

Cross Cultural Transition Success: Personality Variables Influencing Cross-Cultural Transitions

According to the Perceptions of a Population of Third Culture Kids

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### Abstract

Cross-cultural transitions are often difficult for individuals of any background, and are associated with such difficulties as missing friends and family, ignorance of one's home culture, culture shock, and cultural homelessness. These issues have led researchers to seek out those factors that are common to resilient individuals. Third Culture Kids are a unique population that commonly experiences periods of adjustment and transition, and are a focus of this study. From the literature, several protective trait-based features have been identified: self-efficacy, self-esteem, extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, social connectedness, ethnic identity, cross-cultural identity, emotional stability, and cultural flexibility. Using self-report survey responses from a sample of TCKs at a large, private university, it was determined that self-efficacy, agreeableness, and cultural flexibility were self-identified as important for making successful cross-cultural transitions, while ethnic identity, cross-cultural identity, and extroversion were not considered as important. Self-efficacy, social connectedness, and cultural flexibility were considered critically important, while ethnic identity and cross-culture had minimal importance. These results, though having limited generalizability, could be useful to laypeople and mental health professionals seeking to meet the needs of TCKs, and for parents seeking to raise resilient TCKs.

## Cross Cultural Transition Success: A Study of Personality Variables Influencing Cross-Cultural Transitions in a Population of Third Culture Kids

In a rapidly globalizing world, expatriation and repatriation are increasingly common features of work in international business, politics, and non-profits. In the midst of this movement is an increasing awareness of the difficulties that are associated with cross-cultural transitions. In order to avoid issues related to burnout and culture shock, research with application toward navigating complex cross-cultural interplay is becoming more relevant. Cross-cultural adjustment is a key indicator of expatriate success, so it is likely that the way that Third Culture Kids cope with transitions not only predicts ease of life at the destination culture, but overall success in expatriation and repatriation. For this reason, this study is concerned with identifying those personality variables and competencies that contribute to the development of a healthy cross-cultural adjustment, from the perceptions of a population of TCKs.

### **Third Culture Kids and Cross-Cultural Transitions**

#### **Third Culture Kid Defined**

Outside of the expatriate community, the phenomenon of the Third Culture Kid, or TCK, remains largely understudied. Warna Gillies' 1998 article on education and Third Culture Kids described this population succinctly: "Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are the children of diplomats, missionaries, business persons, and military personnel who live outside of their native country for a period of time" (p. 36). Pollock and Van Reken (2001), pioneers of cross-cultural studies with decades of experience working with TCKs, offered a more comprehensive definition:

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 with all of the cultures (in which he or she is engaged), while not having full ownership in any.

Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCKs life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background. (p.19)

TCKs are most commonly children of overseas military personnel, government officials, and missionaries/Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) workers. The term “Third Culture” refers to the tendency of people growing up in this environment to synthesize features of their national/ethnic home culture and adopted culture to create a new Third Culture identity. This “Third Culture” or “interstitial culture” is greater than the sum of the parts of home and host culture (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001) and involves a shared experience with other TCKs and a distinct identity.

References to a home culture refer to the culture of one or both parents and/or the passport country/country of national origin for an individual. The term “home culture” does not necessarily refer the actual cultural identity of a TCK. Many TCKs do not identify closely with the culture of their parents, given that they typically grow up outside of it while receiving a variety of sources of cultural input that at times can obfuscate each other. At the same time, some even struggle to fully integrate into the culture that they grow up in. For example, the child of an American missionary working in the nation of Senegal may struggle to connect with American peers, yet not feel completely welcome in the local culture because of external differences and limited assimilation. Thus, TCKs tend to relate best to other TCKs and individuals with their shared experiences (Gillies, 1998).

The latter idea has been supported by recent qualitative research. Through an autobiographical Collage Life-story Elicitation Technique, facilitators have students visually construct their experiences by having them find pictures that represent their experience, tell a story that is connected to the image, and relate the image back to the self while elaborating on

and comparing and contrasting the image with their own experience. In a 2014 study by Lijadi and Van Schalkwyk, it was found that the majority of TCK participants typically chose to use magazines pictures that used a language that they were most familiar with. However, only 10 participants were used, making it difficult to generalize this theme to all TCKs. Additionally, it is possible that a preference for the familiar is a feature that is common to most individuals, not only TCKs.

