# Belonging in Australia not Turkey:  the sense of belonging for Turkish Australians living in Sydney

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**Abstract**
Sense of belonging and friendship are important aspects in ethnic identity. As such, the study explored the relationship between the sense of belonging and friendship of young Turkish Australian females in embracing their ethnic identity. Data was obtained from five young Turkish Australian females living in Sydney through two rounds of face to face interviews. The first round was semi-structured interviews while the second, after a month gap, was exploratory type of interviews to yield rich data. The analyses indicated deeper understanding of ethnic identity among the young participants through the sense of belonging and friendships developed. Inevitably other components of ethnic identity were found to be interwoven with the two, contributing significant roles in depicting the participants' ethnic identity.

**Keywords***: Ethnic identity, Australian Muslims, Turkish-Australians, sense of belonging, friendship.

## 1.    Introduction

The definition of ethnic identity is reflected on how an individual relates to an ethnic group or groups based on the similarities in values, social behaviours and beliefs. This study was designed to comprehend how sense of belonging and friendship contribute to the feeling of belonging in an Australian environment for the Turkish Australian females living in Sydney, Australia.

Dandy andPe-Pua (2010) assert that discussions on issues related to immigration and cultural diversity have often been important for the Australians. The burst acts of terrorism caused by Muslim extremist organisations as defined by Western countries in particular, have led to masses of uproar for Australian Muslims. Hence, as the first major Muslim group to migrate to Australia, the Turkish Australians are useful subjects in understanding how these individuals develop their ethnic identity in Australian multicultural society.

Numerous studies have looked into the psychological importance of ethnic identity and the difficulties of various ethnic groups in understanding their ethnicity (Nesdale andMak, 2003; Ramsay, 2001; Luke and Carrington, 2000). Because the Turkish immigrants and current Australian citizens have come into contact for a long time, the role of ethnic identity is pertinent to this study. It is important to investigate how the younger generation of Turkish Australian females develop their ethnic identity in this immigrated country.

In a parallel note, one of the ways for an individual to develop his or her ethnic identity is through the feeling of belonging. In achieving this, friendships have become one of the means to establish a sense of belonging within a community. Studies have revealed that the more sense of belonging is achieved, the more likely immigrants are able to adapt with their host community (Nesdale andMak, 2003). This investigation, therefore, aims to explore the relationship between the sense of belonging and friendship of young Turkish Australian females and its contribution to their understanding of ethnic identity.

This study was designed to determine the relationship of sense of belonging and friendship in an Australian environment for young Turkish Australian females. For that, two research inquiries were posed in steering the investigation of the study i.e.

1.    Does sense of belonging contribute to the understanding of ethnic identity among the young Turkish Australian females?
2.    How does friendship impact on sense of belonging?

*1.1 Ethnic Identity*

Ethnic identity revolves around attitudes, feelings, self-image and the extent of belonging in a society by an individual (Ting-Toomey, Yee-Jung, Shapiro, Garcia, Wright andOetzel, 2000; Liu, 2010).  Other markers that determine ethnic identity are related to values, experiences, mother tongue and cultural traditions and place of birth (Zevallos, 2008).  Hence, ethnic identity is a very complex concept and this alone indicates that no single definition of ethnic identity can be established (Ruhil andDaing, 2011).  In fact, what becomes more important is the ability to identify the components of ethnic identity to better understand the topic.

Subsequently, various components of ethnic identity have been identified by different researchers. The most commonly identified components are sense of belonging, language, religious affiliation

and cultural beliefs and customs (Nesdale andMak, 2003; Papademetre, 1994; Keceliand Cahill, 1998). Narrowing the scope of the study, two identified variables namely 'belonging' and 'friendship' are the components that will be illustrated in relation to ethnic identity establishment.

