

Confused or Multicultural:

A Phenomenological Analysis of the Self-Perception of Third Culture Kids  
with Regard to their Cultural Identity.

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By  
Andrea M. Moore

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Thesis Committee

Gina G. Barker, Ph.D., Chairperson

Terri L. Cornwell, Ph.D

Clifford E. Kelly, Ph.D.

Dedication

Johnnie, you are my love and my life.

We are two hearts that beat as one.

### Acknowledgments

Almost two years ago, I embarked on a journey with a goal to obtain a master's degree in Communication. I had no idea how life changing this experience would be. I began my coursework with no idea of what my master's thesis would be. In my very first semester, I had the privilege of taking a class entitled, Intercultural Communication, and that was where I first came across the term Third Culture Kids. Little did I know over the next year and a half I would follow a path of discovery that would carry me to opportunities far beyond this thesis. The subject of Third Culture Kids has, in some measure, become the subject of a corner of my life.

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### Abstract

This study investigated whether Third Culture Kids, defined as people who lived in a country other than their passport country during their developmental years, perceived that their cross-cultural experiences during childhood produced in them a sense of confused cultural identity or a multicultural identity and whether they are able to successfully alternate between their two or more cultural identities and achieve intercultural communication competency in multiple cultures. Existing literature on TCKs focuses on the negative aspects of a life on the move and does not view TCKs in light of having a multicultural identity or multiple cultural identities. This study employed a qualitative data collection method known as biographical phenomenology and consisted of 19 participants. Results showed that TCKs are more apt to possess multiple cultural identities or a multicultural identity instead of a confused cultural identity and that, in turn, this may affect their sense of belonging. Additionally, results indicated that TCKs are able to successfully alternate between cultural identities and competently communicate interculturally.

*Keywords:* third culture kids, third culture, intercultural communication, cultural identity, multiculturalism, multicultural identity, multiple cultural identities, intercultural communication competence.

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## Chapter One

### *Introduction*

McLuhan (1962) correctly foresaw the world changing into a “global village.” Developments in transportation and communication technology have been rapidly removing geographical barriers. As a result, the world is becoming more and more interwoven and interdependent in every aspect of social and business life.

The mass media also play an important role in providing social perception of globalization. For example, at the brink of every New Year, television networks broadcast the various events of New Year’s Eve all over the world, from East to West, from the Northern to the Southern poles, by live coverage. Viewers are able to see events in opposite ends of the world as closely as local celebrations. The term globalization is not only an expression to portray the trend of our era, but also the dominant logic affecting our daily lives.

Globalization, together with increasing and changing modes of communication, has brought about significant changes in the development and experiences of children and young people. Many families now move from one country to the next and the children are subjected to a wide variety of different cultures and experiences. The fact that so many parents choose to provide their children with an international education is a testimony to the enriching effects of a life on the move.

Several terms have been given to these internationally mobile children and adolescents such as cultural hybrids (Bhabha, 1994), third culture kids (Useem, Donoghue, & Useem, 1963), global nomads (McCaig, 1992), and cultural chameleons (McCaig, 1996; Smith, 1996). For the purpose of this research, the term *third culture kids (TCKs)* will be employed, a term used for children and adults alike. This term was first coined by sociologist Ruth Hill Useem in the 1960s and she defined it as follows: “TCKs” is a term that “describes young people raised in a country

other than that of their parents. They blend the culture of their passport country with their country of residence and become truly multicultural, often finding it easier to relate to others who have lived abroad than to those who have stayed close to their roots” (Useem & Downie, 1976, p. 103).

Since that time, the world has continued to develop and many families travel outside of their home country independently, as well as with multinational corporations and organizations, including government, military, or missionary organizations. In addition, millions of immigrants and refugees leave their home for another country every year. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2009, the foreign-born population of the United States was 38.5 million residents, representing 12.5 percent of the total population (Grieco & Trevelyan, 2010). As globalization proceeds, people have many more opportunities to interact with these “international partners, people from different national cultures” (Roberts, 1993, p. 64) in their daily lives than ever before.

Eakin (1998) estimated that there might be over 4 million TCKs worldwide. Taken into consideration that this estimate was from over a decade ago, it is safe to assume that this number has grown significantly since then.

Due to the increased number of TCKs, research has also increased considerably in this arena. Pollock and Van Reken (1999) have documented the experiences of TCKs in a significant and well known book and their definition of TCKs is now widely utilized:

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 builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each

culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background (p. 19).

However, much of what has been written in this field focuses on the negative effects of a lifestyle of constant change and mobility. Since these children live abroad during their developmental years, their sense of identity, relationships with others, and view of the world are still being formed in the most basic ways while being shaped according to the different cultures with which they interact. Therefore, according to some researchers, the greatest challenges that TCKs face are in forming their sense of identity and a sense of belonging (Bennett, 1993; Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999b). When people travel to different cultures as adults, they may experience culture shock, but they likely already have a sense of who they are and where they belong. The difference between adults who travel internationally and TCKs is that TCKs move between cultures before they have had the opportunity to complete the critical task of personal and cultural identity development (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

Recent research reveals that most TCKs either have a multiple sense of belonging or no sense of belonging at all (Fail et al., 2004). They may have moved so many times, attended so many different schools, and lived in so many different places that they feel at home everywhere and/or nowhere (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999b). Cockburn (2002) suggested that a common means of identifying the TCK is asking the question, "Where do you come from?" TCKs usually struggle with this question and immediately move to the thought, "Do they want the long or the short story?" (p. 479).

TCKs also often experience the feeling of cultural marginality, in which they do not belong to either their home or host culture because the individual is on the edge of his or her

cultural foundation (Gaw, 2007). TCKs may face challenges in moving from one country to another due to different languages and cultural practices, attitudes, and beliefs. They may be expected to deal with such things as culture shock, transitioning difficulties, being without cultural anchors and losing friends and mentors when they or someone close to them moves. According to Gilbert (2008), all of these challenges involve loss, including the loss of people, places, and possessions and may therefore lead to unresolved grief.

There are, however, researchers who also explicitly promote multiculturalism, an ideology that “is partly based on the idea that an individual can successfully hold two or more cultural identities” (Baker, 2001, p. 402). Adler (1977) envisioned the “multicultural man” as someone whose identity has become international because it is not static, but rather an identity that is fluid, mobile and open to change and variation (p. 38).

Sparrow (2000) illustrated the concept of shifting identities according to the need of the moment. A multicultural person knows how to foster multiple cultural identities and maintain a multicultural coexistence in order to be cross-culturally competent (Chen & Starosta, 2004; Adler, 1977; Boulding, 1988).

A similar concept is that of biculturalism. According to LaFromboise et al. (1993), second culture acquisition can lead to the development of bicultural competence; this competency is marked by knowledge of cultural beliefs and values of both cultures, a positive attitude toward both groups, and intercultural communication competency, among others.

Yet another similar concept, presented by Heyward (2002), is that of intercultural literacy. Due to their understanding and awareness of more than one culture, the intercultural literate individuals are able to consciously shift between multiple cultural identities and to feel and communicate from the standpoint of the insider.

Despite this emerging area of research on multiculturalism, biculturalism and intercultural literacy, these terms are rarely applied to Third Culture Kids. Multiculturalism has been applied in the broader context of international students (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000) but not directly to TCKs.

One can generalize about TCKs: they have experienced life overseas, outside of their home cultures and comfort zones, and feel that their lives have been enriched by the many diverse experiences they have had. Most of these people understand that they now possess a three-dimensional worldview, and have become more flexible in their thinking and communication skills as a result of the many transitions they have made. The typical TCKs appreciate diversity and multiculturalism, and find life in a place where everyone is the same: boring. They tend to be more mature than many of their peers, comfortable with adults and self-confident. As a result of living in new and changing environments, they often develop an active and curious mind (Grappo, 2008).

As Pollock (1984) wrote, “With an abundance of experiences and a view of the world far beyond his counterparts in the United States, the TCK ought to take his place as a leader both in his home country and in the international community” (p. 17). In order for TCKs to succeed in adulthood, they must discover the potential within themselves and maximize those potentials in an advantageous way for themselves.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate whether adult Third Culture Kids around the world perceive that their cross-cultural experiences have primarily produced in them a sense of confused identity, as previous research on TCKs indicates, or a sense of multiculturalism, the idea that an individual can successfully hold two or more cultural identities, and be competent to

communicate in multiple cultures, not just to get by as the TCK literature suggests, but as insiders who truly feel at home in more than one culture.

A study that analyzes Third Culture Kids in light of multiculturalism is important for several reasons. First, these two areas of research already exist but have not been merged together. Second, perhaps most TCKs do not suffer from a sense of confused identity but actually benefit from holding two or more cultural identities. This research could benefit not only future studies in the area of intercultural communication, multiculturalism, and TCKs, but also international schools, parents, missionary organizations, multinational corporations, and anyone who interacts with TCKs on a regular basis.

Additionally, the results of this study may have even broader applications in the field of intercultural communication. Weaver (1996) made the following statement in the preface of his book on culture, communication and conflict: “The more we know about the dynamics of cross-culture communication, adjustment and conflict the more effective we will be while living, working or studying in another culture” (p. xv).

Ting-Toomey (1999) added urgency to the need for intercultural understanding which is gained from studying the lived experiences of people willing to share their intercultural experiences. The following statement explains her beliefs concerning understanding diverse backgrounds, “As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a growing sense of urgency that we need to increase our understanding of people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. From interpersonal misunderstandings to intercultural conflicts, frictions exist with and between cultures” (p. 3). Ting-Toomey explained that due to rapid changes in technology, the global economic scene, immigration practices and policies, and improved transportations, the world is shrinking. As a result, people from different cultural backgrounds are in constant contact. She

concluded with the following statement: “From workplace to classroom diversity, different cultural beliefs, values, and communication styles are here to stay. In order to achieve effective intercultural communication, we have to learn to manage differences flexibly and mindfully” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 3).