Pollock and Van Reken (2001) identified two other key features of TCKs, “Being raised in a genuinely cross-cultural world”, and “Being raised in a highly mobile world” (p. 22). TCKs typically grow up in ethnically and culturally diverse settings in which they learn to interact and build relationships with people from many different backgrounds. In addition, they often remain in one location for a limited period of time. This makes the TCK and expatriate community highly transient. Other common features that the authors identify are external differences from the host culture (especially skin color), the expectation of leaving the host culture at some point, and an identity that is closely connected to the expatriating body that they or their parents represent.

Qualitative research based on Bandura’s Triadic Reciprocity Model identified three main social cognitive domains operating in the lives of TCKs: Environment, personal attributes, and overt behaviors. A TCK’s identity can be understood as an interaction of external factors that affect and shape certain traits and behaviors. Common external environmental features include geographical distance from parents (in the case of TCKs attending university in their home country), and changing educational experiences (attending a variety of co-ops, local schools, and international schools). Regarding personal attributes, it is typical for TCKs to recognize the

shared experience of acculturative stress, especially when adjusting to their home culture (Bikos et al., 2014).

### **Benefits of a Cross-Cultural Lifestyle**

TCKs may benefit from their experiences in several ways. For example, TCKs score significantly higher in social sensitivity assessments (Lyttle, Barker, & Cornwell, 2011), suggesting that experience in a wide variety of cultural settings could be connected to a greater sensitivity to the perceptions of people from different backgrounds. It could be that multicultural TCK experiences heighten one's active cognitive interaction with the environment, making one more adept at interpreting external and cultural cues. Though this is not strong enough evidence to conclude that multicultural experiences directly lead to higher social sensitivity, it does establish a telling correlation as it is less plausible to suggest that MKs have innately higher levels of social sensitivity in comparison to the general population, regardless of environment.

Other positive aspects of a cross-cultural lifestyle include an ability to adapt and make transitions, speak multiple languages, connect with those of diverse backgrounds, develop heightened cultural competence, adopt an inclusive worldview and a personal awareness of global issues, and cross-cultural enrichment (Moore & Barker, 2012; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). A level of familiarity with a number of different cultural settings allows one the potential to feel at home in any environment. Additionally, an understanding of the points of view of people from other cultures tends to grant one greater empathy and sympathy. This is consistent with a Recognition of Prior Learning approach of Honneth's Recognition Theory, in which recognition of others, especially in a participatory sense, has a mutually positive effect on self-esteem (Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013).

In many ways, the above variables can be summed up in the concept of cultural competence. Cultural competence consists of, "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self" (Byram, 1997, p. 34). TCKs exemplify these values due to their lived experience aside locals from their host culture and other TCKs, leading to a greater capacity for placing oneself in a greater context.

### **Challenges of a Cross-Cultural Lifestyle**

A TCK's perception of life experiences and acquired identity are mixed. One study that used semi-structured Life Study Interviewing for a sample of 19 found that 15 described their experience as positive, 3 described it as both positive and negative, and one initially suggested negative then changed answers to positive. Some negative features included being unsure of where one is from, distant relationships with home culture relatives, saying goodbye, leaving familiar settings, not being able to settle down anywhere, and a lack of a sense of belonging (Moore & Barker, 2012). Having membership in many cultures is connected to not having ownership in any, leading to a sense of instability.

Significant sources of difficulty in students' transition to their parents' culture were missing friends and family, feeling misunderstood, and the pressure to keep in touch with friends from previous homes (Hervey, 2009). Pollock and Van Reken (2001) identified various challenges of the TCK lifestyle in their book, such as confused loyalties in national and international debates, heightened sensitivity and emotional pain in response to international crises, and ignorance of home culture, which at times can be construed as unpatriotic.

However, it is possible that more experience with cross-cultural transitions predicts better overall adjustments, based on the finding that those participants who had made 11+ moves had



significantly better adjustment levels than those with less than 10 (Hervey, 2009). The latter study also showed a negative correlation between the amount of time spent with friends from their home culture (parent country, i.e. United States/Canada) prior to moving to their home culture, and difficulty adjusting and making friends (Hervey, 2009). Having experience relating to people from the “destination culture” may have the effect of giving the sojourner practice in building relationships and familiarity with certain aspects of a new cultural setting before moving there. This may help sojourning TCKs become more comfortable taking ownership of their destination’s culture.

The most prominent challenge that TCKs face is the common experience of frequent moving and acclimatization to new settings. These transitions usually take a period of adjustment, the timing of which depends on various factors such as personality, attitude regarding transitions, and past experience with life transitions (Gillies, 1998). TCKs often struggle with feelings of loneliness, disconnection, and distance from relationships due to this highly transient lifestyle (Gillies, 1998; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014). Feelings of insecurity often stem from a lack of familiarity with the home culture (Gillies, 1998), and these feelings often lead to cultural homelessness.