### 1.1.1 Sense of belonging

Sense of belonging is an important component of ethnic identity as it distinguishes a person from other ethnic groups. Nesdale andMak (2003) who investigated the psychological consequences of immigration among a variety of immigrant groups to Australia revealed that the smaller the cultural distance, the more likely immigrants are to live like their host community. This also connotes the greater the sense of belonging as the higher an immigrant's self-esteem was likely to be. Both ethnic and personal self-esteem were shown to be psychologically important to immigrants. The study concluded that most New Zealanders are accepted by Australians and had more Australian friends than did most of the other groups studied. Similarly, New Zealanders also revealed higher levels of self-efficacy and personal self-esteem than did most of the other groups. Their ability to speak English has warranted a greater sense of belonging within the host community.

Conversely, Asian immigrants particularly Hong Kong Chinese and Vietnamese respondents preferred to be more involved with members of their own ethnic groups. These immigrants demonstrated greater intra-group attachment in terms of seeking advice, help and recreation with members of their own ethnic origins (Keceli and Cahill, 1998).

Bouma and Brace-Govan (2000) studied the role of women in a religious settlement and the negotiation of religious diversity. The religious settlement allows an individual to practise their religion within the confines of another society with different religious beliefs. On the other, negotiation of religious diversity allows individuals to adapt and accept the religion of others. One young Lebanese woman in the study who shared her experience of identity confusion during her school years stated that

> *I was mocked at school and labelled a 'wog'. I wanted so badly to fit in with the new way of life, my school friends and be Australian. However no matter how hard I tried I was never accepted as such. I felt then I was stripped from my culture, my heritage, my identity. I was confused as to what I wanted to be: an Australian, a Muslim or a Lebanese? This period went on for a long time in my schooling years (p. 168).*

This is indicative of the respondent not achieving a sense of belonging during her schooling. This also specifies that the essentiality of sense of belonging for a person to understand their ethnic identity. Although the study concentrated on religious settlement among Muslims and Buddhist migrants to Australia, clearly achieving a sense of belonging determined how this young woman was self-identified.

### 1.1.2 Friendship

Friendship and in-group marriage have been found to be significant in studies investigating ethnic identity. Keceli and Cahill (1998) conducted interviews with 70 second-generation Turkish respondents aged between 20-32 years from different suburbs in the Melbourne metropolitan area. One of the criteria for each respondent selected was that they were either born in Australia or had migrated to Australia before the age of seven. It is specifically important that all the respondents had their formal education and socialisation in Australia. Despite the central aim of the study which

was to look into aspects of ethnic inequality, the participants were identified to be "*subjected to considerable degrees of generalised cultural stereotypes' during their schooling*" (Keceli and Cahill: 211). The participants reported selecting school friends based on shared ethnic background because it provides more commonality. The practice had intensified the cultural of stereotyping which in turn, increased the degree to which the Turkish students 'stuck together.' The finding proves how choice of friends or friendship impacts ethnic identity. It also exposes how friendship groups can be a channel for ethnic self-identification, albeit in response to a negative practice like cultural stereo-typing.

## 2.      Method

### 2.1 Participants

This qualitative study used purposive sampling to ensure rich data were obtained. As such, the selection criteria of the interviewees were the immigrants who was born in Australia, attended Australian public school (to ensure the participants have engaged with the culture of the Australian majority), females (since this is not a gender differential study) and provide consent to be interviewed (the willingness to share experiences and contribute for maximum quality and quantity of data). Snowball sampling was also exercised in reaching potential participants for the study.

Saturation was used as a guiding principle during the data collection. Since the purpose is to maximise the richness of the information collated, "the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new samples units" (Lincoln andGuba, 1985: 202). Therefore, the size of the participants was determined after the fifth sample; when redundancy of the data had emerged (Mason, 2010). A total of five Turkish Australian female participants aged 17 to 23 were identified as the primary source of data for the research.

