin (not their parents' culture of origin), also referred to as the mainstream culture.

*European American Monocultural Individuals* (EMIs) are defined as individuals who are of European descent and identify only with Western culture.

## Introduction

- Recent research has begun to reveal the need to explore the implications of intrapersonal cultural dissonance on the sense of self.
- TCKs: Challenges for emerging adult TCKs include grief and insecurity from a globally mobile experience during formative years of their lives. They struggle with finding not only a sense of belonging but also a sense of identity because they must sort through the diverse and many perspectives and social norms they have been exposed to.
- MIs: Integration of a coherent self is more difficult for ethnic minority adolescents than for their peers. On related note, individuals can acculturate to both their mainstream culture and their heritage culture. Acculturation is not a unidimensional spectrum with greater acculturation to mainstream culture detracting from acculturation to one's heritage culture.
- EMIs: It is assumed that they do not experience similar intrapersonal cultural dissonance since their "heritage" culture is likely the same as the U.S. mainstream culture.
- Why emerging adulthood? It is a life stage during which individuals have more agency to pick and choose from their various cultures to form their identity, negotiating a cultural identity that works best for them. In addition, individuals are becoming their own persons, oftentimes away from home (likely their primary source of heritage culture) for the first time in their lives.
- A study on ethnic identity, ethnic behaviors, and psychological well-being found a positive relationship between ethnic salience and engagement in ethnic behaviors. Thus, the more salient ethnicity was for a participant, the more he or she engaged in ethnic behaviors.

## Research Questions

- Do TCKs and MIs in emerging adulthood experience less satisfaction with life than EMIs do?
- Do TCKs and MIs in emerging adulthood experience different ego-identity status than EMIs do?

## Methods

- Screening survey administered to identify qualified Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers
- Qualified MTurk participants sorted into the three participant groups
- Main survey (5-10 minutes) published to MTurk, only visible to pre-identified qualified workers
- Data collected
- Data analyzed using ANOVAs to determine differences in the four measures used in the survey

Measures:

- Vancouver Index of Acculturation (Ryder et al., 2000 – VIA): 20-item bidimensional measure of acculturation – 10 items for U.S. mainstream culture, 10 items for heritage culture
- Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985 – SWLS): 5-item measure of life satisfaction
- Adapted version of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers et al., 2013) Centrality Scale: 8-item measure of ethnic identity salience
- Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (Balistreri et al., 1995 – EIPQ): 32-item measure of identity exploration (16 items) and commitment (16 items)

## Results

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Sample*

	Sample size (n)	Gender	Average Age (SD)	Geographic Region	Race or Ethnicity	Generation Status
Full sample	81	52 females (64.2%) 28 males (34.6%) 1 non-binary (1.2%)	24.81 (3.25)	16 Midwest (19.8%) 24 Northeast (29.6%) 28 South (34.6%) 13 West (16%)	17 Asian 7 Black 15 Latinx 3 Native American 48 White 3 Other	(3) 1-gen (4) 1.5-gen (22) 2-gen (4) 2.5-gen (44) 3+ gen (1) no answer
TCK	17 (21%)	13 females 3 males 1 non-binary	23.88 (2.83)	5 Midwest 6 Northeast 3 South 3 West	7 Asian 2 Black 4 Latinx 4 White	(1) 1-gen (3) 1.5-gen (9) 2-gen (2) 3+ gen (1) I don't know (1) no answer
MI	28 (34.6%)	11 females 17 males	25.25 (3.60)	4 Midwest 8 Northeast 13 South 3 West	10 Asian 5 Black 9 Latinx 8 White 3 Other	(1) 1-gen (1) 1.5-gen (13) 2-gen (4) 2.5-gen (7) 3+ gen (2) I don't know (1) no answer
EMI	36 (44.4%)	28 females 8 males	24.92 (3.15)	7 Midwest 10 Northeast 12 South 7 West	36 White 2 Latinx 1 Native American	(1) 1-gen (35) 3+ gen

Highlights of Post Hoc Tests (Tukey,  $p < .05$ ):

VIA – U.S. Mainstream Acculturation

- EMI: significant difference with MI and TCK
- MI: significant difference with EMI, no significant difference with TCK
- TCK: significant difference with EMI, no significant difference with MI