Cultural homelessness is common in individuals of mixed ethnicity or culture in those who do not identify with the cultural framework of any one group (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011; Vivero & Jenkins, 1999). This is characteristic of many TCKs, as they grow up among different cultures, yet have innate or acquired characteristics that prevent them from becoming a full member of any culture. The cultural homelessness experience among TCKs is nearly identical to those of mixed race or ethnicity (Navarrete & Jenkins, 2011). Individuals who come from multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural background are significantly higher in cultural

homelessness than those of single ethnicity, race, or culture. An inverse relationship was found between cultural homelessness and level of ethnic identity identification (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011, Navarrete & Jenkins, 2011). In other words, culturally homeless individuals feel less able to find security in an identity that is characterized by owning aspects of more than one culture and embracing an interstitial culture. Also, those who identify as cultural homeless had significantly lower self-esteem than those who did not (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011; Navarrete & Jenkins, 2011), and were also more likely to have more cross-cultural experience than those who were not culturally homeless (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011). Though cross-cultural experience may facilitate better adjustments, it could foster a fragmented cultural identity by one's sense of a lack of ownership or belonging in a group.

One should be careful not to generalize the shared experiences of TCKs to the life situation of every TCK, as everyone carries different perceptions regarding their experiences. According to the latter studies (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011; Navarrete & Jenkins, 2011), a TCK with yet unresolved emotional pain may carry more negative perceptions about his/her identity than a TCK who has made relatively few significant cross-cultural transitions and has strong social support.

### **Cross-Cultural Adjustment**

As mentioned previously, a key feature that links the experiences of TCKs is that of cross-cultural moves and adjustment. By definition, TCKs grow up in a culture that is different from their "home culture", but they often move from place to place and from country to country. One of the most significant transitions that many students make occurs when individuals transition from life in their host culture to their home culture, either in order to start university studies or a career. This can be an especially difficult adjustment because, though a TCK may

externally appear to be just like others in their home culture, they do not necessarily share the same cultural norms and values as peers in their home cultures.

An ethnographic study of 13 postgraduate international students coded several prominent themes in these students' experiences, including nervousness, feelings of loss or disorientation, dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the host culture, feelings of depression, homesickness, and loneliness. Stress was also commonly observed, though it was impossible to separate this variable from the stress connected to coursework. These feelings of stress and disorientation may possibly be attributed to the phenomenon of culture shock (Brown & Holloway, 2008), which will be discussed in a later section. Culture shock often leads to struggles with sociocultural and psychological adjustment.

Psychological adjustment problems to new cultural environments can be traced to an external locus of control, high homesickness levels, significant life changes, dissatisfaction with host nationals, and difficulty in social situations. Similarly, sociocultural adjustment problems, related to a deficit in skills necessary to interact with people in new cultures, have been correlated with poor language ability, negative views of and fewer interactions with host nationals, significant differences between host culture and home culture, and mood disturbances (Wilson, Ward, & Fischer, 2013). These sociocultural adjustment problems are significantly greater among sojourning groups than among sedentary populations (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Thus, social skills and resilience training are key in the transition recovery process.

### **Culture Shock**

A common feature of international sojourn is culture shock. Culture shock is a negative reaction to being in an unfamiliar setting, and a perceived lack of control over one's circumstances. Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, and Todman defined culture shock as "The

collective impact of unfamiliar experiences on cultural travelers” (2008, p. 63). Though they may experience culture shock when moving to new locations outside of their home countries, TCKs often experience culture shock after moving back to their home countries, due to frequent lack of familiarity with certain features and values from their “home culture” (Zhou et al., 2008).

According to a sample of 149 undergraduate students at a US university, the principal causes of culture shock include being in a foreign language environment, interacting with culturally different people, unfamiliar surroundings, and an awareness of differences between one's own culture and the host culture (Goldstein & Keller, 2015). These feelings may be heightened in TCKs, because though they may be used to making cultural transitions, they have little control over the places they go and the surroundings they find themselves in. This may lead to various problems adjusting to a new setting.