Finally, Jackson (1999) enlarged the meaning of personal identity as it relates to race and culture, stating, “In the forthcoming century the only thing that is certain to me is that our greatest challenge as a nation will be that of identity” (p. xiii). Jackson argued that understanding the lived experiences of third culture people as related to intercultural communication would advance knowledge on what it means to be a third culture person.

This study looked at the past and current literature on intercultural adaptation, cultural identity, Third Culture Kids, and multiculturalism seen from a perspective of intercultural communication (Chapter Two). Thereafter, the researcher employed a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews to study the perceptions of TCKs in regards to identity, multiculturalism, and intercultural communication competence (Chapter Three). The results of this analysis (Chapter Four) and the interpretations (Chapter Five) either introduce a new branch of study for TCKs or confirm what has been indicated by past research.

## Chapter Two

### *Literature Review*

Since this study falls within the field of intercultural communication, first it was important to give a brief summary of this area of study along with a definition of culture to establish context. Then it was necessary to define cultural adaptation and acculturation since they are the foundation of becoming both a TCK and a multicultural person. Then the researcher introduces the concept of cultural identity because of the centrality of this concept to both TCKs and multiculturals, and briefly highlights identity and identity formation. Following that, the researcher presents the literature on Third Culture Kids and multiculturalism.

### **Intercultural Communication**

Intercultural communication generally is conceptualized as communication between people from different national cultures. Communication may be defined as the process by which information is exchanged among two or more social systems (Barnett, 1997). Therefore intercultural communication should focus on the exchange of information among two or more cultural systems embedded within a common environment that results in the reduction of uncertainty about the future behavior of the other system through an increase in understanding of the other social group (Gudykunst, Yang, & Nishida, 1985).

Asuncion-Lande (1990) defined intercultural communication as the “process of symbolic interaction involving individuals or groups who possess recognized cultural differences in perception and behavior that will significantly affect the manner, the form, and the outcome of the encounter” (p. 211). In order to facilitate intercultural communication, the blending of cultural identities is necessary. There are, however, several elements that could prevent effective

intercultural communication, such as, language barriers, stereotypes, dissimilarities, anxiety, and insufficient cultural understanding (Jandt, 2004).

In order to better understand this exchange of communication between people from different cultures, it is important to define the term “culture.” This has always been a difficult term to define; Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) discussed more than 160 definitions of the term “culture,” but for the purpose of this study, culture will be defined as “the learned and shared behavior of a community of interacting human beings” (Useem, Useem, & Donoghue, 1963, p. 196). In essence, culture is not just the elements surrounding an individual, but it also determines who the individual will become. Through interpersonal relationships and affirmation from within one’s culture, one forms his or her self-perception. Intercultural communication is thus the exchange of symbolic information between individuals belonging to well-defined groups with significantly different cultures.

Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) assert that motivation and knowledge of the other culture are essential for competent intercultural communication. This competence allows the visitor a capability to adjust and also gives him or her a greater understanding of the host culture that surrounds the individual.

Communication competence also includes an individual's effectiveness in communicating ideas and feelings to members of a given culture, both verbally and nonverbally. Language competency, in fact, may be a major building block of bicultural competence. As Northover (1988) suggested, “Each of a bilingual's languages is the mediator between differing cultural identities within one and the same person” (p. 207). As such, bicultural communication competency involves one's ability to communicate in a situationally appropriate and effective manner as one interacts in each culture. This can be applied to language or behavior.

As Chen and Starosta (2004) described it, “A productive and successful communication among diversities demands an individual to cultivate himself or herself to develop a multicultural mindset which provides a ground for the individual to further pursue, through intercultural education and training, the abilities of intercultural communication competence” (p. 14).

### **Intercultural Adaptation**

Matsumoto, Yoo, and La Roux (2007) stated, “Intercultural experience is comprised of continuous adaptation and adjustments to the differences with which we engage each day” (p. 5). Adaptation, as studied by intercultural scholar Kim (2002), is described as the “process by which individuals upon relocating into an unfamiliar cultural environment, establish (or reestablish) and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment” (p. 260). Haslberger (2005), a researcher in this particular field, explained, “Cross-cultural adaptation is a complex process in which a person becomes capable of functioning effectively in a culture other than the one he or she was originally socialized in” (p. 85).

Immigrant groups, as well as individual immigrants, arrive in a new country with differing attitudes about retaining their culture of origin and becoming part of the new society (Phinney et al., 2001). Below are highlighted three processes of adaptation.

The activity of intercultural communication and new cultural learning is the essence of acculturation, that is, the acquisition of the new cultural practices in wide-ranging areas, including the learning of a new language. Acculturation brings about a development of cognitive complexity, or the structural refinement in an individual’s internal information-processing ability with respect to the target culture. An equally significant aspect of acculturation is the acquisition of new cultural aesthetic and emotional sensibilities, from a new way of appreciating beauty, fun, joy, as well as despair, anger, and the like. Acculturative learning does not occur randomly or

automatically following intercultural contacts and exposures. New cultural elements are not simply added to prior internal conditions. Rather, it is a process over which each individual has a degree of freedom or control, based on his or her predispositions, pre-existing needs and interests (Kim, 2008).

The acculturation model also implies that the individual, while becoming a competent participant in the majority culture, will always be identified as a member of the minority culture. Two-dimensional models of acculturation, based largely on the work of Berry (1990, 1997), recognize that the two dominant aspects of acculturation, namely, the preservation of one's heritage culture and adaptation to the host society, are conceptually distinct and can vary independently (Liebkind, 2001). The model highlights the fact that acculturation proceeds in diverse ways and that it is not necessary for immigrants to give up their culture of origin in order to adapt to the new society.

Acculturation is a two-dimensional process, in which the acculturating individual undergoes two independent processes of acculturation, one to the culture of origin and one to the new host culture (Berry, Trimble, & Olmedo, 1986; Mendoza, 1984; Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980). Thus, it is possible for an acculturating individual to be highly acculturated to either both or neither culture, resulting in four possible acculturative styles of assimilation, separation, marginalization, and biculturalism-integrations (Birman, 1994).

Results from a later study done by Birman (1998) suggest that "acculturation to both the culture of origin as well as the American culture was useful for the immigrants in different life situations" (p. 348). This study also found that immigrant individuals' feeling of self worth and competence increased due to an ability to draw on two cultural repertoires.

A second model of acculturation known as the alternation model assumes that it is possible for an individual to know and understand two different cultures. It also supposes that an individual can alter his or her behavior to fit a particular social context (LaFromboise et al., 1993). As Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi (1986) have argued, "It is possible and acceptable to participate in two different cultures or to use two different languages, perhaps for different purposes, by alternating one's behavior according to the situation" (p. 89). Ramirez (1984) also alluded to the use of different problem-solving, coping, human relational, communication, and incentive motivational styles, depending on the demands of the social context. Furthermore, the alternation model assumes that it is possible for an individual to have a sense of belonging in two cultures without compromising his or her sense of cultural identity.

The alternation model suggests that it is possible to maintain a positive relationship with both cultures without having to choose between them and it does not assume a hierarchical relationship between two cultures. Within this framework, it is possible for the individual to assign equal status to the two cultures, even if he or she does not value or prefer them equally.

This model is an additive model of cultural acquisition parallel to the code-switching theories found in the research on bilingualism. Saville-Troike (1981) called this code switching the "sensitive process of signaling different social and contextual relations through language" (p. 3). This implies that individuals learning to alternate their behavior to fit into the cultures in which they are involved will be less stressed and less anxious than those who are undergoing the process of acculturation or assimilation (LaFromboise et al., 1993).

Another model for explaining the psychological state of a person living within two cultures is the assimilation model, which assumes an ongoing process of absorption into the culture that is perceived as dominant or more desirable. Ruiz (1981) emphasized that the goal of

the assimilation process is to become socially accepted by members of the target culture as a person moves through these stages. The underlying assumption of all assimilation models is that a member of one culture loses his or her original cultural identity as he or she acquires a new identity in a second culture. This model leads to the hypothesis that an individual will suffer from a sense of alienation and isolation until he or she has been accepted and perceives that acceptance within the new culture (Johnston, 1976; Sung, 1985). In short, assimilation is the process by which an individual develops a new cultural identity and loses his or her cultural identity to his or her country of origin.

In the midst of international mobility comes what is commonly known as “culture shock,” or the stress of adaptation to a new culture, which often includes a sense of isolation, a loss of friends and status, fear of rejection, lack of identity or role definition (Hill, 2006; Westwood, Lawrence, & Paul, 1986). This transitory process comes at different degrees of difficulty for each individual, influenced by previous experience, available support, and degree of similarity with the new culture (Westwood, et al., 1986).

Less frequently expected is what is known as “reverse culture shock” or the re-adjustment to the home culture after living in a foreign environment, which leads to many of the same difficulties faced when entering a foreign culture (Gaw, 2000; Westwood, et al., 1986). Hervey’s (2009) study looked for correlations between the pattern of transitions during childhood and the success in adjustment into college for Missionary Kids (MKs), a subgroup of TCKs. It was discovered that those who had more negative experiences in earlier transitions would find adjustment to college more difficult. Hervey’s study confirmed the need for support in the transition process (Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999a).

Of the three models described above, acculturation, alternation, and assimilation, the alternation model best describes the multicultural TCK because it encourages high contact with culture of origin, high loyalty to culture of origin, high involvement with culture of origin, high acceptance by members of culture of origin, high contact with the second culture, high affiliation with the second culture, and high acceptance by members of the second culture (LaFromboise et al., 1993). In this model, the individual never loses his or her cultural identity but learns a new one and is able to successfully alternate between the two.

### **Cultural Identity**

Cultural identity is believed to be an important factor in determining how one person relates to another person in society. Awareness of various different views of the self and understanding how third cultures are developed through communication is beneficial for understanding and managing cross-cultural adaptation (Timmons, 2004).

Samovar and Porter (1982) defined cultural identity as “The symbol of one’s essential experience of oneself as it incorporates the worldview, value system, attitudes and beliefs of a group with whom such elements are shared. The center, or core of cultural identity, is the image of the self and the culture intertwined in the individual’s total conception of reality” (p. 392).