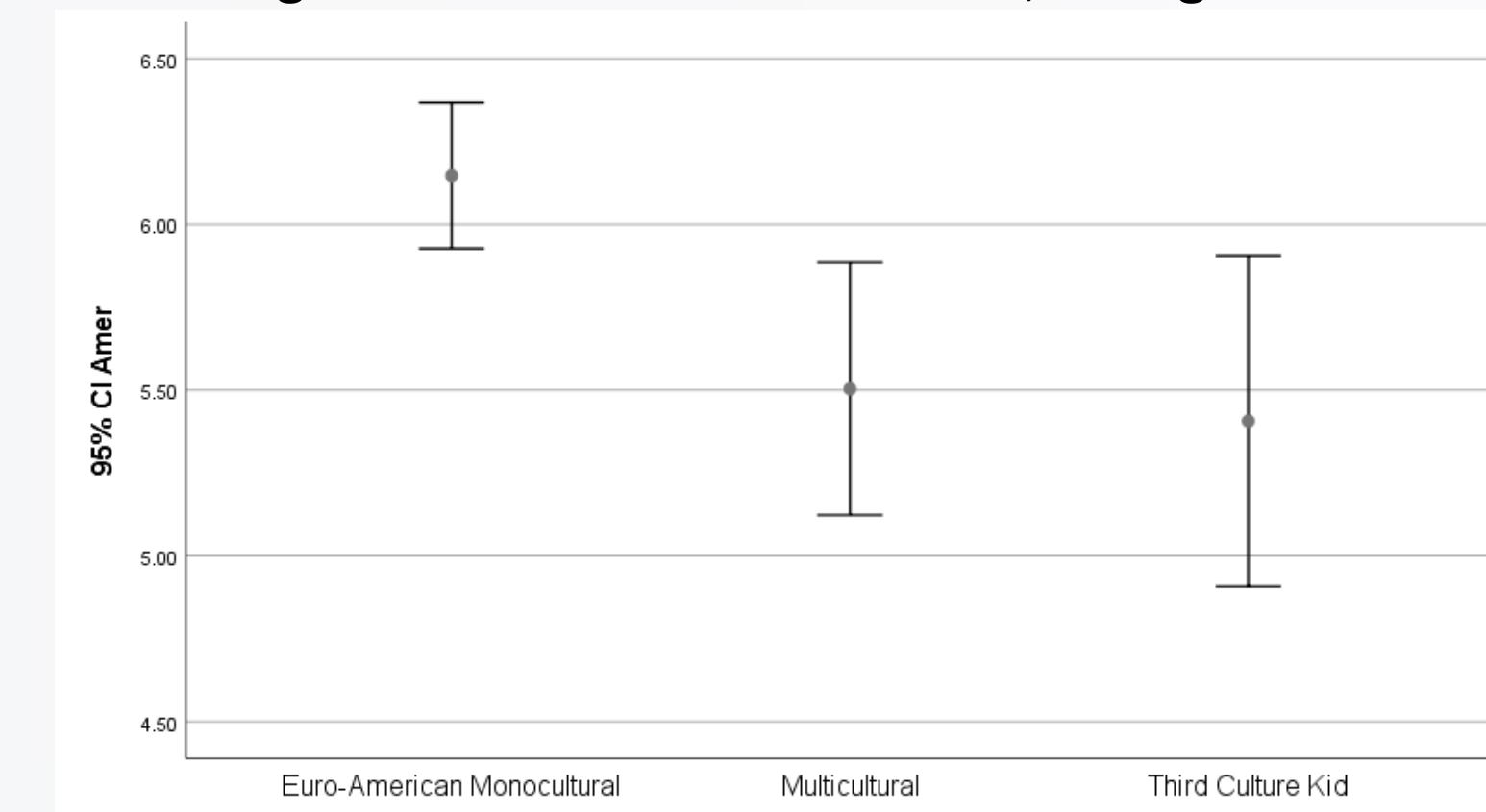


Figure 1. *95% Confidence Interval for U.S. Mainstream Acculturation*

SWLS (Life Satisfaction)