Current conceptualizations of culture shock often use the ABC (Affect, Behavior, Cognition) model. This model shows different levels of response to new cultural situations. Affect involves a change in attitude, behavior involves a change in actions, and cognition involves a change in perceptions due to culture shock. This model suggests that people are actively engaged in resolving their own culture shock, learning and adapting to challenges rather than passively accepting them. Moreover, recent theory now sees culture shock as a stress-induced condition that is worsened by lack of practical skill. It is thought that TCKs are adept at dealing with culture shock due to accumulated experience. However, as a TCK, transitioning to an entirely new lifestyle in one's “home culture” may be particularly difficult because life in one's home culture is often highly dissimilar to the environment where one grew up. While dealing with the culture shock of moving between two third-world countries on the same continent may be manageable, it is moving back to one's country of national origin that is often

particularly trying. Elaborating further on the ABC process, the Acculturation Model suggests that those who are making a cultural adjustment must learn to cope with stress and learn relevant social skills (such as learning to communicate and relate to host nationals) that can be applied in a particular setting. For the purpose of making a successful cross-cultural transition, TCKs will need to translate their experiences to practical skills, such as learning socially appropriate behaviors, interpretation of cultural cues and norms, and self-efficacy (Zhou et al., 2008).

### **Features of Successful Cross-Cultural Adjustment: Traits**

While a lifestyle marked by international sojourn can often be distressing for children and adolescents, there are various strategies, dispositional factors, and behaviors, such as cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability, and flexibility (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2013) that aid individuals in navigating the struggles associated with cultural transitions.

Certain “stress-buffering” traits, such as cultural flexibility (Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006; Wilson et al., 2013) and emotional stability, protect a person from seeing a situation as threatening (Shaffer et al., 2006; Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2013). Third Culture Kids who, having applied themselves in several different cultural contexts, are able to self-regulate and adapt their behaviors and perceptions to certain cultural situations, have a lower likelihood of experiencing problems in the cross-cultural sojourn process. Similarly, “social-perceptual” traits help a person adapt to social contexts in new cultures. Such social initiative helps a person to seek out cross-cultural social situations to grow from (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2013). While some TCKs may express discomfort at new social experiences and having to make new friends, they are served well by playing to their strengths and engaging in cultural learning with new people.

A propensity for cultural learning largely depends on one's level of cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence (CQ), conceptually similar to cultural awareness and defined as one's ability to work well in a culturally diverse environment, lies at the heart of the cross-cultural adjustment process. It has been positively correlated with culturally sensitive decision-making effectiveness and sociocultural adjustment (Wilson et al., 2013). More specifically, motivational cultural intelligence (level of interest in other cultures) and behavioral cultural intelligence (ability to speak and act appropriately in a culturally diverse setting) are positively correlated with cultural adaptation and a sense of well-being and comfort in a new cultural setting. Thus, TCKs who have high CQ may attribute it to accumulated experience, but those who have low cognitive flexibility or grew up primarily in one location may encounter difficulty with transitions (Ang et al., 2007).

### **Features of Successful Cross-Cultural Adjustment: Exposure**

While TCKs may grow up in a culture that is different from their own, some seek little to no exposure to the local elements of the host culture. Greater interaction with host nationals is positively correlated with satisfying relationships with host nationals (Ward & Kennedy, 1993) as well as cross-cultural adjustment (Li & Gasser, 2005; Wilson et al., 2013). However, it is possible that this correlation only exists when contact with host nationals and openness were both high (Caligiuri, 2000). Thus, for those who are open to new experiences, social experiences with locals could ease the transition, but for those who avoid these experiences will engage little with locals socially and may struggle more with the cross-cultural adjustment. Those with strong ethnic identity ties may also struggle in the transitioning process as ethnic identification is negatively correlated with contact with host nationals (Li & Gasser, 2005; Ward & Kennedy, 1993) and positively correlated with homesickness (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Identifying very

closely with a particular ethnic group may lead one to want to identify exclusively with similar people, to the exclusion of others.

Cross-cultural self-efficacy also predicts contact with host nationals (Li & Gasser, 2005; Wilson et al., 2013). Those who have confidence in their ability to make successful transitions are more likely to have success. High self-efficacy has been linked to better adjustment levels in cross-cultural contexts across several dimensions, including general adjustment, interaction adjustment, and work adjustment (Harrison, Chadwick & Scales, 1996; Ittel & Sisler, 2012; Li & Gasser, 2005).

While building relationships with host nationals is a key part of making a successful international sojourn, recent findings have shown that home culture “primes” also facilitate security in this adjustment. An initial study assessed the effect of “memory tasks” that doubled as home culture priming sentences (“My favorite game is baseball”) on a sample of 87 US foreign exchange students. The results showed that those participants who received a home culture cue showed higher relational security, lower levels of depression, and higher cultural adjustment ratings (Ho-Ying Fu, Morris, & Yi Hong, 2015).

