

**Pacific youth, acculturation and identity:  
the relationship between ethnic identity  
and well-being - new directions for research**

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**Abstract**

Given the importance of studying ethnic identity, acculturation and cultural orientation research and scholarship on this phenomenon is rapidly increasing. Moreover there is a groundswell of interest in the relationship between ethnic identity and well-being. This relationship is particularly significant for Pacific peoples in New Zealand, for whom ethnic identity may be a very salient feature of individuals' self-concepts. In this paper we thus focus on the ethnic identity construct and its relationship with well-being across the sectors of education, justice, religious centrality and mental health and its other possible applications. It ends with a call for *ethnic* enhancements (new programmes which focus on the impacts of colonialism, Christianity and neoliberalism on Pacific peoples and nations) to bolster existing *cultural* enhancements (existing programmes which focus on Pacific culture - languages, music, performance and dance only) for optimal well-being outcomes for our Pacific youth. More significantly, based on our own studies of constructs of Pacific ethnic identity in New Zealand, this paper reviews, identifies and analyses current quantitative and qualitative constructs and findings, and offers new directions for future research.

**Keywords:** Pacific youth, ethnic identity, acculturation, well-being, ethnic enhancements

**Ethnic identity, acculturation and cultural orientation**

Ethnic identity (the degree to which one views oneself as a member of a particular ethnic group), acculturation (the process of adjusting to a different culture), and cultural orientation (one's feelings toward and level of engagement in different cultures) are similar in a number of ways. All three constructs describe individuals' relationships to their cultural environments, span multiple domains of life experience (language, activities), and are dynamic and constantly changing. However, of the three, ethnic identity requires constant endorsement: that is, ethnic minorities, especially New Zealand-born (NZ-born) Pacific people might be very orientated to New Zealand culture in terms of the customs and traditions he or she practices, but might not explicitly identify with being a New Zealander.

Studies of ethnic identity, acculturation and cultural orientation are important, firstly because they highlight and elucidate inter- and intra-group differences and secondly because they reveal the mechanisms/strategies of cultural influence in two ways: firstly, studying these constructs ensures that differences among groups are due to cultural variables, not just variables confounded with culture (e.g. socioeconomic status); and secondly, because these constructs' measures include multiple aspects of culture (e.g. language, social affiliation, and attitudes) they can illuminate the specific means by which cultural values, customs and norms are transmitted to and influence the individual.

## **Ethnic identity**

Ethnic identity can influence the way an individual perceives the actions of others (Operario and Fiske, 2001), values (Gaines et al., 1997), and worldviews (Cross, 1978). The impact of ethnic identity and ethnicity also has importance at structural and societal levels such as socio-economic disparities and health (Barnett, Pearce and Moon, 2005). However, concepts of identity can vary between individuals and groups, in addition to individuals varying in the strength of their identification with their ethnic groups.

Often described as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255), ethnic identity has also been defined by Phinney (1990) as self-identification with a particular ethnic group from which one gains a sense of belonging, together with positive attitudes towards one's group and participation in social activities and cultural practice.

Ethnic identity can be assessed through a variety of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Focusing on quantitative techniques, scales to assess cultural and ethnic identity are very frequently used in the social sciences. There are a variety of scales in use, ranging from those that can be used across groups, to those that are designed to be ethnic-specific. For instance, the Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM: Phinney, 1992; Phinney and Ong, 2007) measures ethnic identity as a general phenomenon across groups. There is good evidence to support the cross-cultural validity of the MEIM (Lee and Yoo, 2004; Ponterrotto et al., 2003; Worrell, 2000) and for that reason it is one of the most widely used measures in ethnic identity research.

Whilst the MEIM allows for comparisons of ethnic identity across groups, other measures provide a platform for ethnic-specific assessment. One example is the Multi-Dimensional Model of Maori Identity and Cultural Engagement (MMM-ICE: Houkamau and Sibley, 2010a; 2015). The MMM-ICE combines Western notions of the self-concept and Maori ideas of "being Maori" (Houkaumu & Sibley, 2010a: 10) to provide a robust assessment of various domains of Maori cultural and ethnic identity, including spirituality, socio-political consciousness and active identity engagement.

In a similar vein, Manuela and Sibley (2013; 2015) developed the Pacific Identity and Wellbeing Scale (PIWBS) as a tool designed specifically for Pacific peoples in New Zealand. The PIWBS was developed by drawing parallels between Pacific and psychological literature on identity and well-being to provide a tool that assesses domains of family, society,

religiosity, ethnic pride, belonging and cultural practices. A unique aspect of the PIWBS is its attempt to align itself with models of Pacific health and well-being that highlight holism.