- No significant differences

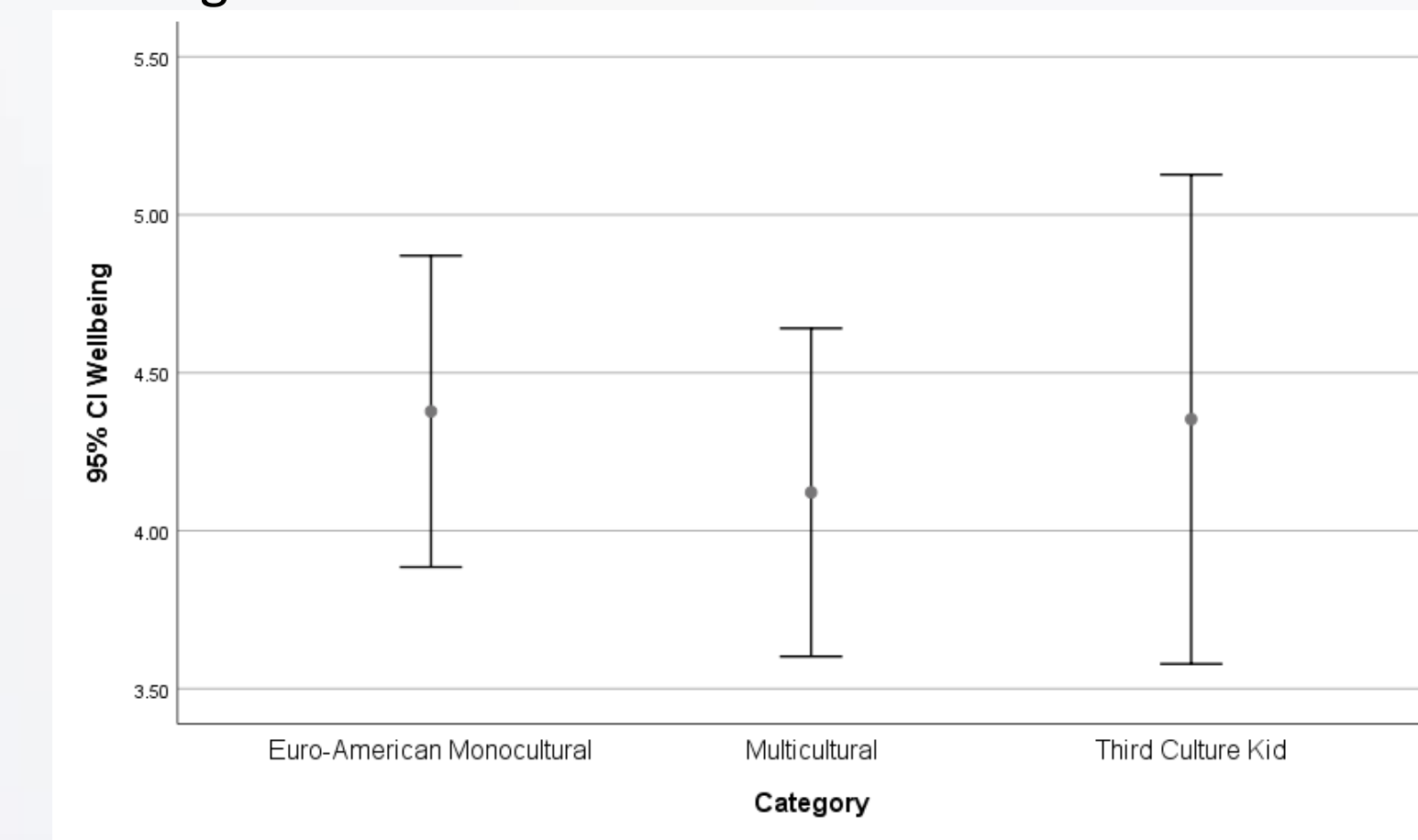


Figure 3. *95% Confidence Interval for Life Satisfaction*

EIPQ – Exploration

- EMI: significant difference with TCK, no significant difference with MI
- MI: no significant differences
- TCK: significant difference with EMI, no significant difference with MI