A follow-up study involving 43 Chinese exchange students showed that home culture primes helped with adjustment for those with feelings of insecurity regarding the cross-cultural integration process. Insecure participants scored significantly higher on cultural adjustment scales after receiving a home culture prime (in which students were asked to explain three symbols of home culture) than after receiving host culture prime. This difference was not found among participants who scored high on relational/cross-cultural security (Ho-Ying Fu et al., 2015). It is important to note that these findings did not denote that home culture primes elicited an objectively high level of cultural adjustment, but only that they can improve outcomes.

**Features of Successful Cross-Cultural Adjustment: Personality and Situational Variables**

Of particular interest in this study is the effect of personality variables on cross-cultural adjustment. Of the Big Five personality traits, extroversion, agreeableness, and openness have been correlated with general living, interaction, and work adjustment in new settings (Huang, Chi, & Lawler, 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006; Ward, Leong, & Low, 2016; Wilson et al., 2013). Conscientiousness (Ward et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2013) and openness (Ward et al., 2016) are also positively correlated with sociocultural adaptation, while neuroticism is negatively correlated with psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation (Wilson et al., 2013), and positively correlated with depression (Ward et al., 2016). Meanwhile, agreeableness and conscientiousness are negatively correlated with depression (Ward et al., 2016). This is important because depression may inhibit the self-efficacy needed to navigate the adjustment process.

Further variables that are correlated to sociocultural adjustment are situational variables such as discrimination and familiarity with host culture and host culture language. In situations of perceived discrimination, sociocultural adjustment is difficult because external factors imposed by the host community prevent the newcomer from assimilating. In contrast, a previous understanding of distinct features and languages can essentially “jump-start” the process of sociocultural adjustment for a newcomer (Wilson et al., 2013).

TCKs and other individuals who grew up in a culture that is different from their culture of birth or origin, though showing above average social sensitivity and cultural competence, often struggle with acculturation problems and cultural homelessness. Frequent cross-cultural adjustments due to a transient lifestyle often result in a strong sense of homesickness and psychological stress that can be attributed to culture shock. Navigating the stress of culture shock



involves developing healthy coping mechanisms and social skills that can be practically applied to the relevant setting. Certain features such as cultural flexibility, cultural intelligence, cross-cultural self-efficacy and social initiative, and personality variables such as openness, agreeableness, and extroversion are correlated with healthy cross-cultural transitions. The present study is similar in focus to the 2006 study by Shaffer et al. that was concerned with identifying several factors of expatriate success. These factors were said to be affected by a number of personality traits, such as emotional stability and agreeableness, and cross-cultural behavioral competencies such as cultural flexibility. This study assesses the importance of the latter variables and competencies for having a healthy cross-cultural adjustment, from the perceptions of a population of TCKs.

The hypotheses are as follows:

*Hypothesis 1: The constructs which will rank significantly higher than average in perceived importance will include self-efficacy, emotional stability, and cultural flexibility*

*Hypothesis 2: The constructs which will rank significantly lower than average in perceived importance will include acquisition of ethnic identity, acquisition of cross-cultural identity, and conscientiousness. The remaining constructs will not significantly differ from the mean.*

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample population was a group of Missionary Kids (MKs), aged 18-22, at a private American university. Each participant had already, or was in the process of, adjusting to life in the United States as a full-time student. Each participant attended mandatory classes as part of the requirements of the school's full-tuition scholarship for MKs. The researcher's relationship with the director of the MK Scholars program, who facilitates services and provides counseling

for MKs, and personal identity as an MK allowed access to these classes as an observant and participant. Participants were recruited through an email sent out from the LU Shepherd's office