Other tools geared towards Pacific populations adopt an acculturative framework. The Pacific Islands Families Study has adapted the General Ethnicity Questionnaire (GEQ; Tsai, Ying and Lee, 2000) as a way to assess cultural orientation towards New Zealand and Pacific cultures. Modifications made to the GEQ and included questions related to language, social affiliation, activities, daily living, food, contact with Pacific family members and attendance at church. Although the GEQ is particularly focused on sociocultural aspects of cultural identity and acculturation (Schluter, Tautolo, and Paterson, 2011), it provides useful information about Pacific communities that may be difficult to capture with other tools.

The measures of ethnic identity highlighted above show the range in which quantitative ethnic research can be conducted. Some measures assess ethnic identity more generally (e.g. MEIM, Phinney and Ong, 2007) whilst others assess ethnic identity from the vantage point of specific ethnic groups (e.g. Manuela and Sibley, 2015). These diverse measures come with advantages and disadvantages in ethnic identity research. This is not a critique of their psychometric properties, but rather the theoretical foundation that informs how the measures can be used. For instance, the MEIM provides a useful tool for comparisons of ethnic identity across ethnic groups, due to its assessment of ethnic identity as a universal aspect. It can be used with specific ethnic groups, but is not capable of assessing some of the more nuanced aspects of those groups. Other measures developed for specific groups, such as the PIWBS, provide information on both general aspects of ethnic identity and unique aspects associated with that group. It draws upon models of Pacific health and incorporates aspects of cultural values that are common across Pacific groups. In this sense such measures can provide information for intra-cultural research, but are limited in their ability to draw comparisons with other ethnic groups due to their specific focus.

## **Well-being**

Well-being is concerned with an individual's appraisal of his or her own life in a positive manner. It is a complex construct with a complex nature, and it is because of this complexity that there is no single agreed-upon definition (International Wellbeing Group, 2006). Well-being is often associated with quality of life, positive and negative affect, happiness, life satisfaction and domain satisfactions (Diener, 2006). Other closely related constructs include self-esteem.

Quantitative measures have also been used very frequently in psychological research on well-being. For instance, the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin, 1985) is a five-item scale that measures life satisfaction as an overall judgment of one's life. The SWLS is narrowly focused to assess global satisfaction; however, it does not focus on any specific life domain, and it assumes that individuals integrate domains to provide a global assessment according to their own standards (Diener et al., 1985; Pavot and Diener, 1993). It can be uncertain as to which domains individuals are using to evaluate their satisfaction with their lives.

The International Wellbeing Index (IWI) covers two broad categories of national and personal well-being (Cummins, Eckersley, Pallant, van Vugt, and Misajon, 2003). Within the IWI are two subscales:

- a) The National Wellbeing Index (NWI), which asks individuals to focus on the nation they live in and rate their satisfaction with their nation's economic situation, natural environment, social conditions, government, business and national security.
- b) The Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI), which assesses satisfaction with one's standard of living, personal health, achieving in life, personal relationships, personal safety, community connectedness, and future security. The PWI has been shown to have good cross-cultural validity (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft and Lawson, 2008; Houkamau and Sibley, 2010b; Lau, Cummins and McPherson, 2005).

The varying degrees to which well-being can be assessed, global to domain specific, highlight the inherent nature of well-being's subjectivity. This can be critical for well-being research within ethnic groups, particularly if some groups hold some domains which have greater importance than others. Likewise, it is important to consider that culturally-nuanced understandings of well-being may be missed under more global measures of well-being. Nonetheless, support for cross-cultural validity in well-being measures is indicative of their utility with cross-cultural and perhaps intra-cultural research.

### **The relationship between ethnic identity and well-being**

There is a well-established relationship between ethnic identity and well-being. A meta-analysis of 184 studies of people of colour in North America found an overall positive relationship between the two constructs ( $r = .17$ ; Smith and Silva, 2011). The analysis showed that the ethnic identity/well-being relationship remained modest (as other factors also mediate well-being) but consistent across gender, race, education level and socio-economic status.

Studies comparing well-being across ethnic groups often show ethnic minorities reporting lower levels of well-being relative to majority groups. For instance, Pakeha generally scored higher than Maori on measures of personal and national well-being (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft and Lawson, 2008). In another study on national and personal well-being, Sibley, Harre, Hover, and Houkamau (2010) reported that national well-being decreased for both Maori and Pakeha between 2005 and 2009, during the global financial crisis of that time. Furthermore, personal well-being decreased during that time period for Maori, but not for Pakeha. The disparity in personal well-being was attributed to material advantages that Pakeha had that may have protected personal well-being during the global financial crisis.