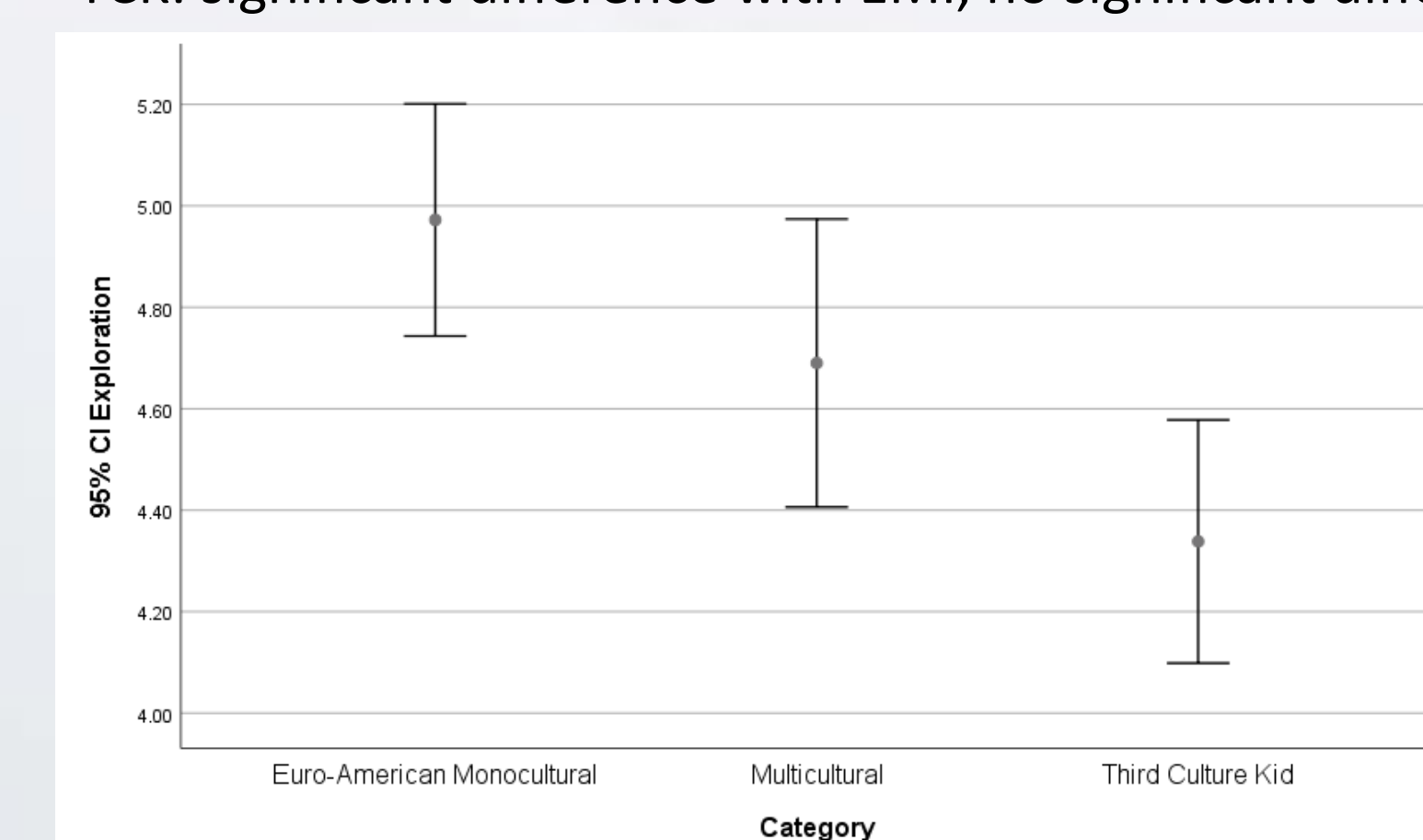


Figure 5. *95% Confidence Interval for Ego-Identity Exploration*

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of Measures*

	VIA – U.S. Mainstream Acculturation	VIA – Heritage Acculturation	EIPQ – Exploration	EIPQ – Commitment	SWLS	Ethnic Identity Salience
Full Sample – Mean (SD), Cronbach's alpha	5.77 (0.90), .91	5.31 (0.92), .85	4.74 (0.70), .70	4.43 (0.90), .85	4.28 (1.41), .88	4.13 (1.25), .85
TCK	5.41 (0.97)	5.36 (0.90)	4.34 (0.47)	4.50 (0.91)	4.35 (1.51)	4.71 (1.05)
MI	5.50 (0.98)	5.36 (1.08)	4.69 (0.73)	4.10 (0.85)	4.12 (1.34)	4.51 (1.03)
EMI	6.15 (0.65)	5.25 (0.81)	4.97 (0.68)	4.64 (0.87)	4.38 (1.46)	3.55 (1.29)