### **Measure**

A 30-item survey (Appendix) was administered to the participants for the purpose of assessing which factors the sample population considers most important for a successful cross-cultural transition. Given that the sample had recent experiences with cross-cultural transitions, its perception of what makes up a successful adjustment carries particular relevance. The survey was designed by the researcher after identifying a number of relevant cross-cultural transitioning coping mechanisms in the literature. In order to qualify for inclusion in the study, variables had to be prominently featured in at least two peer-reviewed studies. Survey questions were coded to a construct item to assess the role of self-efficacy (Harrison et al., 1996; Ittel & Sisler, 2012; Li & Gasser, 2005; Wilson et al., 2013), self-esteem (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011; Navarrete & Jenkins, 2011), extroversion (Huang et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006; Ward et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2013), agreeableness (Huang et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006; Ward, et al. 2016; Wilson et al., 2013), conscientiousness (Ward et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2013), social connectedness (Hervey, 2009; Huang et al., 2005; Li & Gasser, 2005; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001), ethnic identity (identification with one's ethnic group; Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011, Li & Gasser, 2005; Navarrete & Jenkins, 2011; Ward & Kennedy, 1993), cross-cultural identity (identification with a Third Culture identity) (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011; Navarrete & Jenkins, 2011), emotional stability (Shaffer et al., 2006; Van der Zee & Van Outdenhoven, 2013), or cultural flexibility (Shaffer et al., 2006; Wilson et al., 2013) on the success of one's cross-cultural sojourning experiences.

The survey was reviewed by faculty members at the university in which this study was conducted, and field tested with peers of the researcher to ensure that questions were understandable. IRB approval was obtained in November of 2017, and each question was tested to ensure that it accurately measured the variable that it was intended to measure. Questions were organized as follows: Questions 1, 11, and 21 assess self-efficacy; 2, 12, and 22 assess self-esteem; 3, 13, and 23 assess extroversion, 4, 14, and 24 agreeableness; 5, 15, and 25 conscientiousness; 6, 16, and 26 social connectedness; 7, 17, and 27 ethnic identity; 8, 18, and 28 cross-cultural identity; 9, 19, and 29 emotional stability; and 10, 20, and 30 cultural flexibility. Participants were asked to rate the importance of each item for a successful cross-cultural adjustment on a Likert-type scale with possible answers ranging from Not At All Important, Sometimes Important, Important, and Very Important.

### **Procedure**

The surveys were sent to all potential participants via mailing list. Surveys were sent back to a third-party email address, and returned to the researcher from the latter source as a collection of anonymous attachments. Though the researcher was unable to determine the total number of possible participants, 15 surveys were returned. Answers were coded to a score from 1-4, with answers indicating “Not At All Important” earning a score of 1, “Sometimes Important” earning a score of 2, “Important” earning a score of 3, and “Very Important” earning a score of 4. For each participant, total scores of questions assessing each construct were calculated. For example, a participant who gave answers of “Very Important” (4 points), “Important” (3 points), and “Important” (3 points) for questions 1, 11, and 21, which assess the importance of self-efficacy, the participant’s total self-efficacy importance score would add up to 10. The highest maximum score for a construct was 12, indicating answers of 4 to all three

relevant questions, while the lowest possible score was 3, indicating answers of 1 to all three relevant questions. Individual scores closer to 12 indicate that a participant gives a construct a high level of importance in making a cross-cultural transition, while individual scores closer to 3 indicate that a participant gives a factor a low level of importance in making a cross-cultural transition. A collective mean score for all individual scores was calculated, and compared to the mean score of each individual variable using a one-sample t-test, in order to determine if particular variables showed significant differences in means to the overall sample population. In answer to hypothesis 1, a variable whose mean score was significantly higher than the overall mean of all variables was determined to have high perceived importance among the population of MKs. In answer to hypothesis 2, while a variable whose mean score was significantly lower than the overall mean of all variables was determined to have low perceived importance among the same population.

Important to note is that the answers given did not denote answers with objective or clinical significance. Thus, it was not the case that “low” average scores indicated objectively low levels of importance toward successful cross-cultural transitions, only low importance in comparison with other given factors in the survey.

## Results

The mean score across all factors, for the population as a whole, was 9.01. Mean scores for individual variables can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

*One-sample statistics for a group of variables relating to cross-cultural transitions for a sample of MKs*

<b>One-Sample Statistics</b>				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Self-efficacy	15	9.93	1.438	.371
Self-esteem	15	9.93	2.052	.530

Extroversion	15	7.80	1.612	.416
Agreeableness	15	10.27	1.668	.431
Conscientiousness	15	8.93	1.335	.345
Social connectedness	15	8.33	1.718	.444
Ethnic identity	15	7.13	1.685	.435
Cross-cultural identity	15	7.80	2.178	.562
Emotional stability	15	9.67	1.543	.398
Cultural flexibility	15	10.00	1.195	.309

Test results indicated several factors that were significantly different from the mean of 9.01.