Comparisons of well-being across groups draw attention to how different groups are affected by various factors such as the economy, conflict, and in the face of negative experiences such as discrimination and prejudice. However, comparisons across groups may benefit from additional measures that assess the influence of other factors. For example, when assessing well-being across different ethnic groups, it will be useful to include a measure of ethnic identity, as members of particular ethnic groups may not have the same

level of identification with their ethnic groups. Given the generally positive relationship between ethnic identity and well-being, it is imperative to consider the influence that ethnic identity can have on the relationship between psychological stressors and well-being.

Given the positive relationship between ethnic identity and well-being, it has been assumed that there may be a causal relationship between the two (Ponterotto and Park-Taylor, 2007) and thus ethnic identity may buffer against psychological stressors such as discrimination (Mossakowski, 2003). Other studies have found that ethnic identity may exacerbate the negative effects of discrimination (Yoo and Lee, 2008). These mixed findings indicate the complexity of ethnic identity's relationship to well-being, which may be further confounded by contextual, situational and personal characteristics. However, there is growing evidence in support of the protective role of ethnic identity for Pacific groups.

McCubbin and McCubbin (2005) suggest that identity and culture can either independently or in combination with other factors moderate or mediate recovery of families following trauma. For example, the authors noted how the cultures of many families (e.g. Hispanic, Native American, Hawaiian) can influence traumatic experiences associated with death, and how these cultural beliefs help families cope with such traumatic experiences. McCubbin's 2003 study of native Hawaiian adolescents showed that ethnic identity served as a protective factor that promoted well-being. In addition, he found that pressures such as discrimination and other factors such as language, dance and traditions deepened Hawaiian adolescents' sense of identity, and concluded that such stressors can make historical discrimination more salient and, in the process, may increase a sense of belonging with their group.

Other studies have also highlighted the importance of Pacific group cultures in trauma recovery for Samoans following a tsunami disaster (Seiuli, Nikora, Te Awekotuku, and Hodgetts, 2016) and mental health service delivery (Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave, and Bush, 2005). These studies point to how identity and well-being are understood within these communities, providing important new directions for research.

### **Pacific perspectives of health and well-being**

Pacific perspectives of health and well-being suggest that well-being is viewed holistically. This sheds light on how important it is to take cultural and ethnic identity perspectives into account when researching identity. For example, the Fonofale model of health (Ministry of Health, 1995) depicts a dynamic, interactive and holistic Samoan model of health that can inform well-being. It is presented as a fale (house) that serves as a metaphor for the interrelated concepts of health important for Pacific peoples. These include aspects of family (the foundation for Pacific Island cultures), culture, beliefs and cultural values (represented as the roof) and four pou (posts) that represent the spiritual, physical, mental and 'other' aspects of well-being, all encapsulated within a cocoon with three dimensions representing the environment, time and context, which symbolize the non-static nature of well-being. The Fonofale model is a dynamic model that takes into consideration dimensions that may be better suited to Pacific peoples in a holistic manner.

In addition, Kupa's (2009) Te Vaka Atafaga model supports holistic mental health practice with Tokelau people. It draws on core Pacific values similarly identified by the Fonofale model, but also incorporates cultural values important for Tokelau peoples that contribute to well-being. For example, the concept of 'Inati, the sharing of resources, is included within the model to highlight cultural values that encourage well-being on a collective level. Models such as Fonofale and Te Vaka Atafaga highlight the cultural variability within the well-being framework, with the Te Vaka Atafaga model going further in highlighting the heterogeneity within Pacific cultures. The Pacific models highlight the importance of including cultural and ethnic identities into consideration when researching well-being.

Anae's 'teu le va'<sup>1</sup> paradigm (2016), which focuses on the centrality of valuing, nurturing and 'acting on' the reciprocal relational spaces of interaction during the research process for optimal outcomes for all stakeholders in health and well-being settings, highlights the need to incorporate both cultural and ethnic identities for robust research processes, and to value and nurture research relationships with all stakeholders in order to enhance Pacific well-being outcomes (see also Anae, 2013). 'Teu le va' thus provides an over-arching paradigm which encapsulates the various models above, for example, the Fonofale and Te Vaka Atafaga models provide methodologies for how to 'teu le va' for Samoan and Tokelauan peoples respectively.