Table 3. *One-Way ANOVA Results*

	VIA – U.S. Mainstream Acculturation	VIA – Heritage Acculturation	EIPQ – Exploration	EIPQ – Commitment	SWLS	Ethnic Identity Salience
<i>F</i> ( <i>df</i> = 2,78)	6.52	0.14	5.46	3.06	0.28	8.29
<i>p</i>	.002	.87	.006	.05	.78	.001
$\eta^2$	.14	.00	.12	.07	.01	.18

VIA – Heritage Acculturation

- No significant differences

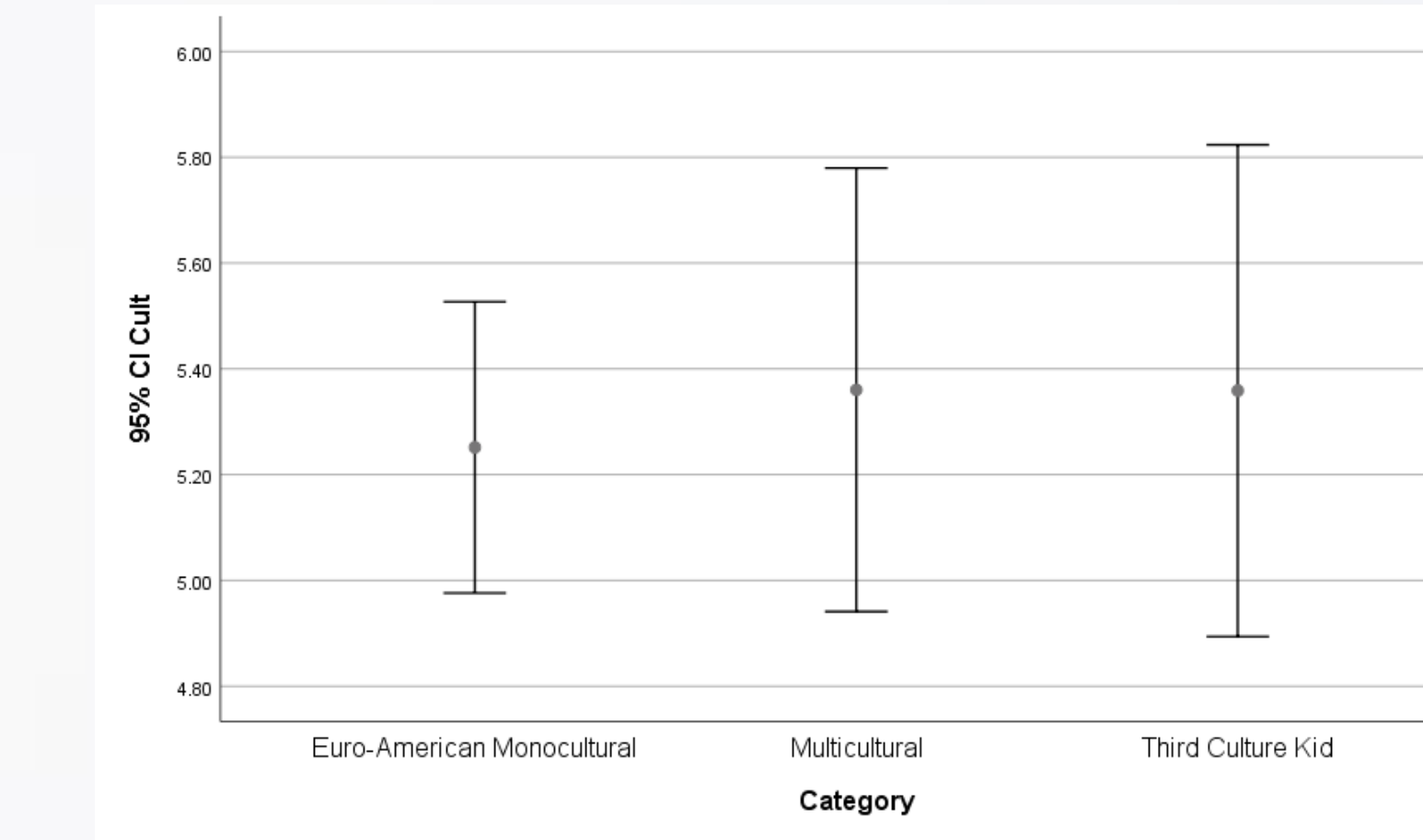


Figure 2. *95% Confidence Interval for Heritage Acculturation*

Ethnic Identity Salience

- EMI: significant difference with MI and TCK
- MI: significant difference with EMI, no significant difference with TCK
- TCK: significant difference with EMI, no significant difference with MI