Cultural identity is an important part of a person. Casmir (1984), building on Samovar and Porter’s definition, defined cultural identity as “the image of the self and the culture intertwined in the individual’s total conception of reality,” (p. 2) and went on to stress that the “process of becoming man takes place in an interrelationship with a perceived environment” (Casmir, 1984, p. 2). This identity is formed through an understanding of the culture’s symbols, meanings, and code of conduct, as well as perceiving acceptance within this framework (Collier & Thomas, 1988). In essence, “culture” is not just surrounding an individual, but also determines

who the individual will become. Through interpersonal relationships and affirmation from within one's culture, one forms his or her self-perception.

According to Adler (1977), cultural identity cannot be separated from a person's existence and that cultural identity is "the symbol of one's essential experience of oneself as it incorporates the worldview, value system, attitudes, and beliefs of a group with which such elements are shared" (p. 230). Collier and Thomas (1988) presented an interpretive theory of how cultural identities are managed in intercultural interactions. Their theory on cultural identity is articulated in six assumptions, five axioms, and one theorem. The assumptions are that (1) individuals "negotiate multiple identities in discourse"; (2) intercultural communication occurs by the "discursive assumption and avowal of differing cultural identities"; (3) intercultural communication competence involves managing meaning coherently and engaging in rule following (i.e., appropriate) and outcomes that are positive (i.e., effective); (4) intercultural communication competence involves negotiating "multiple meanings, rules, and positive outcomes"; (5) intercultural communication competence involves validating cultural identities; and (6) cultural identities vary as a function of scope, salience, and intensity. This theory is a substantive theory that provides insight into the Intercultural Communication Competence Theory.

Intercultural Communication Competence involves the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures. Competent communication consists of behaviors that are regarded as effective and appropriate. Effective communication suggests that people are able to achieve desired personal outcomes. Appropriate communication entails the use of messages that are expected in a given context and actions that meet the expectations and demands of the situation. This criterion for communication

competence requires the interactant to demonstrate an understanding of the expectation for acceptable behavior in a given situation (Wiseman, 2003). Intercultural communication competence, according to Wiseman, “is not something innate within us, nor does it occur accidentally. Rather, there are necessary conditions that must exist before we are consciously and consistently competent in our intercultural actions” (p. 195). Spitzer and Cupach (1984) isolated three conditions: knowledge, motivation, and skills. Knowledge refers to our awareness or understanding of requisite information and actions to be interculturally competent. Motivation refers to the set of feelings, intentions, needs, and drives associated with the anticipation of or actual engagement in intercultural communication. Factors such as anxiety, perceived social distance, attraction, ethnocentrism, and prejudice can influence an individual’s decision to communicate with another. Skills refer to the actual performance of the behaviors felt to be effective and appropriate in the communication context. Competent intercultural communication requires all three components. These three components can be influenced by education, experience, and guided practice in such a way that people can learn to be competent intercultural communicators.

Kim (2008), however, challenged the idea of cultural identity by presenting a new theory that is intended primarily to explain the common adaptive experiences of individuals who are born and raised in one cultural or subcultural environment and have relocated to a new and different one for an extended length of time. Yet, the core concepts and the theoretical arguments are applicable to the broader context of the increasing intercultural communicative interface accompanying the process of globalization. Emerging from the experiences of acculturation, the adoption of the behavior patterns of the surrounding culture, deculturation, the loss or abandonment of culture or cultural characteristics, and the stress–adaptation–growth dynamic is

an emergence of *intercultural identity*—an open-ended, adaptive, and transformative self-other orientation. The concept, intercultural identity, highlights one of the well-known central maxims for all living systems, that is, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Ruben, 1972). It depicts a dynamic and integrative transformation of identity and, thus, is differentiated from other similar terms that represent various forms of additions and subtractions of specific cultural components such as bicultural, multicultural, multiethnic, and even hybrid identity.

### **Third Culture Kids**

One group that actively engages in intercultural communication during the span of their childhood and beyond is Third Culture Kids.

The term Third Culture Kid (TCK) was first coined by sociologist Ruth Hill Useem in the 1960s after spending a year on two separate occasions in India with her three children, in the early 1950s. Useem (1976) described how:

Although these children have grown up *in* foreign countries, they are not integral parts *of* those countries. When they come to their country of citizenship (some for the first time), they do not feel at home because they do not know the lingo or expectations of others – especially those of their own age. Where they feel most like themselves is in that interstitial culture, the third culture, which is created, shared, and carried by persons who are relating societies, or sections thereof, to each other. These children find themselves living in other countries because their fathers are missionaries, visiting professors and teachers, government representatives, employees of international and multinational corporations and financial institutions (p. 103).

In order to understand the TCK, it is important to define the term “third culture.” Useem, Useem and Donoghue (1963) described the “third culture” as a complex combination of an

individual's home culture and host culture (or host cultures), which amalgamated to form an individual third culture. The third culture is then reaffirmed and truly a "culture" when in association with other TCKs, who share similar backgrounds (p. 17).

The third culture is the intersection between the parents' culture, the child's passport culture if not the same as the parents', and the intercultural environment in which he or she develops. The result is a dynamic sense of cultural space, marked by mobility, multiculturalism, and marginality – an interstitial cultural milieu (Gaw, 2007).

This is resonant of Kramsch's (1993, p. 233) notion of "third place identities," which suggests a more positive view of the international student experience. Some students may feel that their values and behaviors do not fit with the stereotypical characteristics of their home culture. Instead, they may find that they are more comfortable occupying the "third place," which lies in between the cultural practices of home and abroad. There, unencumbered by the associations of particular nationalities, ethnicities or other groupings, they are able to forge alternate, self-affirming identities.

However, Useem and Useem's (1963) portrayal of TCKs has been criticized by scholars, most notably by Casmir (1993) who stated, "What they called 'third cultures,' result from poorly understood interactions between sojourners and members of their host cultures..." (p. 417). A more systematic definition was suggested by Casmir and Asuncion-Lande (1989): "In the conjoining of their separate cultures, a third culture, more inclusive than the original ones, is created, which both of them now share. Third culture is not merely the result of the fusion of the two or more separate entities, but also the product of the harmonization of composite parts into a coherent whole" (p. 294).

Pollock and Van Reken's (2001) book on the subject of Third Culture Kids not only popularized the subject but pointed out the two overarching realities of the TCK experience that shape the formation of a TCK's life: (1) Being raised in a genuinely cross-cultural world (instead of simply watching, studying, or analyzing other cultures, TCKs actually live in different cultural worlds as they travel back and forth between their home and host cultures); (2) Being raised in a highly mobile world. Mobility is normal for the third culture kid experience. Either the TCKs themselves or those around them are constantly coming or going. The people in their lives are always changing, and the backdrop of physical surroundings may often fluctuate as well.

Pollock and Van Reken (2001) discussed how, although the length of time needed for someone to become a true TCK can not be precisely defined, the time when it happens can. It must occur during the developmental years – from birth to eighteen years of age.

This is significant because the cross-cultural experience occurs during the years when that child's sense of identity, relationships with others, and view of the world are being formed in the most basic ways. Time by itself, however, does not determine how deep an impact the third culture experience has on the development of a particular child. Other variables such as the child's age, personality, and participation in the local culture have an important effect (p. 27).

Third Culture Kids inevitably are influenced by multiple cultural traditions. As such, and particularly when they return to their passport countries, they may experience themselves as culturally marginal. They typically will find that they do not fit into the cultural mainstream of the society that they have been raised to consider their own. They often find themselves to be hidden immigrants and experience themselves as terminally unique. However, the world in which we live today is no longer easily defined by either/-or. The complexities of an

interdependent human community increasingly are calling us to experience the both/and, and from that place of ambiguity and uncertainty to find a sense of home in the in-between (Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999).

In order to gain a better understanding of issues affecting the TCK, the construct of identity and sense of belonging will be further explored.

Some of the greatest challenges that TCKs face are in forming their sense of identity and sense of belonging (Bennett, 1993; Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999). For the past several decades, the notion of identity, in general, and cultural identity, in particular, have occupied a central place in social science research, most extensively in the United States. Systematic investigations of identity can be traced back to psychologist Erikson's (1950) theoretical framework. Erikson described the process of identity development as one in which the two identities—of the individual (or the personal) and of the group (or the social collective)—are merged into one. Erikson thus placed cultural identity at the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his or her common culture.

Josselson (1987) defined identity as: “The stable, consistent, and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world” (p. 10). Identity defines values, beliefs, and behavior, and influences our interactions with others. Our core identity, or inside self consists of personal attributes and characteristics, and our outside identity or facts of identity are easily named by others, such as race, gender, and nationality (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

The development of a child's self-concept or identity, which is not realizable outside the cultural context, is also well under way between the ages of 3 and 5. A classic child development study (Braga & Braga, 1975) demonstrated how an important part of learning self-confidence is learning to be proud of who you are. They suggested that children must never be made to feel

that what they learn in their cultural setting is any less (or any more) valuable than what is learned in other cultural settings.

Children are wonderfully adaptable in many ways to new environments. The younger a child is, the fainter on the psyche is his or her own culture's imprint, so the less it stands in the way of acquiring new cultural knowledge and attitudes. Young children are, in other words, very impressionable, but this mobile lifestyle can cause in the child a clouding of his or her cultural identity (Murphy, 2003).

When people travel to different cultures as adults, they may experience culture shock, but they likely already have a sense of who they are and where they belong (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). The difference between adults who travel and TCKs is that TCKs move between cultures before they have had the opportunity to complete the critical task of personal or cultural identity development (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

TCKs form a sense of personal and cultural identity the same way everyone else does – by catching it from the environment and cues around them (McCaig, 1994; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). However, TCKs catch many different cues, cultural rules, behavior, and values from the various cultures they have experienced. Finding a sense of identity becomes a difficult and confusing task.