### **The saliency of ethnic identity for well-being of Pacific youth in education**

Education is often seen as a predictor of economic well-being in later life by providing greater opportunity to find higher-paid employment, which may influence well-being (Diener, 1993). Exploring identity within education is also important because many ethnic minority adolescents must contend with developing their own ethnic/cultural identity in New Zealand's social milieu, often with a large amount of time spent in an educational setting. Currently in New Zealand, Maori and Pacific youth are underachieving in the education system. This pattern of minority group students underachieving can also be found internationally (Warikoo & Carter, 2009). By exploring the relationship of ethnic identity within education, it is possible to see how ethnic identity and the issues surrounding it may influence academic achievement.

That there is a difference in educational achievement amongst minority and majority groups is widely known. However, this is not to assume that ethnic minorities do not have strong educational aspirations. For Pacific youth in New Zealand, research from the Youth2000 dataset showed that Pasifika students had high aspirations for education, and also displayed a strong sense of identification with their ethnicity (Mila-Schaaf, Robinson, Schaaf, Denny, and Watson, 2008). In spite of knowledge of the importance of education, and a desire of minority groups to succeed in education, this does not yet provide a possible explanation for the differences in academic success between ethnic groups.

Some international research has offered some explanations. For underachievement outcomes for minority ethnic groups, some posit a mistrust of the education system and

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<sup>1</sup> Literally 'to value/nurture/look after the relational spaces between people, people and things, people and the environment, people and the cosmos

teachers (Irving and Hudley, 2008); others point to acculturation and discrimination for a negative experiences of education (Guyll, Madon, Prieto, and Scherr, 2010) where phenomena such as self-fulfilling prophecies, stereotype-based beliefs, stigma consciousness and stereotyping lead to differential treatment and biased perceptions, which may ultimately lead to lower academic achievement for ethnic minorities.

Nevertheless, in the face of disparities in educational achievement, there are minority group members who do experience highly positive educational outcomes, and research suggests ethnic identity can give strength to individuals within education. A study by Wong, Eccles and Sameroff (2003) found a positive relationship between school grades and ethnic identity for young African American students, and evidence to suggest that identity provided a buffer against perceived discrimination from teachers and peers. Data from the Youth2000 study (Mila-Schaaf et al., 2008) show that for Pasifika students, variables including pride in ethnic identity, cultural values, language efficacy, and feelings of acceptance and economic prosperity were associated with higher educational outcomes. In addition, a study by Fairburn-Dunlop (2010) showed evidence that some Pacific secondary school students involved in a Polynesian cultural group performed better on literacy and numeracy tests, completed a higher number of NCEA credits, and that involvement in the group may have encouraged retention. These studies highlight the importance of the relationship between ethnic identity and education, and the possible benefits gained from one's ethnic identity.

A possible explanation for the academic success of some statistically disadvantaged groups are the successful navigation at the interface of two different cultural worlds (Okagaki, Helling and Bingham, 2009), and how strong ethnic identification positively influences academic success (Kalavite, 2010). Kalavite's participants expressed how they viewed themselves as being successful when there was a mutual understanding, respect and expression of both Tongan and New Zealand cultures (academically and socially) and proposed that academic achievement was nestled in their abilities to cope and negotiate at the interface of both Tongan and New Zealand cultures through relationships formed with bureaucracy, family, church and communities.

In 2002, a study was carried out to gather qualitative information on the actual and perceived barriers to participation in tertiary education and training programmes for Pacific peoples (Anae, Anderson, Benseman, and Coxon, 2002). The study had a particular mission to develop an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of Pacific communities, in order to inform future policies aimed at addressing barriers to Pacific people's participation in tertiary education and training. Of the over 100 Pacific students who were interviewed, many described their ability to succeed in the education system in very negative terms and had adopted significant self-blame attitudes, but one of the most significant findings was that factors relating to ethnicity were found to be both inhibitive and supportive. That is, some participants viewed their roles and obligations as family members as reasons for failure, whereas others viewed these same factors as reasons for their success. Other valuable findings were that issues relating to language and the framing of settling systems for island-born students, interaction between schools and Pacific ethnic communities and the distinction between New Zealand and island-born students were seen as issues for attention (Anae et al., 2002: 132).