### 2.2 Data Collection

The study exercises two types of facetoface interviewsas the research instrument in giving 'voice' to the participants (Talmy, 2010). The interviews were conducted in two rounds with each comprised of five individual interviewsat a location of the participants' choice. The first rounds employed semi structured interviews based on topics covered in a study by Papadametre (1994). The adapted topics cover two main aspects i.e. personal information and medium of communication. The personal information involves educational qualifications, childhood experience and relationships with family members. Whilst, medium of communication comprises questions related to language used with family members, friends and neighbours and at social events with relatives and friends. The second round used exploratory type of interviews in gaining further understanding of what was not elaborated in the first sessions. This second round of interviews took place nearly a month after the first session. The second interviews probed elaborations in yielding rich data particularly in relation to belonging and friendship based on the participants' individual response of the first interview. Also, the second session allows for content validation of the information obtained during the first interview, via cross checking. The individual interviews lasted approximately an hour.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

The analyses were targeted to explore the five Turkish Australian females' experiences in embracing their ethnic identity through the sense of belonging and friendship. The interviews used English as a medium. It was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim upon the completion of each interview session for detailed analysis. The interview transcripts were scrutinised to search for any

patterns and themes related to the ethnic identity through a process called coding. Tesch's (1990) eight steps approach of coding and categorising the themes were applied accordingly. The two main themes were 'belonging' and 'friendship.' All the participants were asked to view the transcripts but none omitted any data. Privacy pseudonyms were applied to identify the tapes and when analysing the transcribed data.

## 3.    Results
### 3.1    Sense of belonging
Achieving a sense of belonging is essentially important for a person to understand their ethnic identity.  Some of the important aspect of sense of belonging is the ability to belong in a society that either shares the same language, religion or culture. In this study, the five participants expressed their difficulties in achieving this sense of belonging if they were not confined in a Turkish community. For instance, Amina stated that;

> *My whole life I was sort of guided around the Turkish culture and the Turkish community. I was always in the same society like there wouldn't be a day without me being around people [Turks] that I've never seen.  It's always the same people [Turks] and to the age of 12 we were in Melbourne and then when I moved to Sydney for a year it was the same culture again.*

Another participant, Eda, further explained that,

> *In high school I attended X College where there's a lot of people I could relate to that were more from my background… relate to as in similar morals and values and similar culture.*

This supports Liu (2011) who claims that individuals felt an emotional attachment and sense of belonging when they share common traditions, values and beliefs. The matter is concurred by findings from Farisha who was used to the environment in Melbourne where a lot of Turks can be found. Eda echoed similarly, feeling a sense of belonging with her friends when they share "*similar morals, values and culture.*" With that she added,

> *Schooling years for me was a really interesting experience because my primary years I spent going to a public school and there wasn't, well I think there was one Turkish person there that I could relate to.*

The findings were agreeable with most of the present studies. It is believed that a sense of belonging is transparent when there are similar morals, values and culture shared in the community. The evidences were found in Farisha's situation when she went to "*Islamic school we celebrate the same things and we know what's going on and it was easier*" and in Eda's experience when she was around her circle of friends that share a "*similar culture*" with her.

However, the study identified some sense of alienation at some stages of the participants' life that had caused some difficulties to the participants in developing the sense of belonging.  For example Sadia, faced some difficulties when she went to a public school, stating that "*I couldn't adapt to them as easily as I could adapt to my Turkish friends.*" This is predictable as there were more Lebanese girls in the school. Another instance is from Farisha when she was in Queensland. She

"*didn't have much Turkish friends*" so she had "*difficulties in just communicating with them. It was very different you'd feel like an alien to the environment*". This is relatedtoEda, who found it hard to go to a public school due to her inability to communicate in English in which in her casehad led tofurther alienation.