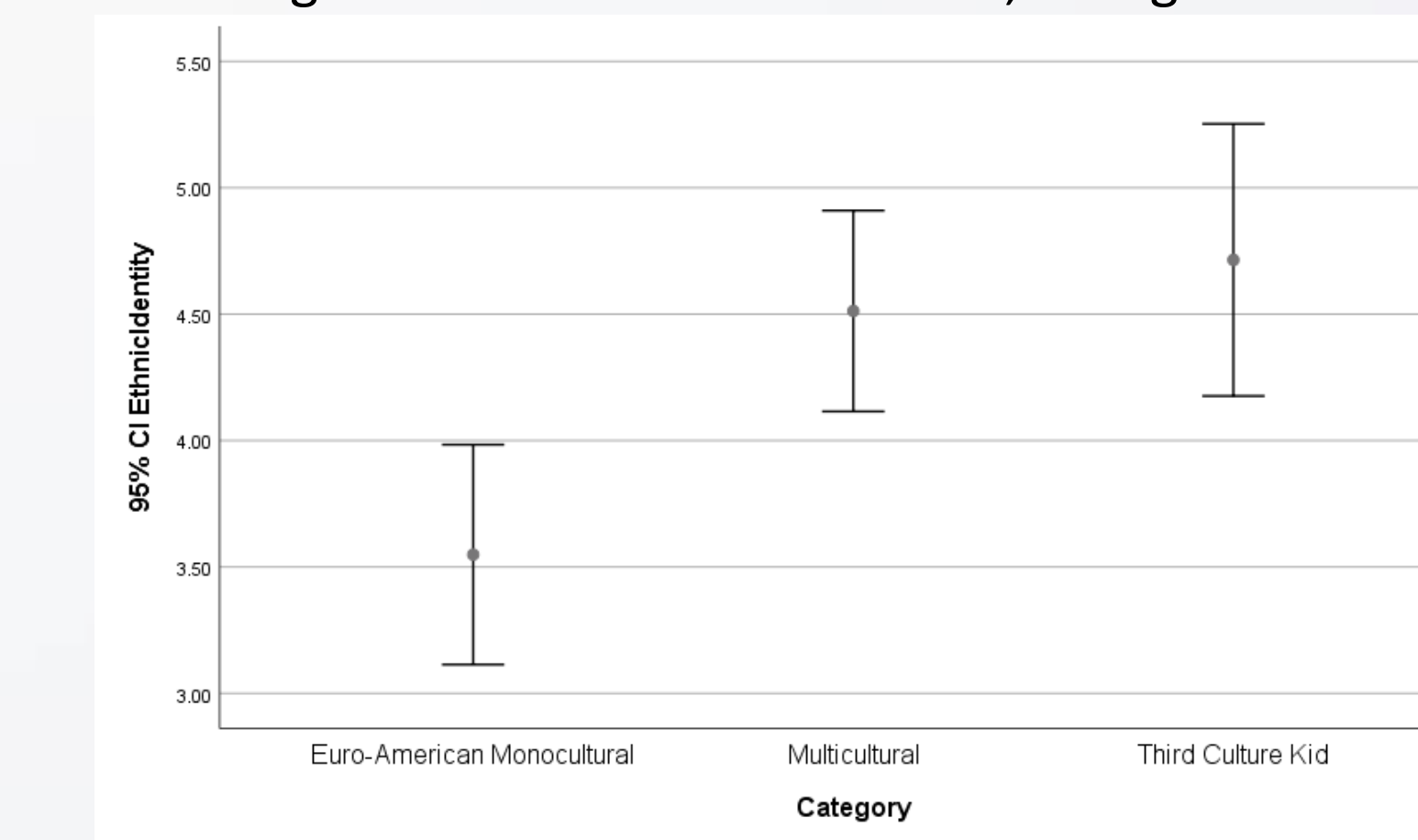


Figure 4. *95% Confidence Interval for Ethnic Identity Salience*

EIPQ – Commitment

- EMI: significant difference with MI, no significant difference with TCK
- MI: significant difference with EMI, no significant difference with TCK
- TCK: no significant differences