From the studies reviewed here, some common themes emerge. Education is viewed as important and as a tool for social mobility within society (Diener, 1993; Warikoo and Carter, 2009; Mila-Schaaf, Robinson, Schaaf, Denny and Watson, 2008; Wong, Eccles and Sameroff, 2003; Anae, Anderson, Benseman and Coxon, 2002). In spite of lower rates of academic achievement, those who identify closely with their ethnic group have strong aspirations for academic achievement. In some cases, ethnic identity draws strength when facing challenges, and this can be used to the individual's advantage to navigate successfully between cultural worlds. However this may be more prevalent in individuals just past adolescence, who have a greater sense of who they are and, possibly, greater cultural capital.

### ***Injustice***

Like other aspects of cross-cultural studies, when justice is considered the focus has tended to be on comparisons across groups, instead of looking at the role ethnic identity can play in the sector. Statistics in New Zealand consistently show that Maori and Pacific populations are over-represented in crime and in the prison populations (Department of Corrections, 2007).

Societal culture may explain in part why there are higher rates of people from ethnic minorities in prisons. Crutchfield and Pettinicchio (2009) proposed cultures of inequality may, in part, explain the overpopulation of ethnic minorities in prisons and that the presence of marginalized ethnic groups increases a society's tolerance of inequality, which can in turn increase preferences for punitive criminal justice practices (thus maintaining a dominant or majority group's position). Processes that maintain social hierarchy and influence criminal justice for ethnic minorities may explain, in part, differential imprisonment rates. Public perceptions of justice and ethnic identity also shed some light on the differential imprisonment rate across groups.

In New Zealand, a longitudinal study by Marie, Fergusson and Boden (2009b) looked at criminal offending within the participants' cohort, by examining how Maori cultural identity, in conjunction with other socioeconomic factors, predicted criminal offending in New Zealand. The cohort was grouped into Maori, Maori/Other and non-Maori. The findings show that non-Maori had the lowest risk of offending, followed by sole Maori, with Maori/Other showing the highest risk. When controlling and adjusting for social factors, the strength of the links were lessened and it was shown that Maori and non-Maori had similar risks of offending, whilst Maori/Other still had the highest risk. It was suggested that the link between ethnic identity and crime might be mediated by social and other factors. There was also a suggestion that a compromised cultural identity might encourage offending. The finding that non-Maori also showed some risk of offending similar to those who identified as only Maori suggested that perhaps a secure cultural identity may be important for the relationship between the two. Whether or not this is true is not clear, as the results of this cohort study are not likely to be generalizable. In addition, sociocultural indicators of cultural identity, as opposed to more widely used ethnic identity measurements, were used. Further research can explore this area.



There have been efforts to include aspects of cultural and ethnic identity as a means for interventions and the rehabilitation of prisoners. In a critique of Maori and criminal offending, Marie (2010) suggests a “wishing well approach” has been utilized by the Department of Corrections in New Zealand in response to the theory that overrepresentation of Maori in crime statistics is an outcome of impaired cultural identity stemming from colonization. Marie (2010) suggests that attempts to utilize cultural identity in rehabilitation programmes, while well meaning, are based on little empirical evidence and have done little to benefit Maori, and the focus of such efforts should be on social factors such as deprived SES and individual adversity. Marie’s (2010) critique deemphasizes the influence of ethnic and cultural identity in addressing the situation of Maori in crime. However, current initiatives that have a cultural influence are showing some positive results.

A report by the Department of Corrections (2009) evaluated a Maori Focus Unit (MFU) and Maori Therapeutic Programme. Although the report did not assess identity within the programmes and the evaluation, the MFU places focus on Maori cultural principles and encourages offenders to embrace Maori cultural values, identity and affiliations through activities that include courses on Maori culture, language, rituals and ceremonies. It is expected that participants will internalize cultural values, which will lead to the development of a motivation for a future in pro-social activities. There were overall positive results and change in participants, who reported a strengthened cultural identity and improved relationships, and psychometric data indicated some positive change to thinking patterns. Other programmes overseas that incorporate cultural aspects have also found promising results (Wolf, Graziano and Hartney, 2009). The findings from this evaluation support the idea that a strong cultural environment can lead to positive changes in negative behaviour. It is not explicitly apparent if any changes occurred to participants’ ethnic identity; however, the findings do show that there is some evidence of a positive relationship.

In summary, there is evidence to suggest that societal structure and societal culture may inform social processes and endorsement of policies and practices that could affect differential ethnic imprisonment rates. There is some suggestion that individuals may take into account the social context of people from ethnic minorities who commit crime, stemming from historical discrimination. However this does not seem to have alleviated the different rates of imprisonment, and the possibility of social desirability cannot be ignored. Further, there is evidence to suggest that ethnic identity and culture may have positive benefits for rehabilitation and encouraging pro-social behaviour and that a sense of belonging and a positive self-concept informed by culture may influence one to represent one’s ethnic group through pro-social behaviour.