Table 2

*One-sample t-test for a group of variables relating to cross-cultural transitions for a sample of MKs*

<b>One-Sample Test</b>						
Test Value = 9.01						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Self-efficacy	2.488	14	.026	.923	.13	1.72
Self-esteem	1.743	14	.103	.923	-.21	2.06
Extroversion	-2.906	14	.011	-1.210	-2.10	-.32
Agreeableness	2.919	14	.011	1.257	.33	2.18
Conscientiousness	-.222	14	.827	-.077	-.82	.66
Social connectedness	-1.525	14	.149	-.677	-1.63	.27
Ethnic identity	-4.314	14	.001	-1.877	-2.81	-.94
Cross-cultural identity	-2.152	14	.049	-1.210	-2.42	.00
Emotional stability	1.648	14	.122	.657	-.20	1.51
Cultural flexibility	3.208	14	.006	.990	.33	1.65

**Self-Efficacy**

The mean score of the self-efficacy factor was 9.93, with a standard deviation of 1.438, and standard error of .371. This score was significantly higher than the mean,  $t(14)=2.488, p=.026$ .

### **Self-Esteem**

The mean score of the self-esteem factor was 9.93, with a standard deviation of 2.052, and standard error of .530. This score was not significantly different from the mean,  $t(14)=1.743, p=ns$ .

### **Extroversion**

The mean score of the extroversion factor was 7.80, with a standard deviation of 1.612, and standard error of .416. This score was significantly below the mean,  $t(14)=-2.906, p=.011$ .

### **Agreeableness**

The mean score of the agreeableness factor was 10.27, with a standard deviation of 1.668, and standard error of .431. This score was significantly higher than the mean,  $t(14)=2.919, p=.011$ .

### **Conscientiousness**

The mean score of the conscientiousness factor was 8.93, with a standard deviation of 1.335, and standard error of .345. This score was not significantly different from the mean,  $t(14)=-.222, p=ns$ .

### **Social Connectedness**

The mean score of the social connectedness factor was 8.33, with a standard deviation of 1.718 and standard error of .444. This score was not significantly different from the mean,  $t(14)=-1.525, p=ns$ .

### **Ethnic Identity**

The mean score of the ethnic identity factor was 7.13, with a standard deviation of 1.685, and standard error of .435. This score was significantly below the mean,  $t(14)=-4.314$ ,  $p=001$ .

### **Cross-Cultural Identity**

The mean score of the cross-cultural identity factor was 7.80, with a standard deviation of 2.178, and standard error of .562. This score was significantly below the mean,  $t(14)=-2.152$ ,  $p=.049$ .

### **Emotional Stability**

The mean score of the emotional stability factor was 9.67, with a standard deviation of 1.543, and standard error of .398. This score was not significantly different from the mean,  $t(14)=1.648$ ,  $p=ns$ .

### **Cultural Flexibility**

The mean score of the cultural flexibility factor was 10.00, with a standard deviation of 1.195, with a standard error of .309. This score was significantly above the mean,  $t(14)=3.208$ ,  $p=.006$ .

In comparison with the overall mean of 9.01, self-efficacy, agreeableness, and cultural flexibility were significantly higher. Thus, hypothesis 1 was partially supported in that self-efficacy and cultural flexibility were significantly higher than average. However, emotional stability was not significantly different from the mean, and agreeableness was significantly higher.

In contrast, extroversion, strong ethnic identity, and strong cross-cultural identity were all significantly below the mean. Hypothesis 2 was partially supported in that ethnic identity and

cross-cultural identity were significantly lower than average. However, conscientiousness was not significantly different from the mean, and extroversion was significantly lower.

## **Discussion**

### **Application**

Just as is the case with all mental health clients, raising well-adjusted TCKs requires a special effort to meet both perceived and real needs. The results of this study are practically applicable to counselors and laypeople working to build resilience in repatriating TCKs and MKs. Whether integrating such information into re-entry retreat curricula or seeking broader understanding as a parent or caregiver, knowing the unique struggles and coping mechanisms of TCKs should lead to a deeper understanding of what needs may be unmet in an individual or group of individuals, and which individual strengths may be accentuated.

The significance of self-efficacy, agreeableness, and cultural flexibility in this study is consistent with the medium to large effect sizes connecting each of the latter variables and cultural adjustment as found in the 2013 meta-analysis by Wilson et al. These results are also indirectly consistent with Li & Gasser's (2005) correlation between self-efficacy and contact with host nationals (which was in turn highly correlated with successful sociocultural adaptation). Correlations found in a 2016 study of the relationship between Big Five personality traits and cross-cultural transitions which indicate the importance of agreeableness (Ward et al.), and an analysis by Shaffer et al. (2006) on specific personality traits and socio-behavioral competencies indicated that cultural flexibility is a strong predictor of cross-cultural adjustment.