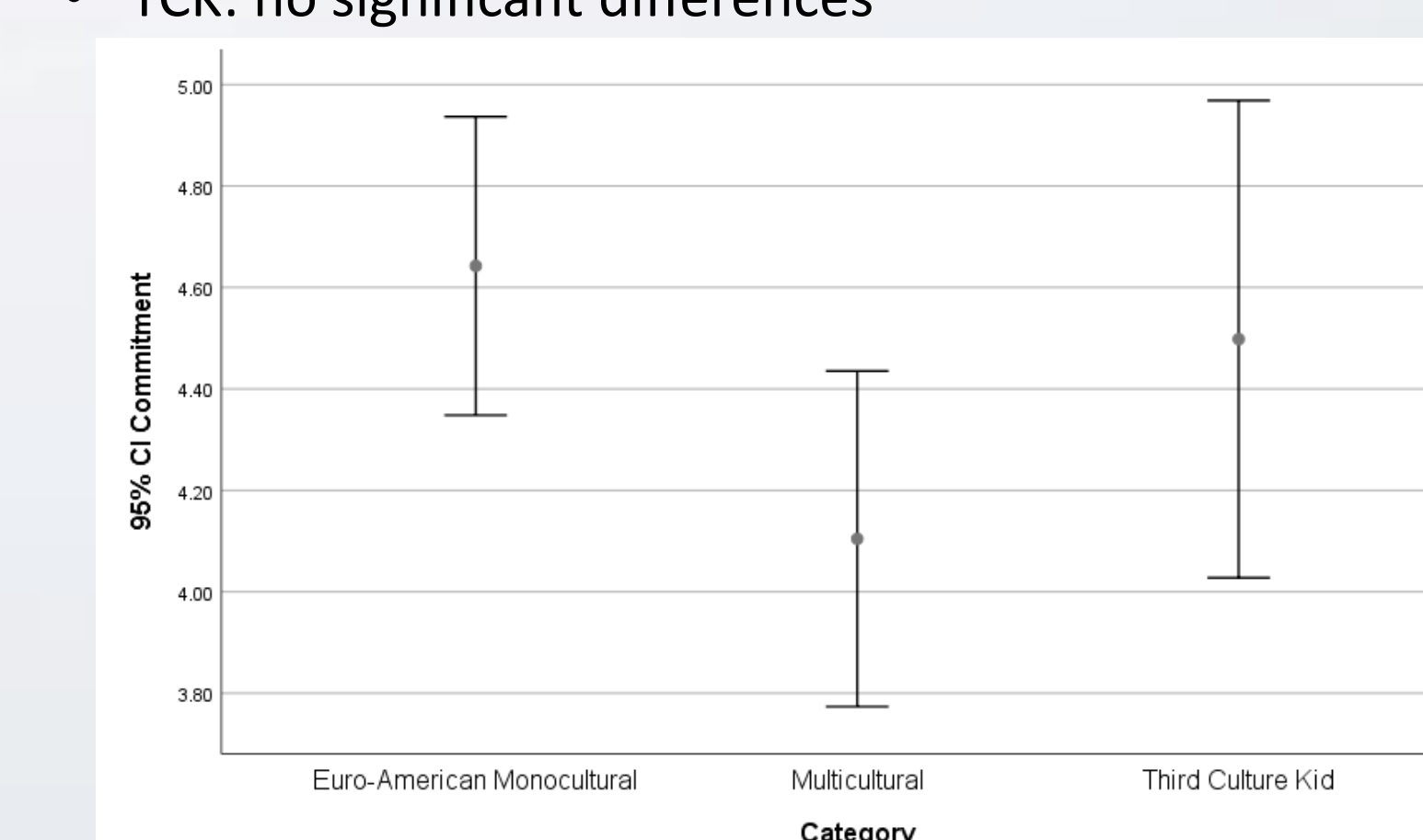


Figure 6. *95% Confidence Interval for Ego-Identity Commitment*

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if TCKs and MIs in emerging adulthood experience 1) less satisfaction with life and 2) different ego-identity status than EMIs. For the first research question, significantly less satisfaction with life may indicate that TCKs and MIs may be experiencing negative impacts on wellbeing that are unique to their populations, possibly due to intrapersonal cultural dissonance. However, no significant differences were found among the three participant categories. It is interesting to note, though, that MIs had a lower average life satisfaction than TCKs and EMIs, who had similar averages. Other literature has highlighted the resilience and adaptability produced by TCKs' globally mobile experience. Possibly, other factors such as this resilience and adaptability compensate for the intrapersonal cultural dissonance TCKs may experience, resulting in similar levels of life satisfaction between TCKs and EMIs.

For the second research question, significantly different ego-identity statuses between EMIs versus MIs and TCKs may provide support for research indicating that emerging adult TCKs may struggle to find a sense of identity and for research finding ethnic minority adolescents having more difficulty integrating a coherent self, compared to their peers. The results were mixed. Significant differences were found for both ego-identity exploration and commitment but not exactly as predicted. For exploration, only TCKs scored significantly less compared to EMIs. MIs scored less than EMIs and greater than TCKs, but not significantly. For commitment, only MIs scored significantly less compared to EMIs. TCKs scored less than EMIs and greater than MIs, but not significantly. From a broader view, non-monocultural participant categories were exploring less and committing less, contrary to expectations.