### ***In religious centrality***

Manuela and Sibley’s (2013) research project was set up to understand outcomes for Pacific peoples in New Zealand and the need to further our psychological knowledge of the relationship between Pacific identity and well-being. In order to do this, Manuela and Sibley mapped the hierarchical organization of Pacific identity and well-being using a novel top-down factor analytic approach applied to the Pacific Identity and Wellbeing Scale (PIWBS; N = 586). Analyses indicated that Pacific identity experiences were organized within two broad dimensions – reflecting *Identity Engagement* and *Cultural Wellbeing*. Critically, their

analysis showed that *Religious Centrality and Embeddedness* emerged jointly from these dual broad domains. Their study is very significant and highlights the Religious Centrality and Embeddedness (RCE) factor as a bridging link between identity and well-being.

Subsequent analyses have also shown that RCE has a unique, direct association with increased reports of anxiety and depressive symptoms. This association occurs whilst controlling for demographic, identity and well-being variables. These analyses also show that other identity and well-being factors are associated with lower reports of anxiety and depressive symptoms. Whilst this highlights an interesting relationship between religiosity and ethnic identity on the one hand, and psychological distress on the other, more research is needed to understand the psychological mechanisms and social factors underlying this association.

Anae's qualitative research on NZ-born Samoan identity journeys similarly describes the centrality of the church as a microcosm of Samoan identity and a 'battleground of change'. The pivotal relationship between ethnic identity and well-being and the bridging of these two constructs of 'religious identification' for Pacific youth provided by both Manuela and Sibley's psychological and quantitative constructs and Anae's anthropological and qualitative constructs (1998) thus provide extremely strong empirical evidence that of all the factors which make up one's ethnic identity, the religion factor, however it is defined, perceived and experienced by Pacific youth, may be causing the most psychological stress and the most prohibitive factor for the well-being of Pacific youth. This deserves our urgent attention and warrants an important new research direction. Tiatia (1998) has asked the question whether the "Church is friend or foe?" and has highlighted spirituality as a factor in her suicide prevention research; Anae's research has described ethnic identity confusion as exacerbated by the entanglement of culture/religion, church/Christianity; and now Manuela and Sibley have indicated that the religion factor may cause the most psychological stress. This must be our new research direction.

Whether 'religion' is defined by our Pacific youth denominationally, theologically, as a search for spirituality, as Christianity, or even as a hankering after indigenous religious beliefs in order to contextualize Christianity, research must be carried out to explore their perceptions and experiences of religion in order to ensure that our Pacific youth are fully aware of and are secure in their ethnic identities.

### ***In mental health***

Te Rau Hinengaro: The New Zealand Mental Health Survey (Wells, Oakley-Browne, and Scott, 2006) reports that Maori and Pacific peoples have a higher prevalence of mental disorders than the total New Zealand population. It is possible that Western influences within the mental health sector are not meeting the cultural needs of Maori and Pacific people. Attempts to account for these differences look at the influence of ethnic identity in mental health.

Studies show that ethnic identity can provide a protective buffer for mental health. It has been suggested that ethnic identity may provide individuals with coping resources that can be utilized to diminish negative experiences associated with ethnic identity (e.g.

discrimination, racism: Phinney, 1991). Crocker and Major (1989) provide an extensive review of self-protective strategies individuals may employ to protect their self-esteem, such as attributing negative feedback to prejudice against their group, comparing personal outcomes with similar rather than dissimilar others, and selectively choosing dimensions on which an individual and their group may excel on. Their work goes against a seemingly intuitive theory that negative experiences will have a negative impact on individuals. How this relationship may occur has been researched in relation to mental health.

International literature on ethnic minorities has shown a positive relationship between ethnic identity and mental health symptoms (Bhui et al., 2005; Mossokowski, 2003; Umana-Taylor and Updegraff, 2007; Veling, Hoek, Wiersma, and Mackenbach, 2010). Most of these studies suggest that ethnic identity may provide a buffer, but exactly how this occurs is not entirely agreed upon. It is most likely that the sense of belonging and positive self-concepts gained from ethnic identity provides individuals with coping mechanisms and resilience. It is also likely that expressing one's ethnicity decreases acculturative stress and associated psychological distress.