The fact that so many parents choose to provide their children with an international education is testimony to the enriching effects of a life on the move. However, people who have experienced a mobile expatriate lifestyle during their childhood often report a feeling of confusion over their identity as individuals (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008). This identity confusion is largely because neither TCKs nor others understand who they are. They do not understand that, although deviant to the mainstream culture, they are essential to the transnational culture in

which they were raised, the third culture (Cottrell, 2006).

Cockburn (2002) explained how the question of “where is home?” is a difficult one for the TCK but when amongst other TCKs the recognition that all share this genuine lack of understanding of a traditional “home” provides relief (p. 479). Among children and adults in the supposed “home” country, TCKs are often seen to be strange and initially they may struggle to fit in, more so than in the country where they are so obviously out of place (i.e., adopted foreigner). As a result of their experiences, TCKs have a greater need to develop identity and a concept of “home” within their families and relationships.

Walters and Auton-Cuff (2009) explored how the lived experience of movement between multiple cultures influenced identity development in women. Transition was typical in the lives of the autobiographers and was a disruption in identity development because they often had to focus on surviving and adjusting rather than gaining a sense of who they were. Although the autobiographers felt different and as outsiders in many places, the women in this study found great comfort and refuge in their other TCK friends and it gave them meaning and identity.

The same concept was also confirmed in a study conducted by Peterson and Plamondon (2009); they discovered that despite diversity in TCK membership, interviewees talked about “the TCK experience” (p. 762) in a unified way, as if it were easier for them to connect to another TCK or sojourner than an American who had grown up in the United States. Interviewees all expressed the feeling that they were part of a special in-group. This study was useful and is pertinent to the present study because it highlights the sense of identity that all TCKs share although they may have grown up in extremely diverse cultures and contexts. Perhaps TCKs experience a confused identity in relation to a specific country but can share an identity with people who have had the same experience as them.

Gilbert (2008) explored the loss and grief experienced by third culture kids, both physical and emotional, including the loss of “who I thought I was” (p. 104). Gilbert also found grief over the loss of security, trust, and identity, a common trait among these individuals, based on the turbulence of transitions. This common trait is perhaps a side effect of the experience, but was common to each surveyed TCK. As with any child, the life TCKs experienced while living overseas feels normal to them. Without an external comparison, the life they have is what life should be, but looking back, TCKs affirm that liminality or ambiguity, in the form of being between identities, can be highly stressful and that TCKs may end up not knowing who they are, or how to be who they are, or even what that means.

Fail et al.’s (2004) research reveals that most TCKs either have a multiple sense of belonging or no sense of belonging at all. Interviewees spoke of how they used their experiences to their benefit and that they have a multiple sense of belonging in different places and an ability to adjust and fit in and enjoy the advantages of being a part and yet apart of and from a place. There is a certain ambivalence which does not necessarily disturb them but gives them a sense of being different from those around them. However, not all TCKs have benefited from this; many disclosed how there is an aspect of their lives in which they feel marginal to the mainstream, feel outsiders in the countries in which they are living, and have no real sense of belonging to their community.

They have moved so many times, attended so many different schools, and lived in so many different places that they feel at home everywhere and nowhere (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999). They feel rootless. Fail and colleagues suggest that a TCK’s sense of belonging may be connected to relationships with similar people rather than a geographical place.

Greenholtz and Kim (2009) introduced the idea of “cultural hybridity.” The central paradox of cultural hybridity that this research sets out to explore is that despite the perception that they fit seamlessly into any cultural context, cultural hybrids profess never to feel at home except with others who have the same type of lived experience.

Gleason (1970) examined where TCKs felt most at home. One third to one half of all his interviewees cited more than one country. Some say TCKs are at home everywhere and nowhere (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999; Useem, 1984; Wertsch, 1991), and that they are rootless (Bushong, 1988; Loewen, 1993; Pollock & Van Reken, 1999). Wertsch (1991) claimed military children are constantly haunted by never belonging anywhere and having no sense of home. She concluded that frequent geographical relocation has a long-lasting negative effect. Pollock and Van Reken (1999), however, suggest that TCKs can feel at home anywhere and they move regularly and make successful adjustments.

Sense of belonging affects our sense of who we are. It is during the formative years that a sense of belonging and a sense of identity are developed. These two concepts are closely related. Both identity and sense of belonging can elicit differing emotions and hold different meanings among different people; however it can be safely assumed that these are issues that most TCKs will face at one time or another (Fail et al., 2004).

### **Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism is a concept that “is partly based on the idea that an individual can successfully hold two or more cultural identities” (Baker, 2001, p. 402). Adler (1977) characterized the experience of what he called “multicultural man.” His article was an important think piece for the field of intercultural communication. His articulate description of a “new kind of man,” who might “embody the attributes and characteristics that prepare him to serve as a

facilitator and catalyst for contacts between cultures” (Adler, 1977, p. 38), provided the basis for considerable discussion about the types of persons best suited for working across cultures.

In his article “Beyond Cultural Identity: Reflections on Cultural and Multicultural Man” (1977), Adler suggested that the conditions of contemporary history may be creating “a new kind of man” whose identity is based, not on a “belongingness” which implies either owning or being owned by culture, but on a style of self-consciousness that is capable of negotiating ever new formations of reality. This person, he said, “lives on the boundary,” is “fluid and mobile,” and committed to people's essential similarities as well as their differences: “What is new about this type of person and unique to our time is a fundamental change in the structure and process of identity” (Adler, 1977, p. 26). He also listed three main features of multicultural man: he is psychoculturally adaptive, he is one who is undergoing personal transitions, and his identity is not fixed or permanent but is temporary and open to change.

In a critique of Adler’s work, Sparrow (2000) illustrated the concept of shifting identities by relating the experience of one of the women she interviewed: “I think of myself not as a unified cultural being but as a communion of different cultural beings. Due to the fact that I have spent time in different cultural environments I have developed several cultural identities that diverge and converge according to the need of the moment” (p. 190). She also criticized Adler’s use of the term “man” when women may also be multicultural beings.

In other words, a culturally diverse society requires members of the community to acquire the ability to negotiate the meanings and priorities of various identities in order to be cross-culturally competent (Chen & Starosta, 2004). More specifically, intercultural communication competency aims to promote an individual's ability to respect and integrate cultural differences in order to transform oneself into a multicultural person who knows how to foster multiple

cultural identities and maintain a multicultural coexistence for the development of a civic community (Adler, 1977; Boulding, 1988).

As a result of growing up in an intercultural environment, TCKs may possess strong intercultural skill sets. Tokuhamma-Espinosa (2003) noted how TCKs often learn multiple languages and have a desire to acquire language because they understand the relevance of language and culture, although Pollock and Van Reken (1999) also observed that TCKs are not necessarily fully proficient in any one foreign language, sometimes including their home language. This ability to switch back and forth between languages allows the TCK to successfully communicate verbally in both their home and host culture, and negotiate their identity through the use of spoken language.

In a recent study by Lyttle, Barker, & Cornwell (2011), levels of interpersonal sensitivity were compared between TCKs and mono-cultured individuals. As hypothesized, TCKs scored higher on social sensitivity scales than did their mono-cultured counterparts. This confirms the notion that TCKs having experienced intercultural exposure, achieve notable intercultural competence. This competence stems from a heightened perceptual ability as a result of adaptation to diverse cultures.

A similar concept and term is that of biculturalism. According to LaFromboise et al. (1993), second culture acquisition can lead to the development of bicultural competence; this competency is marked by knowledge of cultural beliefs and values of both cultures, a positive attitude toward both groups, and communication competency, among others. The construct of bicultural competence as a result of living two cultures grows out of the alternation model. Although there are a number of behaviors involved in the acquisition of bicultural competence (e.g., shifts in cognitive and perceptual processes, acquisition of a new language) the literature on

biculturalism consistently assumes that an individual living within two cultures will suffer from various forms of psychological distress. LaFromboise et al. (1993) also suggests, however, that individuals living in two cultures may find the experience to be more beneficial than living a monocultural lifestyle. The key to psychological well-being may well be the ability to develop and maintain competence in both cultures. Szapocznik et al. (1980) also discovered that embracing biculturalism facilitated greater adaptation.

Thus, it is implied that increased overall adjustment is positively correlated with being acculturated to both cultures, or being bicultural. However, being bicultural is not a one-dimensional phenomenon and it does not mean being between two cultures, but rather being part of both, to varying degrees. It does not require a weakening of identification with one's ethnic culture but identifying with both cultures. (Phinney & Devich-Nevarro, 1997).

In a study addressing biculturalism and cognitive outcomes, Tadmor and Tetlock (2006) found that immigrants choosing integration, rather than assimilation or separation, were found to have higher level of integrative complexity, or "the degree to which a person accepts the reasonableness of different cultural perspectives on how to live" (p. 178).

Ramirez and Castaneda (1974) highlight the academic advantages that can result from the bicognitive development of immigrant students. They suggested that bicultural individuals have the ability to switch between cognitive orientations, drawing on ethnic orientations or American orientations according to the demands of the situation.

Another similar concept to multiculturalism is that of intercultural literacy. Heyward (2002) defined intercultural literacy as "the competencies, understandings, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for effective cross-cultural engagement" (p. 10). The interculturally literate person possesses the characteristics listed above for successful

living and working in a cross-cultural or pluralist setting. He or she has the background required effectively to read a second culture, to interpret its symbols and negotiate its meanings in a practical day-to-day context. Due to his or her understanding and awareness of the culture, the interculturally literate person is able to consciously shift between multiple cultural identities to feel and operate from the standpoint of the insider.

One instrument that has been widely used in measuring multicultural effectiveness is the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) developed by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000). Although this instrument will not be employed in this research, some of the dimensions highlighted in the questionnaire are pertinent to the study of multiculturalism.

One of the most common dimensions is that of flexibility. Several authors have stressed the importance of this dimension (Arthur & Bennett, 1995; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Hanvey, 1976; Ruben & Kealey, 1979; Smith, 1966; Torbiorn, 1982). The international child or adolescent has to be able to switch easily from one strategy to another because the familiar ways of handling things will not necessarily work in a new cultural environment. Elements of flexibility, such as the ability to learn from mistakes and adjustment of behavior whenever it is required, are associated with the ability to learn from new experiences, in particular. This ability to learn from experiences appears to be of critical importance to multicultural effectiveness (Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997). This flexibility can be associated with the ability to effectively switch between one cultural identity to the other.