Regarding identity status for TCKs, some speculations could be that, due to their globally mobile childhood, TCKs have been exposed to greater variety of perspectives and have already had the opportunity to explore, thus as emerging adults they do less identity exploration. Also due to their globally mobile childhood, they may have had to compress their core identity to retain consistency amid the change around them, thus leading to levels of identity commitment more similar to those of EMIs. Whereas EMIs may explore significantly more than TCKs since they are exercising their newfound agency and greater degree of independence from their families to explore their identities in different contexts. Regarding lower identity commitment for MIs, a speculation could be that MIs perceive more polarity than possibility for amalgamation between mainstream culture and heritage culture (possibly different from TCKs who grew up abroad and may have less attachment to any one mainstream culture). As a result, they may struggle to commit since they have to sort through both cultures and pick what parts of each they wish to integrate into their coherent identity. Also, one thing to note is that this study's analyses were conducted to find significant differences among the participant categories but did not assess whether scores were in the high or low range according to their psychological construct.

Two other important characteristics were measured to explain more about the three participant categories – acculturation (to mainstream culture and to heritage culture) and ethnic identity salience. Significant difference was found in mainstream acculturation but not in heritage acculturation. EMIs were more acculturated to U.S. mainstream culture than MIs and TCKs were, which aligns with our understanding of MIs and TCKs' cultural backgrounds. EMIs were not less acculturated to their "heritage" culture than MIs and TCKs were to theirs, likely because U.S. mainstream culture has become EMIs' "heritage" culture (or vice versa). On the other hand, ethnic identity salience was significantly less for EMIs than for MIs and TCKs, but possibly for the same reason – that EMIs' ethnic identity and national identity are likely one and the same. The fact that ethnic identity was found to be significantly more salient for MIs and TCKs lends support to their experience of sorting through more cultural backgrounds.

## References

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## Acknowledgments

This research was supported by an Academic Year Undergraduate Research Initiative grant from the Seaver College Dean's Office.