> *When I went to school I didn't know much English and I felt that it was really hard to communicate with students...but it was always different because I had festive days and no one knew about it but me. So I sort of felt a bit out of place and they were going on about its Easter...I sort of felt a bit left out.*

The wearing of *hijab* had also caused them to feel alienated. The participants reported feeling shy when there was no other Muslims who wore it. The instance can be found in the conversation with Amina who claimed that she felt "*paranoid*" because of other people's perceptions toward her. She felt "*like aliens to the people there because we [she and her mother] have the hijab on.*" However, her main concern was self-perceived; not so much of the effect caused by other people when she said;

> *I hate to say this but sometimes maybe I'm not self-confident with the hijab...I couldn't speak, the guys wouldn't speak to you because it's like you're an alien*

Eda faced similar difficulties in Year 9 at a public secondary school when she wore the *hijab*. She explained "*it bothered me and that's why I took it off … but now I get that sort of treatment (being mistreated) and it doesn't bother me at all*." There is a clear inference in this statement that Eda was singled out for negative attention by the other students because of her *hijab*. At that stage of her life, it appears that she was unable to cope with this attention and thus made a concession to the majority culture.Farishacarried on describing the pressure of her experience when she was in a public school:

> *They used to say "what's that on your head, why do you wear it"? You can't fully explain it and if you do they won't understand; they're still young"*

This contradicts Bouma and Brace-Govan's (2000) study on the role of women in religious settlement that allows an individual to practice their religion within the confines of another society with other religious beliefs.This reveals that Farisha did not receive the same treatment as the stated study.

Sara, on the other, faced some problems that are related to her cultural background. She was teased by other students during her primary years because of the different food that she consumed.

> *They would say things like wogs and they would tease me because of the food I ate because obviously people from the western cultures had differences.*

Likewise, the participants expressed the identical feeling of alienation when they visited Turkey. Sadia admitted this in her conversation.

> *I went to Turkey and it was very different, I found that I was very different to the typical Turkish person there…I found that my Australian culture does come through...I find it difficult to get used to people who are from Turkey.*

Conversely, the quest to embrace the sense of belonging has sparked challenges among the participants. They admitted feeling alienated due to their cultural (Sara), religion (Eda) and barriers in communicating (Eda and Farisha). Interestingly, the feeling of being alienated has been found to be more self-perceived rather than as a result of treatments from the community. It had affected the participants' self-esteem (Amina and Eda) and abiding reaction (in the case of *hijab*) in accommodating to the community i.e. the sense of belonging. The feeling lingered even when they were in Turkish soil depicting a 'neither here, nor there' situation for the young ladies.

*3.2      Friendship*

Most of the participants believed that there was a need in making friends with people of the same ethnic group. Sara for example, indicated a preference of making friends with the "*same cultural background*" peers because she felt the need to share "*everything*" in common with them.  She remarked an especially enjoyable schooling experience at a school run by Turkish Australians.

> *Everything, literally everything, from food to jokes from the language just similar views, ideas we could relate to each other...it was just similar, like we were all the same...not many people who were different from the norms of the culture.*

The findings from Farisha signified a similar experience where it is "*easier*" to have friends from the same ethnic background because she "*had a lot of difficulties explaining some stuffs*" to people who do not know Turkish. For example,

> *Having Turkish friends is a big difference because it's not like you don't trust non-Turks but you don't feel comfortable speaking to them about some stuffs.  But when I went to a Turkish school it was easier for me because we can get along really good like joke around; speaking and everything.*

> *If you're going to explain a joke in Turkish it's funny, but when you translate into English it makes no sense and it's not funny.*

It made a difference for Farisha when she used to go to a school run by Turkish Australians because "*it was the same thing, religion and culture*" which made her more aware of her "*cultural background a bit better.*"

A different finding had been detected in the case of Sadia. The young lady did not express a specific preference when it comes to making friends, although she faced difficulties because "*Turkish, there weren't any in that school.*" She chose to be friended with everyone and maintained a positive relationship with non-Turkish peers.

> *As for friendships I've got friends who are Christians, who are Anglo-Saxon, Indian, you know, don't really bother me because they're friends and as long as they are a good person so that hasn't really made that much of a difference.*

Sadia on the other hand, was more futuristic when emphasising the need to marry someone who shares the same culture as her; having a Turkish background and brought up in similar ways.