The child or adolescent will also have to develop new social skills in the host country (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Social initiative is defined as a tendency to approach social situations in an active way and to take initiatives. Several researchers have pointed at the relevance of the ability to establish and maintain contacts (Hawes & Kealy, 1981; Kets de Vries

& Mead, 1991) and to take initiatives (McCall, 1994; Spreitzer et al., 1997). For example, Hawes and Kealy (1981) stress the importance of interaction with people from the host country and of making friends among the locals. More convincingly, empirical evidence underlines the relevance of this dimension (Abe & Weisman, 1983). In a study by Hammer et al. (1978), in which they asked cross-culturally effective students to assess the importance of a large number of dimensions, communication skills and the ability to establish interpersonal relationships appeared as crucial dimensions to multicultural effectiveness. The TCK must learn early on in life effective communication skills to succeed in two, or more, cultures.

After an extensive review of the literature, it is evident that many studies involving Third Culture Kids have been conducted recently. However, most of the research on identity only encompasses the negative effects of a transient lifestyle on the TCK. This research attempted to look deeper into the elements of multiculturalism and identity in Third Culture Kids to see how the two constructs relate and whether most TCKs in fact have multiple cultural identities and may be considered multicultural. The extent to which TCKs achieve intercultural literacy and communication competence was also examined. In the following chapter, the researcher describes how this research was conducted.

## Chapter Three

### *Methodology*

The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate whether Third Culture Kids around the world perceive that their cross-cultural experiences during childhood produced in them a sense of confused cultural identity or a multicultural identity as adults. This study aims to understand the extent to which TCKs are able to successfully alternate between their two or more cultural identities and achieve intercultural communication competency in multiple cultures. This study attempts to answer the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent do Third Culture Kids experience a sense of confused cultural identity, a multicultural identity, or multiple cultural identities, respectively?

RQ2: To what extent and in what ways are Third Culture Kids able to successfully alternate between two or more cultural identities and be culturally literate?

RQ3: What benefits or detriments from their experiences abroad during their developmental years do Third Culture Kids perceive as adults and in what ways have these experiences impacted their intercultural communication competence?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study in order to accommodate the personal contributions of each participant. The description of qualitative research that follows and the rationale for selecting this approach will further explain the fit between the research questions and the research method used to collect and analyze the data in this study.

Qualitative approaches, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2001), focus on studying the complexity of phenomena that occur in natural settings and thus provide detailed descriptions that can reveal the nature of particular situations. These insights lead to developing new concepts

about the phenomenon or phenomena under study and allow the researcher the freedom to test the validity of existing assumptions as well as to evaluate the related literature. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2004) wrote, “Moreover, qualitative research allows us to ask and answer a wide range of socially relevant questions and develop theories with both descriptive and explanatory power” (p. 13).

Rossman and Rallis (1998) point out that qualitative research develops and takes unique directions as the inquirer learns more about the topic of investigation. The questions can change throughout the inquiry process. The data collection process may also take a different direction as the researcher learns more about the phenomenon of interest. The theory or general understanding emerges and develops as the inquiry progresses. The researcher is introspective and acknowledges biases, values, and interests and the personal self is closely linked with the researcher self. Qualitative researchers do bring questions, however, they do not “impose a rigid a priori framework on the social world; they want to learn what constitute important questions about the participant’s lives from them” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 9).

According to Wiersma (2000), research of this nature is focused on obtaining accurate description of the phenomenon under study rather than on quantitative and generalizable data about the phenomenon. This focus requires the researcher to establish the type of relationship with the participants that will provide access to the data from their personal perspectives while still being alert to any personal biases they may hold concerning the topic or issue being studied.

The ability to seek in-depth understanding is the strength of qualitative method. Creswell (1998) described qualitative research as a process of inquiry that can be used to develop understanding concerning social problems and various human dilemmas. The researcher,

according to Creswell, “builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 15).

Research on TCKs is still in its infancy. Much of the early research was anecdotal in nature or was based on informal interviews with TCKs (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Fail et al., 2004; Sparrow, 2000). Quantitative studies have focused on specific aspects of TCKs identity development or communication competency (Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009; Greenholtz & Kim, 2009; Peterson & Plamondon, 2009; Lyttle, Barker & Cornwell, 2011); however, a more complete picture and theoretical framework have yet to emerge.

Prior to engaging participants for this research, permission was granted from the Institutional Review Board at the university where this thesis was completed. The IRB exists to protect the rights and welfare of human participants volunteering in any academic research study. The IRB committee reviewed the research proposal and plans for conducting the research to insure that risks to participants were minimized, that subjects could make an informed decision about whether to participate, and that the participants’ privacy was well-protected. Once approval was granted, the researcher then began collecting data.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study included 19 adult TCKs (8 males and 11 females) who spent at least three years of their developmental years, between the age of 6 and 18, outside of their passport country. This purposeful sample consisted of participants from various nations who are now residing in their passport country or another host country. The adult TCKs participating in this research were between the ages of 18 and 44 and were located through snowball sampling and personal networking. By nature, TCKs have many connections and usually know others who

have had similar experiences, therefore snowball sampling was helpful in recruiting additional participants for this study.

The nationalities represented in this study were the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, El Salvador and the Ivory Coast. The countries of residence during childhood included, but are not limited to, the United States, Canada, Russia, Slovenia, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, England, Romania, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ghana, Ethiopia, Mauritania, Oman, China, and Australia. Six of the participants were children of missionaries, twelve were children of corporate and business employees stationed abroad, and one was a diplomat's child. The majority of the participants were between 18-24 years old.

All participants signed a consent form, which informed them that participation was voluntary and all information would be kept confidential and only the researcher would have access to such information. Participants were free to express their opinions as no names or personal information were released in the research. However, the countries in which they resided as well as the purpose for their living abroad might have been mentioned in the study due to the nature of the research.

### **Data Collection**

This study employed a qualitative data collection method known as biographical phenomenology or life story interviewing, which allows the participants to express themselves in their own words and through their own stories (Chaitin, 2004). The purpose of phenomenology is to capture the lived experience of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Phenomenological research is not intended to test hypotheses, but it is intended to describe a lived experience from the perspective of the individual (Osborne, 1990).

The phenomenon, or lived experience, under examination in the current study was identity formation and communication skills within the context of movement between multiple cultures, specifically in Third Culture Kids. This method is appropriate and sensitive to the exploration of identity, especially for those who may be grappling with their personal sense of identity (Chaitin, 2004). It was necessary to listen to the voices and stories of TCKs in order to better understand how TCKs form their identity and how they communicate.

This research also took an “emic” approach; that is, one which views social life from the perspective of the participants themselves (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114). This is premised on the notion that cultures can only really be understood in their own terms. Research of this kind has been described as “understanding-from-within” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 41), its methodology being interpretative and in nature. By adopting an emic approach, the researcher aimed to ensure that the participants remained at the center throughout the research process, and that the findings were firmly grounded in their experiences.

In-depth interviews with the participants covered emotional and relational issues such as sense of belonging and identity (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008; Fail, Thompson & Walker, 2004; Greenholtz & Kim 2009) and explored whether participants are able to hold multiple cultural identities simultaneously, (Baker, 2001, p. 402). The study also explored the participants’ cultural literacy and communication competence.

It is important to remember that life history and personal narratives analysis are how people make sense of their life stories. When a person tells his or her life story, the information has been edited and events selected to create a story which is compatible with the present (Clausen, 1998; Giele & Elder, 1998; Josselson & Lieblich, 1995): “Memory has a way of making the past consistent with the present as people amend their ongoing autobiographies”

(Josselson, 1987, p. 9). Narratives are the representation of a process, of a self in conversation with itself and with its world over time. Narratives are not records of facts, of how things actually were, but meaning-making system that makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of a life (Josselson & Lieblich, 1995, p. 32). The person being interviewed is not simply recalling facts, but interpreting the past in the light of the present (Bergman, Eklund, & Magnusson, 1991; Cohler, 1982; Courceau, 1990; Josselson, 1987; Waterman & Archer, 1990). Polkinghorne (1988) suggested that the purpose of descriptive narrative research is to uncover the common themes or plots in the data from a collection of stories.

Rather than pre-dispose the interviewees to a particular format for describing their experiences, a semi-structured interview approach called “in-depth interviewing,” developed by Seidman (1991) was selected. He noted, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 1991, p. 8).

In order to maximize the number of participants involved in the study and allow for the participation of geographically dispersed individuals, the interview protocol was designed in a manner that was most convenient to the participant. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via an online video-conferencing application (Skype). Interviews conducted via Skype were similar to face-to-face interviews in that the researcher and the participant were able to interact not only via audio, but also video. Participants felt comfortable via Skype because they were in a familiar environment and had greater privacy; therefore felt more at ease with sharing personal information. Some face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private location, but some, due to

the gender of the participant and the researcher, were conducted in a public location. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately 30 minutes.

A semi-structured approach was used with open-ended questions that were few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed following standard procedures for qualitative research methodology (Chaitin, 2004; Groenewald, 2004; Osborne, 1990).

### **Data Analysis**

As previously discussed, the phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience. The approach “seeks to disclose and elucidate the phenomena of behavior as they manifest themselves in their perceived immediacy” (van Kaam, 1966, p. 15). The data analysis process for this study followed a model outlined by Giorgi (1985) which includes two descriptive levels of the empirical phenomenological approach: Level I, the original data is comprised of naive descriptions obtained through open-ended questions and dialogue. On Level II, the researcher describes the structures of the experience based on reflective analysis and interpretation of the research participant’s account or story (p. 69).

The aim was to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individuals’ descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived; in other words, the essences or structures of the experience.