As in the section on ethnic identity and well-being, in contrast to the idea of ethnic identity acting as a protective factor for mental health, a number of studies have found the opposite (Hovey, Kim and Seligman, 2006; Smith and Silva, 2011; Smokowski and Bacallao, 2007). These findings lend support to the notion that an increased ethnic or cultural identity may increase negative experiences related to ethnic identity that may have a detrimental effect on mental health.

A possible explanation for the variation in findings in the relationship between ethnic identity and mental health could be the point of life or context that an individual is in. Theories of identity development suggest that in the younger stages of life, individuals are still in the process of discovering, exploration and defining what their ethnic identity means to them (Anae, 1998; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 2002). In addition, it is suggested that as individuals get older, their ethnic identity becomes more stable and secure (Anae, 1998; Marcia, 2002; Phinney, 1990). A study by Torres and Ong (2010) showed evidence that for those who were in a stage of ethnic identity exploration, discrimination seemed to be intensified and had a greater negative impact on mental health. However, for those who had a committed ethnic identity, their identity appeared to act as a protective buffer against discrimination. It was suggested that younger individuals were at greater risk of experiencing depressive symptoms as older individuals were more likely to have developed more effective strategies over time (see Anae (1998) and her notion of 'secured identities'). Yip, Gee and Takeuchi (2008) found similar effects of age on the relationship between racial discrimination and psychological distress. The influence of life stages and ethnic identity exploration on mental health is also advanced by Greig (2003), who suggests that consideration of mental health patients should take the individual's status in terms of their ethnic identity into account in mental health practice.

In addition to the influence of age on the relationship between ethnic identity and mental health, social context may also have an important role. A study by Kokaua and Wells (2009) showed that there was a higher prevalence of mental disorder amongst Cook Islanders born in New Zealand compared to those born in the Cook Islands. It was suggested that the effect of birth place and early exposure to New Zealand society may be associated with higher

mental disorder rates. Marie et al. (2009a) found in a longitudinal cohort that Maori and Maori/Other participants had higher rates of mental disorder than non-Maori, and suggest that the higher rates of mental disorder for Maori were explained by social disadvantages and other risk factors that were more pronounced. Marie and colleagues (ibid.) go further to suggest that the effects of social disadvantage may be modified by cultural identity where sole Maori fared better than Maori/Other.

These studies highlight the complexity of the relationship between ethnic identity and mental health, and the need to take aspects of birth place, acculturation, and socioeconomic factors into consideration.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored constructs used to assess ethnic identity and well-being, and has reviewed studies that have looked at the relationship between these two constructs across the sectors of education, justice, religious centrality and mental health. While these sectors have been explored in this paper/ there are other inter-related identities which need attention, such as gender (identity, sexism), sexual orientation, and the centrality of family. The use of quantitative and qualitative constructs such as the ones reviewed here provide researchers with a means and the necessity to explore such important relationships. However the variations in the constructs and tools need to be responsive to the variations in how ethnic groups define themselves.

Overall, there appear to be two major ideas on the relationship between ethnic identity and well-being. The first is that ethnic identity can provide individuals with protection and buffer the influences of negative experiences on well-being. The literature provides a strong body of evidence for this idea. A strong ethnic identity has also been shown to be beneficial in education, and shows signs of promise for rehabilitative programmes in the justice sector.

The second major idea is that ethnic identity may exacerbate negative experiences, which can have a detrimental effect on well-being. There is evidence to suggest that some negative outcomes can be observed in education through phenomena related to ethnic identity (such as stereotypes). However there is a greater weight of evidence that ethnic identity is a protective factor for Pacific peoples. In relation to mental health, Torres and Ong (2010) break ethnic identity down into ethnic identity and exploration and ethnic identity commitment in relation to mental health, suggesting an interesting idea that could potentially account for the differences in these two main ideas. They posit that ethnic identity may both negatively *and* positively affect well-being, although at differing times and differing stages in ethnic identity development. Using the metaphor of a 'journey', Anae has also pointed out the significance of age development and life experience as a buffer to 'ethnic identity confusion' in the culmination of a 'secured identity' for many NZ-born Samoans (1998).

In this paper the authors wish to encourage researchers, in particular those using quantitative methods, to include measures of ethnic identity within their studies. We argue that comparative studies of ethnic groups can be enhanced by modelling the influence of ethnic identity on key life outcomes. To this end, there are measures that assess ethnic

identity as a general construct that are useful for comparative research directions. In addition, there are measures that assess ethnic identity with special focus on unique qualities of ethnic groups for intra-cultural research. The inclusion of ethnic identity measures will provide more detailed evidence for explaining ethnic disparities and the potential for ethnic enhancement programmes. It is possible that the magnitude of the effect of ethnic identity on well-being outcomes may be minimal; however, if there are positive associations, they would most likely have important ramifications in practical terms for policy formation and service delivery across the sectors of education, justice, religious centrality and mental health, in highlighting the saliency of ethnic identity for the well-being of Pacific youth.