Friendship to her was not a priority. Apparently, Sadia was not alone in this. All other participants expressed similar essentiality when it comes to marriage. Amina concurred this in the following.

> *If I married someone from Turkey it'd be a bit of a hassle because we won't be able to get along as well. Seeing my parents' marriage that's what I'm taking out of it…the problems like language was a problem; my mum not knowing her way around. I mean small things come up like even now like after 20 years of marriage it's still coming up for things like this but small things add to big problems so that's why I'd say someone more like me, someone with a more Australian-Turkish culture, a bit of both.*

As for Sadia, she explained,

> *If I was to get married…I'd have to be with someone who's got my culture because it'll be very difficult to get used to their culture and I feel that my Turkish culture will come through inevitably. So that, if I was to meet someone who's Australian Anglo-Saxon with their culture unless they were raised in similar ways to me I find it hard to assimilate and adapt to that person, and I think that's why I would prefer to be with someone who's most similar to me in their culture.*

As well as Eda who justified that,

> *I've seen people…Turkish people that had gone and married someone from a totally different cultural back ground and it's been really hard on the kids. And I think it's slack to put your kids through that…the kids can't communicate with their grandparents, grandparents can't communicate with their grandkids. Not only that the kids sort of feel torn between two cultures and then they think "hold on, who am I?" And they go and try to figure out what culture they sort of belong to.*

The data gathered from all the interviews had a mutual agreement on the importance of making friends with people from the same ethnic group. Doubtless, the friends who were from the same ethnic group shared common understanding as compared to those who were of different ethnic groups. This is concurrent with Ullah (1987) whose study highlighted the need to be more involved with members of own ethnic group for self-identity determination. Nevertheless, it is interesting to divulge into the participants' greater concern which is in relation to marriage. This connotes a more mature thinking from some of the participants despite the lesser priority in selecting friends.

### 4.    Discussion

Having a sense of belonging is clearly essential to feel an attachment to an ethnic group or groups. All the participants experienced feelings of alienation during the early days of their schooling in the public system mostly because they did not have friends from the same ethnic background.  All indicated that they felt a greater sense of belonging at secondary school if they were other Turkish Muslim girls there.  Like the respondents in Keceliand Cahill's (1998) study, the participants reported selecting school friends who shared their ethnic background because they had more in common. Especially important was the opportunity to discuss and share religious and cultural celebrations.  With these commonalities a sense of belonging was later on achieved and thus an understanding of ethnic identity was also present.

While all participants interact in a variety of socio-cultural contexts now in their post-compulsory school lives, they continue to feel a greater sense of belonging with Australian Turkish people who share their cultural and religious background. These findings support Nesdale and Mak (2003) who found that the greater the cultural distance between the host community and the immigrant groups; the greater the immigrant intra-group attachment was likely to be. However, it is worth noting that the participants in the present study were at least first generation Australians, not recent immigrants. Thus, it seems that the importance of ethnic attachment in the achievement of a sense of belonging does not necessarily diminish amongst later generations of immigrants.

Having the same ethnic background of friends allows a greater opportunity to share a lot of things (i.e. religion, culture) which were in common. This in turn becomes one of the reasons behind the choices made in building friendships. While not all the participants stated friendship preferences, the need to share religion, culture and language led to definite preferences for in-group marriage. This supports the crucial role of cultural attachment in representing ethnic identity (Ruhil andDaing, 2011).

Simultaneously, friendship and sense of belonging were also influenced by cultural beliefs and customs, and religious affiliation. While the research of others has attempted to isolate one component of ethnic identity for investigation (*see*Papademetre, 1994;Keceliand Cahill 1998), the study inadvertently discloses the influences of other components of ethnic identity, intertwined with the sense of belonging and friendship in depicting ethnic identity among the five young Turkish Australian females living in Sydney.

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