From the sample of TCKs being studied, it could be inferred that an emphasis on self-efficacy, encouraging interpersonal positivity and agreeableness, and developing cultural flexibility are important for cross-cultural transitions. This could involve using motivational



techniques and integrating readiness to change scales, teaching and modeling social skills that are important for the destination culture, or educating individuals about cultural features of their new destination to mitigate the effects of culture shock and help them develop greater cultural flexibility.

### **Limitations**

It is important to note that the results from this study do not necessarily indicate objective standards of the importance of particular socio-cognitive factors toward making successful cross-cultural transitions. Though certain factors may have earned higher or lower scores from the participants, indicating perceived higher or lower levels of importance, these results remain objectively insignificant. For example, the fact that self-efficacy scored significantly above the mean in regard to perceived importance, does not necessarily indicate that this factor is particularly important for the overall population.

Given the relatively small sample size, these results are not generalizable to the general population of TCKs. Future studies that assess similar constructs should seek to obtain a larger response of self-report surveys in order to increase validity and reduce standard error.

These results should also not be generalized to high school students or younger children. Future research should replicate this study with different groups in order to compare the perceptions of younger students or older adults with the perceptions of the sample in this study. Different results could carry different implications for interventions, depending on age. Different sub-populations of TCKs may yield different results, as the sample population in this study may only represent a particular group of TCKs that may differ in key ways from the overall population of TCKs. Thus, further research comparing the perceptions of MKs and other TCKs (for example, children of military personnel or children of diplomats) could help researchers

determine significant differences between MKs and other TCKs that could affect the efficacy of interventions.

Finally, the results of this study should have limited implications for clinical work. While they may illuminate certain common features of the perceptions of TCKs and MKs, these only operate as potential foci for interventions. There may be key differences between the *perceived* needs of TCKs and their *actual* needs. Further research is needed to compare current intervention outcomes of repatriating or transitioning TCKs on adjustment health with treatments focused on TCK perceived needs (as discerned in this study).

It is hoped that the results of this study will lead to a greater understanding not only of the unique problems associated with a sojourning lifestyle, but also of the variables that can mitigate the negative effects of these transitions. These results could be especially useful for mental health professionals who are trying to help TCKs successfully navigate life in a new home. By identifying the key socioemotional needs that TCKs face, counselors can help them to cognitively reframe their situation and better cope with and relate to their surroundings.

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## Appendix

**Third Culture Transitional Success: A Study of Personality and Identity Variables Influencing  
Cross-Cultural Transitions****Instructions**

Indicate how important each item is toward making a “successful” cross-cultural transition. **Bold** one option per question. Rate each item to the best of your knowledge and understanding, based on your personal experience or general perception.

**Year:** Freshman          Sophomore          Junior          Senior  
**Survey**

- 1) Having a confidence in your own ability
  - Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 2) Having a positive view of self
  - Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important

- 3) Enjoying being around people
  - Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 4) Staying positive
  - Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 5) Taking your time to do things the right way
  - Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 6) Feeling socially connected
  - Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 7) Strongly identifying with your ethnic group
  - Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 8) Having a sense of belonging to more than one culture at once
  - Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 9) Being able to control emotions
  - Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 10) Being open to new experiences
  - Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important



- Very Important
- 11) Believing that you can make an effective transition possible
- Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 12) Believing that you deserve to be loved and cared for
- Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 13) Being outgoing
- Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 14) Being kind and warm to others
- Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 15) Staying with a plan
- Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 16) Expecting to receive social support
- Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 17) Pride in your national/ethnic heritage
- Not at all important
  - Somewhat important
  - Important
  - Very Important
- 18) Being comfortable identifying with more than one culture
- Not at all important
  - Somewhat important

- Important  
Very Important
- 19) Being able to calm yourself down  
Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important
- 20) Feeling confident adapting to new settings  
Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important
- 21) Believing that you can pick yourself back up when you're down  
Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important
- 22) Believing that you are worthy of attention and care from others  
Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important
- 23) Being comfortable seeking out friends  
Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important
- 24) Being willing to cooperate and work with others  
Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important
- 25) Staying disciplined  
Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important
- 26) Confidence that you have people around you who have your back

Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important

27) Not feeling like you need to have a different skin color/have a different first language to fit in

Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important

28) Feeling a sense of pride in being "Cross-cultural"

Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important

29) Not getting upset too easily

Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important

30) Being able to make yourself feel at home anywhere

Not at all important  
Somewhat important  
Important  
Very Important