Pacific youth in New Zealand grow up in a variety of cultural, social and environmental settings and the concepts of health, mental health and well-being in New Zealand society are diverse and complex. Added to this complexity are the diverse inter- and intra-ethnic considerations that cut across dimensions of age, class, gender and socioeconomic status.

Research shows that Pacific youth are at crisis point not only in terms of all socioeconomic indicators, but also mental health and unintentional and intentional risk-taking statistics. More careful attention and analysis regarding Pacific peoples in New Zealand undergoing change are necessary, but solutions to complex issues are not always to be found immediately. If however, researchers and professionals and communities in crisis can work together in a collaborative relationship, and if policy-makers are responsive, then there are ways in which the situation in New Zealand can be improved in practical terms. This paper provides unequivocal evidence that there is a strong relationship between ethnic identity and well-being and that some factors such as centrality of religion are able to mediate this relationship. While there is a plethora of existing Pacific community initiatives across the spectrum of social services which provide *cultural* enhancement programmes (learning the language, culture, music, dance, arts and crafts), the evidence provided here points out the need for *ethnic* enhancements – that is programmes for Pacific youth which acknowledge the different needs of the two cohorts ( island-born and NZ-born) and which excavate Pacific colonial histories, Pacific ontologies and epistemologies and how Pacific indigenous knowledges are ways to navigate their contemporary realities. For island-born Pacific peoples, integration programmes are necessary to inform integration into New Zealand mainstream life; for the NZ-born cohort, programmes are needed which inform their Pacific heritage and pride in the negotiation of their present realities.

Bearing in mind that ethnic identity may both be the buffer and cause of anxiety and/or stress there must be careful negotiation and attention paid to contexts of individuals and groups when developing programmes and initiatives. More specifically attention must be paid to Pacific demographics, especially, for example, for NZ-born/island-born, gender, status, cohort, and generational considerations. In short, what is needed is that:

- In existing community *cultural* enhancement programmes, a more cohesive collaborative and consolidated approach inform external relationships with mainstream groups (i.e. *ethnic* enhancement education is needed).
- In education, *ethnic* enhancement programmes must be anchored in primary and secondary school Pacific Studies curricula (languages, islands/islanders in New Zealand

histories, cultures, indigenous cultural references). Such programmes need to be supported by dynamic student mentors, and in secondary schools the ASB PolyFest<sup>2</sup> cultural performances can become an evaluative tool for aspects of this curriculum.

- In Churches, a space is needed for NZ-borns to negotiate their ethnic, acculturation and cultural orientation experiences. The stewardship of Christianity and culture is in the hands of our Church leaders. It is they who must now be brave enough to focus on *ethnic* enhancements to contextualize our indigenous points of difference with the New Zealand mainstream, that is, the excavation of our ancient indigenous religious beliefs, and cultural references in order to contextualize Christianity for our Pacific youth, thereby starting the process of enlightenment for our future generations.
- In prisons, a Pacific Studies curriculum (languages, islands/islanders in New Zealand histories, cultures, performing arts, and mentors) inform rehabilitation processes, and reduce recidivism.
- In mental health programmes, opportunities are provided to practise social skills, fostering orienteering towards the future, appropriate vocational support, a focus on individuals skills and strengths; cultural interventions such as language classes, programmes promoting Pacific ethnic history and culture, opportunities to practice cultural skills

The suggestions for negotiating spaces for Pacific youth and for future research directions proposed in this paper aim to be part of a collaborative relationship with academic researchers, policy-makers, service-delivery groups, schools, Churches and Pacific communities, given the need to understand the saliency of a secured ethnic identity for the well-being of Pacific youth and their families in New Zealand and the need to find solutions for these complex issues. This will mark the beginning of dynamic research and scholarship that illustrates the multiple contexts in which the well-being of Pacific youth is situated and negotiated.

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<sup>2</sup> Auckland Savings Bank has sponsored this festival over the last 42 years. ASB Polyfest is an iconic Auckland festival which features Pacific traditional music, dance, costume and speech by secondary school students. It is an important showcase of New Zealand's diverse cultures and a celebration of youth performance. The festival is the largest Maori and Pacific Islands festival in the world.

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