The data analysis for this study was conducted via a three-part process with the ultimate intention of culling from within the data set the most common/prominent themes apparent in the

interviews. First, the researcher reviewed each interview, line-by-line, with the goal of becoming comprehensively acquainted with the data collected. Next, the data was analyzed via a second reading with a pen in hand making immediate notes on certain observations with special attention to those elements of continuity apparent in the individual responses and the observable incongruities between others. Finally, the researcher gave a third reading of all the material, and while doing so she collected certain data samples by noting particularly revealing quotes from the interview participants. It is also worth noting that each phase of the analysis was embarked upon within a time span that provided an above-average amount of data retention. It was also advantageous that the researcher was also the “interviewer.” This additional acquaintance with the data allowed the researcher to build upon observations made during the actual interviews. This was, essentially, a fourth step of data analysis that in effect preceded the other three.

These apparent themes that were withdrawn during the review process were then clustered together in an attempt to answer the research questions posed. However, attention was also given to other themes that also emerged during the study that the researcher did not anticipate. These were also noted in the research findings.

This process more than sufficiently met the parameters defined in Giorgi’s (1985) empirical phenomenological approach. The data collected constituted a return to experience via open-ended questions and dialogue while eventually affording the researcher an opportunity to analyze the structures of the stated experience based upon reflective analysis and interpretation of the research participant’s account or story.

In the following chapter, the results of the study are presented.

## Chapter Four

### *Results*

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether Third Culture Kids perceive that their cross-cultural experiences during childhood produced in them a sense of confused cultural identity or a multicultural identity as adults and aimed to understand the extent to which TCKs are able to successfully alternate between their two or more cultural identities and achieve intercultural communication competency in multiple cultures. In this section of the study, the researcher arranges the findings according to themes and topics and draws out key issues that were discussed by participants.

The most prominent themes mentioned by interviewees were, the ability to shift identities depending on cultural settings; the ability to blend cultures to form a cultural identity; a lack of sense of belonging; the benefits and detriments of the TCK experience; and finally, the competency to communicate interculturally. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' demographic information, background, TCK experience, sense of identity and sense of belonging.

#### **Shifting Identities**

Participants within this study spoke of their experiences of constructing new identities, but always within existing cultural definitions. There was frequent mention of the concept of shifting identities to adapt to different cultural settings. One TCK said,

I'm like a hybrid, right? I can function in both cultures. So I can go to Brazil and nobody would ever notice that I've been living in the U.S. for my whole life, and a lot of times here in the U.S. people are surprised when I tell them that I was born and raised in Brazil.

Table 1

*Overview of Participants*

<b>Gender (Age)</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Country of Birth</b>	<b>Country(ies) of Residence</b>	<b>Cultural Identity</b>	<b>Sense of Belonging</b>
Female (21)	Expat	Brazil (5)	Argentina (8) & USA (5)	Shifting Identities	To all three
Female (23)	Diplomat	Ivory Coast (1)	France (7), Mauritania (6mo.), Ghana (2), USA (1), Spain (7mo.), Costa Rica (8mo.), Ethiopia (6mo.)	Blend of Cultures	Fit in but did not belong
Female (20)	Missionary	USA (5)	Spain (10) & Portugal (3)	Shifting Identities	Mainly to Spain
Male (25)	Expat	Brazil (15)	USA (3)	Shifting Identities	To both
Male (19)	Missionary	USA (6)	China (12)	Blend of Cultures	To China
Female (21)	Missionary	El Salvador (6)	USA (1) & Romania (11)	Confused cultural identity	Only to Romania
Male (44)	Expat	Peru (2)	Argentina (4), Brazil (10), USA (2)	Blend of Cultures	Foreigner in all three countries
Male (22)	Expat	USA (1)	Mexico (9) & Brazil (8)	Blend of Cultures	To both
Female (23)	Missionary	USA (2)	France (16)	Blend of Cultures	Fit in but did not belong
Female (25)	Expat	USA (15)	Chile (3)	American Cultural Identity	Only to USA
Male (19)	Missionary	USA (4)	Russia (9), Slovenia (2) & Germany (3)	Blend of Cultures	Fit in but did not belong
Female (20)	Expat	USA (11)	Chile (3), Canada (1), Oman (2) & Australia (1)	International Identity	Only to USA
Female (26)	Expat	Argentina (2)	Colombia (6), USA (4), Brazil (6)	Blend of Cultures	Yearning to belong
Male (24)	Expat	Brazil (14)	USA (4)	Shifting Identities	To both
Female (40)	Expat	Brazil (2)	Mexico (5), USA (8) & Holland (3)	Shifting Identities	Mainly to USA
Male (21)	Expat	Brazil (9)	USA (9)	Shifting Identities	To both
Male (24)	Expat	USA (2)	Mexico (8) & Brazil (8)	Blend of Cultures	To Mexico and Brazil
Female (18)	Missionary	USA (6)	England (6) & Germany (6)	Blend of Cultures	Fit in but did not belong
Female (38)	Expat	Brazil (13)	USA (5)	Shifting Identities	To both

*Note.* Number in parentheses, except age, indicates number of years lived in each country from birth to eighteen even if not consecutively.

Shifts in identity seemed to happen almost intuitively and many interviewees seemed to take this capacity for granted. Another TCK said,

My mindset is just different. In certain circumstances I'll think like a German, and in other circumstances I'll think like a complete British person, and then I just have my American moments. So I think I can't see myself and think of myself without associating those three cultures in my life. When asked about taking on different cultural identities and easily switching between them, this TCK answered,

I know I do that. It's not really like a thought out thing, I don't plan it out, like I have to act this certain way, but it's just sort of how you adapt to your environment. That's just because that's what you're constantly around, that's what you're exposed to at that point in time. It's a completely natural thing, it's not even something that's in the back of your head; you naturally do it.

Another TCK said,

It's not like I think, "Oh, okay. I'm in Brazil. I need to act a certain way." It just comes to you naturally because that's what I'm used to. I don't even think about it. It just happens. Depending on where you are, you just act a certain way.

Some of the TCKs who expressed their ability to shift identities depending on the different cultural settings, also expressed a sense of belonging and a sense of "home" to each of these different countries.

I feel like, in most places, I feel right at home. I feel comfortable in both of them, I feel well accepted in both cultures. I think it's because I've been immersed in both cultures enough that I click with both cultures at a lot of different levels.

Research Question 1 asked, “To what extent do Third Culture Kids experience a sense of confused cultural identity, a multicultural identity, or multiple cultural identities, respectively?” Participants within this study spoke of their ability to intuitively shift between identities depending on the cultural context, which translates as having multiple cultural identities which they alternate between.

Research Question 2 asked, “To what extent and in what ways are Third Culture Kids able to successfully alternate between two or more cultural identities and be culturally literate?” It was obvious from the interviews that TCKs are able to successfully alternate between two or more cultural identities. The second component of the question which refers to the issue of intercultural literacy, involves the competencies, understandings, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation, and identities necessary for effective cross-cultural engagement. The ability to shift between identities demonstrates that TCKs in this study possess the aptitude for all of the elements listed above. In order to successfully engage in a culture, they must be proficient in that language and hold a certain understanding of that culture. This issue will also be discussed in more detail under Intercultural Communication Competence.

### **Blend of Cultures**

While some spoke of their ability to shift naturally between the different cultures, other participants spoke of a concept in which their identity is a blend of all the different cultures they have lived in. They are unable to separate them depending on the country they are in; this means that regardless of where they are in the world, they will behave in a manner consistent with their blended identity and not shift between the different cultural identities. They have incorporated elements of the different cultures and have created for themselves a blended cultural identity. The two, or more, cultures they have experienced, have become part of who they are, and

regardless of physical location, they will behave and think in a manner which consists of their blended identity. One TCK said,

Third Culture Kids, they don't think like a normal, I'd say American. Like, I think like a Chinese person, I think like an American person, and I mix them together. So, I have those two cultures mixed in with the way I do things.

Another TCK said,

I have one identity but I understand both cultures. I know how to put them together in one piece which is me. I know how to mix both of them in a way that I can adapt wherever I'm at.

Some interviewees expressed how their sense of identity doesn't come from a particular country, but from the experiences they have gathered from each country and that has made them who they are today.

I don't feel like identity has to be you pertaining to a country. I see how you can pertain to several cultures, and feel identified with several cultures. I have sort of combined and blended different cultures into shaping my identity now. I definitely have a mix of cultures, and I think I like it more that way.

Yet, another TCK said,

The challenge was to – how to take the good in their culture and how to respect their culture and to have their culture be added to yours and to your growth. I don't see myself as having one culture, like I would say I know I'm Ivorian, but I'm a lot more than that. That's how I feel. I feel like everywhere I went I made it my goal to be a part of that country, a part of those people, so when I had to leave, again it was painful. It was like this was my family.

This demonstrates that certain TCKs possess a multicultural identity, as addressed in Research Question 1, in that they have blended the different cultural identities into forming one single identity. These TCKs are unable to separate the different cultures depending on cultural context, but behave in a way consistent with their “multicultural identity.” Some of these TCKs have incorporated two cultural identities, whereas some have incorporated three or even more. These TCKs are different from the TCKs mentioned earlier (see *Shifting Identities*) in that they don’t shift or alternate between the different cultural identities depending on cultural context. They only have one cultural identity that consists of elements from different cultures forming their blended cultural identity. This does not mean that they have a confused identity; they are very well aware and sure of their identity, they are just unable to differentiate or alternate their identities depending on cultural context or location.

### **Sense of Belonging**

However, the shifting of identities or blending of identities described by the TCKs have also caused some TCKs to not have a sense of belonging to anywhere. At the same time that they could adapt to the different places and maybe even “fit in,” they did not feel like they truly belonged.

The same TCK that mentioned her ability to shift between identities, later said in the interview, “I’ve never really felt like I belonged in any of the countries. The little things often would show me, ‘Hey, you don’t fully belong to this country.’”

