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

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if TCs 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 TCs and MIs may be experiencing negative impacts on well-being 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 TCs and EMIs, who had similar averages. Other literature has highlighted the resilience and adaptability produced by TCs' globally mobile experience. Possibly, other markers of this resilience and adaptability compensate for the intrapersonal cultural dissonance TCs may experience, resulting in similar levels of life satisfaction between TCs and EMIs.

For the second research question, significantly different ego-identity statuses between EMIs versus TCs and MIs may provide support for research indicating that emerging adult TCs 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 TCs scored significantly less compared to EMIs. MIs scored less than EMIs and greater than TCs, but not significantly. For commitment, only MIs scored significantly less compared to EMIs. TCs scored less than EMIs and greater than MIs, but not significantly. From a broader view, non-multicultural participant categories were exploring less and committing less, contrary to expectations.

Regarding identity status for TCs, some speculations could be that, due to their globally mobile childhood, TCs 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 might 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 TCs since they are exercising their newfound agency to a 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 possess more potent utility or possibility for amalgamation between mainstream culture and heritage culture (possibly different from TCs who grew up abroad and may have less attachment to any one mainstream culture). As a result, TCs 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 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 TCs were, which aligns with our understanding of MIs and TCs' cultural backgrounds. EMIs were not less acculturated to their “heritage” culture than MIs and TCs 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 TCs. One possible reason for this 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 TCs lends support to their experience of sorting through more cultural backgrounds.

References


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