Another TCK that was mentioned earlier as having a blended cultural identity also said, I have that weird sense of yearning to belong. I had it, I don’t have it anymore. I don’t feel like I belong, I feel like a tourist when I go to my home country. Yet, I feel like I can fit in and adapt easily without having that sense of belonging or attachment to that

culture. That's what's incredible about this lifestyle, that you can be sitting at a table with somebody from Brazil, somebody from Argentina, and somebody from the States, and switch languages in two seconds, and it's not even a conscious effort. It's extremely automatic. I think that's so special, to be able to switch around like that.

One TCK, who was born in America, yet lived in four different countries, described her experience like this,

I always would feel like I didn't belong because I'm different and I'm from America, I don't look like those people, I don't speak their same language, I'm not from there. But I'm back in the U.S. now, and it's different, so I guess I kind of fit in, but I don't feel exactly like I totally fit in, because I've lived overseas a lot, so it's kind of like, I don't know which one to identify with. I guess I feel closer to the American side than the international side, but I would say in between, like not fully American, not fully international.

She spoke of an in-between state, not fully belonging to one culture or another. In this case, since she had lived in several different countries, she didn't define her cultural identity in relation to the other countries, but to her "international identity."

Another TCK, who has lived in four different countries, defined her sense of belonging as not having a sense of home, she said,

I think one of the things that is hard is identify which one is your home, and as much as you want to say that you know, it's never just one place. There are little things that you'll pick up everywhere you live, whether it's values or traditions that you take with you everywhere you go, so you're not 100% entirely at home anywhere.

Another TCK described her experiences as,

Sometimes I don't feel like I belong anywhere. Most of the time I don't feel like I belong anywhere. I can function anywhere; I can fit in anywhere, but not truly belong or feel really confident. But even then you're always a mix. You just have to balance it out and then realize that where I feel best, feel like I belong is with close friends and family.

This does not apply to all participants in this study; three participants expressed a sense of belonging to a country other than their passport country while five participants expressed a sense of belonging to their passport country and countries of residence. However, there were some who, despite their ability to shift cultural identities or blend cultural identities, still did not feel a sense of belonging to any of these cultures. Nine participants were confused as to where they belonged, either in how they rambled when answering the questions or by outright stating it, and two participants firmly expressed that they did not belong in either culture. For those participants who felt a sense of belonging, in every circumstance, they mentioned how connecting with people in the cultures allowed them to relate and to feel like they were a part of that culture. For those who felt like they belonged in both cultures, they also mentioned how they were secure in themselves and had the added value of having a more secure personality. One TCK said,

If I feel like I'm a part of a culture, people accept me. If I felt like, "I don't belong here. What am I doing here?" people can see that through me and then people might be like, "Oh, look. She doesn't belong here. She's not acting like she belongs here." But the fact that I'm secure in myself, that I know my culture, I know my roots, I know where I stand, and I also know how to act depending on the country I'm in.

The primary external factor that contributes to belonging within a culture is connectivity with people with whom you have certain commonalities. Those unique individuals who are able

to connect well with multiple cultures seemed to be of a certain personality type, namely a secure personality that exhibits a certain self-confidence. However, the majority of participants were confused when it came to their sense of belonging and expressed their desire to truly belong to a certain culture. One TCK, who has adapted to living in three different cultures, expressed her desire to truly belong:

You're always a stranger no matter where you go and it does feel like that. It feels like ultimately you really don't have a home or like a set identity and you just kind of have to learn to live with that and accept that. A lot of us do have problems, trying to fit in and I guess we'll never fit in. But it's a battle that we do – I know I try to fit in a lot. I want to fit in to a certain culture. I want to belong. I want to feel like for once I found that one place where I actually belong.

### **Benefits and Detriments of the TCK Experience**

When asked whether TCKs perceive their experiences as mainly positive or negative, 15 out of the 19 participants, answered emphatically that their experiences had been mainly positive. Three said it was a combination of both positive and negative, and one said it was negative at the time but now looking back it was a positive experience. Those who responded that it was a positive experience also listed some of the negative aspects, such as not having a clear definition of where you're from, not being close to extended family, having to say good bye to friends, the pain of leaving what is familiar, and not growing roots anywhere. It's worth noting that the vast majority of these identified negative aspects came to light only after a follow-up question drew particular attention to the detrimental components.

Multiple interview participants, while describing their experience as overwhelming positive, when further questioned regarding any negative aspects spoke of how difficult it was to

articulate exactly where they were from. One even said, “It’s just tiring to be asked and explain that question.” Another commented that she felt as if she didn’t “fit in anywhere” and was picked on because of that.

Other participants commented on the relational challenges of leaving behind certain family members and friends as their journey in and out of cultures caused the maintenance of those relationships to become more and more difficult. Two participants when speaking of this challenge defined it as “not having roots” anywhere. It was a challenge to find friendships that transcended the geographic and cultural challenges of living in multiple cultures. While it was “tough,” for one, it wasn’t entirely negative because “in the end” it allowed him to “weed out” those friends who weren’t “true friends.”

These negative responses were generally only brought to light after specific questioning, perhaps demonstrating that they were secondary considerations to the participants but were still present and to some had caused pain and hurt growing up.

But the positive aspects far outweighed the negatives and most participants perceive their experiences abroad provided them with more benefits than detriments. Most common among these were, the ability to adapt easier, speaking multiple languages, being able to communicate with more people, being aware of different cultures, having a broader worldview, and most predominantly, having an open mind.

One TCK said, “I think the TCK experience really allows us to have a more open mind. I’m not socially paralyzed because I don’t know how to work or relate to other people with other points of view or from different backgrounds.”

When speaking of her experience as a TCK and having to move around and interact with so many different cultures, this TCK said, “I think that was a gift. It really opens up the person

culturally and just increases tolerance and acceptance. You have a much broader knowledge that ‘Oh, not everybody thinks like me.’”

Another TCK responded,

For me personally, I think it has taught me a lot more than I think I would have if I had only stayed and pretty much grown up in only one country. It opened up my eyes to a lot of different things, a lot of different lifestyles, a lot of different cultures, and it kind of took me outside of my comfort zone.

When answering how the TCK lifestyle has affected his identity, another TCK answered, It’s a huge impact, because I didn’t just grow up mono-cultural. One thing it helped me the most is with relating to different people. It makes it a lot easier to adapt to new situations and environments, and just a lot easier to get to know somebody because you’re not just used to this one thing, you have multiple experiences.

Research Question 3 asked, “What benefits or detriments from their experiences abroad during their developmental years do Third Culture Kids perceive as adults and in what ways have these experiences impacted their intercultural communication competence?” As mentioned above, participants in this study were very aware of what their experiences, as a TCK, had produced in them; they spoke with clarity of thought and assertiveness when listing both the benefits and detriments of a life on the move. All participants spoke with confidence that although there were negative experiences of living a life of constant change and mobility, the benefits and positives far outweighed the negatives.

### **Intercultural Communication Competence**

The second part of Research Question 3 asked how these experiences abroad impacted their Intercultural Communication Competence. Participants in this study believe their

experiences helped them to become competent when engaging in intercultural communication. As mentioned earlier, TCKs are more aware of different cultures and feel like they could adapt more easily if they were to move to a country that they had not previously lived in. So, in essence, the participants in this study possessed the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures. Participants were asked whether they were able to successfully function in the countries where they had lived. They were also asked whether they were able to effectively communicate verbally and non-verbally, and whether they were aware of the different norms and behaviors in each country and if they could easily adapt to them. One TCK said, “I think as a TCK you have to. You sense things, so you pick up on things quite easily.”

Participants affirmed their ability to communicate both verbally and non-verbally in the different cultures, which refers to the necessary skills to possess intercultural communication competence. Participants also affirmed their awareness and understanding of the different cultural norms and behavior in each country and their ability to adapt to the different cultural scenarios, which refers to the necessary knowledge to possess intercultural communication competence. Lastly, participants mentioned throughout the interview their desire to continue to travel or live abroad and their ability to make friends easily with other TCKs or people from a different cultural background than them. This refers to the motivation component of intercultural communication competence. One TCK said referring to the TCK lifestyle,

It’s my identity. It’s part of who I am. And I think it’s affected me in the fact that I don’t want to live in America. I feel like overseas is part of who I am and you almost get this restlessness that I have to move.

This TCK expressed her desire to live in different countries irrespective of where her parents are living. Since graduating from college, she has lived in the Middle East, Africa and Australia because of a constant longing to be engaged with different cultures and relating to people who are different from her. A few participants in this study expressed their restlessness of being in a single country for too long and their aptitude to build friendships with people who have had similar experiences or people from different countries.

In summary, the main themes emerging from this study were, the ability to shift identities depending on cultural settings; the ability to blend cultures to form a cultural identity; a lack of sense of belonging; the benefits and detriments of the TCK experience; and finally, the competency to communicate interculturally. In the final chapter, these findings are analyzed in light of existing literature in this field of study.

## Chapter Five

*Discussion*

The intent of this study was to investigate whether Third Culture Kids perceive that their cross-cultural experiences during childhood produced in them a sense of confused cultural identity or a multicultural identity as adults. This study also aimed to understand the extent to which TCKs are able to successfully alternate between their two or more cultural identities and achieve intercultural communication competency in multiple cultures.

Acknowledging the potential limitations inherent in a qualitative study, the results of this study indicate that TCKs are more apt to possess multiple cultural identities or a multicultural identity instead of a confused cultural identity. As highlighted in the literature review, cultural identity cannot be separated from a person's existence and according to Adler (1977) cultural identity is "the symbol of one's essential experience of oneself as it incorporates the worldview, value system, attitudes, and beliefs of a group with which such elements are shared" (p. 230).

The concept of shifting identities is also very closely linked to the alternation conceptualization proposed by Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi (1986), which assumes that it is possible for an individual to know and understand two different cultures and that "it is possible and acceptable to participate in two different cultures or to use two different languages, perhaps for different purposes, by alternating one's behavior according to the situation" (p. 89). The alternation model also supposes that it is possible for an individual to have a sense of belonging in two cultures without compromising his or her sense of cultural identity. In this model, the individual never loses his or her cultural identity but learns a new one and is able to successfully alternate between the two. This research confirmed that TCKs fit into the alternation model and are able to successfully shift between identities depending on cultural context or location. These

already established findings are confirmed in this study, and bring attention to the fact that is at least possible, and maybe probably, that a TCK will be capable of shifting between multiple identities dependent upon the cultural context or location.

However, the fact that many TCKs shift identities does not mean that they have a clouded cultural identity (Murphy, 2003) or a feeling of confusion over their identity as individuals (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008). Participants in this study could very clearly articulate their different cultural identities and describe their ability to shift between them; in fact, to most participants, this ability came naturally and without any effort. This meets the immediacy test of the research method, and confirms that the particular TCKs analyzed in this study most certainly confirm the notion of shifting identities or alternating identities as evidenced in the research of Adler and Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi over that of a clouded or confused identity as pointed out by the research of Murphy and Grimshaw and Sears. Pollock and Van Reken (2001), also noted in their pioneering work that TCKs move between cultures before they have had the opportunity to complete the critical task of personal or cultural identity development. Although many of the participants in this study moved at a very young age, they all reported that they stayed in contact with their home culture, and this contact was largely due to their parents. It was therefore not uncommon for TCKs to speak their native tongue at home while also making periodic visits to their home culture to visit relatives. They did not lose touch with their home country and were still able to develop a cultural identity incorporating that country. TCKs within this study also did not express a feeling of loss as illustrated by Gilbert (2008). On the contrary, many TCKs believe their experiences enhanced their childhood and added to their lives today as adults.

The concept of biculturalism (LaFromboise et al., 1993) and intercultural literacy (Heyward, 2000) were supported by the findings of this study. Bicultural competency is marked

by knowledge of cultural beliefs and values of both cultures, a positive attitude toward both groups, and communication competency, among others. Intercultural literacy refers to the understandings, competencies, attitudes, and identities necessary for successful cross-cultural engagement. Due to their understanding and awareness of the culture, the interculturally literate person is able to consciously shift between multiple cultural identities to feel and operate from the standpoint of the insider. Although the terms biculturalism and intercultural literacy were not employed by this study, they directly lend corroborating evidence to the findings of other studies who have concluded that TCKs are able to successfully alternate between cultural identities and competently communicate interculturally.

Adler (1977) and Boulding (1988) also noted how intercultural communication competency aims to promote an individual's ability to respect and integrate cultural differences in order to transform oneself into a multicultural person who knows how to foster multiple cultural identities. TCKs within this study confirmed that growing up in an intercultural environment provided them with strong intercultural skill sets. Central to this study is the multicultural man illustrated by Adler (1977), intercultural identity as articulated by Kim (2008), and the concept of multiculturalism (Baker, 2001), which is based on the idea that an individual can successfully hold two or more cultural identities. As mentioned in the literature review, Sparrow (2000) also illustrated this concept of shifting identities according to context. She observed in her interviews that TCKs possess the ability to shift between identities and that this seemed to happen intuitively and many seemed to take this capacity for granted. This directly relates and confirms what TCKs within this study spoke so prominently about, the notion of shifting cultural identities according to context.

The notion of blending identities is different from the concept of shifting identities in that these TCKs are unable to differentiate between their cultural identities depending on context or location. They have blended different elements from each culture thus forming one cultural identity to which they adhere to consistently regardless of which country they are in. Their cultural identity is fused with components of each of the cultures they have lived in.

Whereas some participants expressed a sense of belonging and a sense of home to each of the different countries they have lived in, not all participants felt like they truly belonged to a specific country or countries, although they were able to adapt to the different places and maybe even feel as if they fit in. Fail et al.'s (2004) research reveals that most TCKs either have a multiple sense of belonging or no sense of belonging at all. Some interviewees in that study expressed how they have a multiple sense of belonging in different places and an ability to adjust and fit in. However, not all TCKs have benefited from this and many disclosed how they have no real sense of belonging.

Participants within this study expressed those same feelings. While some felt a sense of belonging to both their passport country and countries of residence, others felt no sense of belonging at all. This confirms previous literature that concludes that TCKs feel at home and that they belong everywhere and nowhere (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999; Useem, 1984; Wertsch, 1991).

However, the findings show evidence that sense of belonging to a culture and having a cultural identity are not necessarily one and the same. TCKs in this study expressed their ability to shift between different cultural identities and even blend identities but without feeling a sense of belonging to any of them. This does not mean that their cultural identity is confused; it simply

means that they have found their sense of belonging in things other than a specific country, such as, family, the TCK experience, or the international community.

The research questions were appropriate for guiding this study and the 19 interviews provided sufficient evidence to justify the conclusions. The results of this study adds to the existing literature, but also clearly demonstrates the absolute necessity of continuing this line of research in order to gather a more nuanced view of how the TCK experience impacts individuals.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The form of data analysis utilized in this study provides increased opportunity for researcher bias, inadvertent or otherwise. While every attempt was made to guard against subjectivity, the threat of researcher bias might have been exacerbated by the fact that the author of the study spent considerable time living within three cultures during her developmental years.

While the sample size was more than sufficient for the purpose of the study, it is nonetheless, a very small sample that does not necessarily provide the breadth of data required to make far reaching conclusions regarding such a varied group as Third Culture Kids living in numerous cultures and contexts. The sample was a snowball sample and was, therefore, influenced by the limitations of the researcher's personal network. The inherent limitations of snowball sampling were present in this study, and perhaps the study would have produced different results had a different sampling method been utilized. Demographics were also a limitation to this study since the majority of participants were 18-24 years olds. Perhaps a more diverse sample including an older demographic would have provided different insights considering that their experiences as a child were much longer ago, so the emotions have probably given way to more rational thinking when looking back at their experiences as a TCK.

As previously noted, the research sample constituted both children of expatriates and children of missionaries without necessarily taking into account the very unique characteristics of each of these individual groups and how these characteristics might influence the findings. Questions of religious views and attitude of the TCK's parents toward the culture where they were residing in were not addressed and might be considered in future studies.

The sample also did not take into account the cultures represented, whether home or host cultures, and whether certain cultures provide an environment more conducive for shifting between identities or belonging more so than other cultures. A more comprehensive study should take into account which cultures each TCK lived within and whether the unique cultural components of each country allowed for an easier or more difficult transition and adaptation due to the significant differences in each.

### **Future Research**

As previously mentioned, this study is one of the first to investigate the notion of multiculturalism and its implications for a TCK. Future studies should pay particularly close attention to why some TCKs are able to shift between identities and why some have blended the different cultural identities into one cultural identity.

Future studies should also take into account the different groups under the TCK umbrella, such as children of expatriates and diplomats, children of missionaries, and children of military. As mentioned above, a more detailed study should take into account which cultures each TCK lived within and whether the unique cultural components of each country played a significant role in the life of each TCK. Without doubt, the vastly different experiences of missionary, expatriate, and military children might have some kind of material effect on a TCKs sense of belonging. These are very different experiences, often playing out in different socio-economic

strata, and with varying levels of cultural immersion. Separate, comparable studies of each subgroup, respectively, should be undertaken with the results being cross-referenced with studies that do not take into account the particular reason why a parent took their child into a third culture. These studies might result in significant changes to the current thought on the issue, or might verify existing hypotheses and thus satiate many objections to studies like this one.

One of the interviewees mentioned how the Internet, and more specifically, social networking has helped her cope with a life of constant mobility. She mentioned that it has specifically allowed her to stay connected not only to the news and happenings in the different countries that she has lived, but has also afforded her a previously unrealized opportunity to maintain relationships with friends from each of the countries she has lived in. Future studies should take into account the role the Internet has played in TCKs reality today in comparison to reality within which this field of study was inaugurated.

The findings in this research may be in some ways applicable for parents, friends, communities, and TCKs themselves. Many interviewees had never heard of the term Third Culture Kids before and were not aware that there was an entire field of study dedicated to this area. Perhaps increased awareness could have helped smooth the transition process and help them realize that they are not the only ones experiencing the effects of a life of constant change and mobility. After the interviews, many participants were interested in studying more about TCKs and reading the available literature. Some have even contacted the researcher after the interviews were completed to share additional thoughts and how the interview and reading literature on the topic has helped them understand their experiences. More studies should be devoted to increasing awareness among the TCK community, such as TCKs themselves, parents, international schools, and international organizations.

It is hoped that this study will suggest the importance of ongoing exploration of multiculturalism, shifting identities, and sense of belonging as it relates to Third Culture Kids. With the rapid expanse of information technology and the shrinking of the globe through globalization, there will only be more TCKs. Therefore, the research should continue so that this increasingly relevant area of study might be fully explored for the good of TCKs and for the good of those who, in making them TCKs, might open up for their children a glorious and precarious opportunity to become a multicultural being.

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## Appendix A

*Interview Questions*

1. Please give me a timeline from birth to eighteen of:
  - a. Where were you born?
  - b. Where have you lived and for how long?
  - c. And the reason(s) for moving?
2. When people ask you “where are you from?” how do you typically answer?
  - a. Does your answer differ depending on where you are or who asks?
3. Where would you say is “home” and why?
4. Do you refer to yourself as a Third Culture Kid?
  - a. What kind of names do you use to describe your international background?
5. How has the TCK lifestyle affected your identity?
  - a. What are the most positive aspects of being a TCK?
  - b. What are the most difficult aspects of being a TCK?
6. Do you feel like you can successfully function in the countries where you have lived?  
How so?
  - a. How effectively can you communicate verbally in your country of birth and countries where you have lived?
  - b. What about non-verbally?
  - c. Are you aware of the cultural norms and behaviors of those countries and can you easily adapt to them?
7. In your country of birth and countries where you have lived did you feel like you belonged? Why or why not?
  - a. How has the TCK lifestyle affected who you are today or how you see yourself today?

- b. Can you easily switch between identities depending on where you are?
  - c. In the countries where you lived, how did the people there receive and accept you?
  - d. How did you relate to people in the countries where you lived?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add that maybe I didn't cover in the interview?
9. May I contact you again by phone if I have any further questions?