

A Phenomenological Study of the Cross-Cultural Transitions of
University-Level Missionary Kids

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Abstract

The cultural identity and transitions of a Third Culture Kid (TCK) is often a matter of discussion and debate. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the factors that influence the identity and the cross-cultural transitions of university-level TCKs, with a specific focus on Missionary Kids (MKs). The study involved semi-structured interviews of seven undergraduate university students, over the age of 18 and currently involved in the university's Missionary Kid Scholarship program. Results revealed several key themes including identity, community, and friendship expectations that influenced the transition process. Participants generally displayed a positive transition, and the findings provide insight into ways that schools and organizations may help the cross-cultural transition of MKs.

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Sociologists Useem and Useem were the first to use the term *Third Culture Kid* (TCK) as a concept while observing American citizens living in India (Akhund, 2021). In the 1950s they were studying the lives of American citizens living in India. The researchers observed an integration of the two cultures into a third culture an American/Indian culture among the American citizens. Useem and Useem also noted the influence of other cultures on the development of the Americans' third culture. The third culture was perceived to be a blend of several cultures due to the close expatriate community experienced by the American citizens.

The term *Third Culture Kid* (TCK) has not been operationalized; however, it is generally acknowledged as a child that has grown up in a country outside of their parent's country of citizenship (Tan et al., 2021). Globalization has contributed to the migration of families to other countries. As these families become more established and grow, there is the potential development of the third culture, and TCKs (Akhund, 2021). This third culture would be a connection between their parents' culture and their host culture. These cultures, which a child grows up in, do not completely combine but may be considered instead as the space between cultures, or an "interstitial culture" (Tan et al., 2021, p. 82). Aspects of each culture may be adapted into the family structure or system. But families may also lean more towards one culture and represent one side, more than the other. The term TCKs can apply to various demographics, of which the most common are those who are children of "diplomats, international-school teachers, economic expatriates, [and] missionaries" (Akhund, 2021, p. 245). The concepts of identity, relationships, cultural outlook, and transitions are common themes in the lives of TCKs.

A closer look at children of missionaries will provide an increased understanding of TCKs, as these children are often fully immersed in the culture. Hartman (2022) defines a missionary as one that is living in a country different than their passport country, for the purpose of teaching or serving for religious reasons. The researcher defines Missionary Kids (MKs) as the children of missionary parents who have grown up in a host culture different than the ones their parents grew up in. The life of an MK is continually shifting as they transition between their host country or countries and their home country. Hartman (2022) conducted a study using adults who had grown up as MKs. In their research they found that the participants reported that their multicultural upbringing had led to them being more open towards other cultures, having empathy towards those of similar cultural backgrounds, and having a greater overall knowledge of the world. However, several participants also discussed the difficulties they faced in the loss of friendships, due to friends coming in and out of their lives.

There is a lack of programmatic and cohesive research regarding the subject of TCKs (Tan et al., 2021). There is specifically an evident lack of research regarding the specific demographic of MKs attending university (Smith & Kearney, 2016). There is further theorization that the multicultural upbringing, including their relationships, cultural intelligence, and cultural transitions, as well as the identity of MKs, is linked to their transition into university and will influence their overall adjustment process.

Review of the Literature

Identity

The identity development of a TCK can be complex due to the influences of the surrounding cultures (Akhund, 2021). Constant transitions contribute an additional layer to their identity as well. Erik Erikson's theory on identity regarding adolescence suggests that it is a

period of confusion as one attempts to understand their identity and begin the transition of becoming an adult (Miller et al., 2020). In a study by Smith and Kearney (2016), TCKs and MKs who lived abroad during these developmental years noted the impact that it had on their identity when moving back home. Some students reported not being able to settle or claim anywhere as home, while others swayed between settling in their host country or their home country. Being a TCK adds layers to this developmental process as adolescents attempt to understand their identity and purpose while living in a multicultural environment (Smith & Kearney, 2016).

Therefore, this period of life becomes an essential transition as one learns about themselves, who they are, and, where they fit into the larger world. Being a TCK, however, adds complexities to this transition. This may be because an adolescent is processing the concept of their identity while simultaneously living in a complex, multicultural environment (Hartman, 2022). This may lead to identity confusion as an adolescent may change their identity to better fit into their current cultural environment (Miller et al., 2020). It may also influence an individual's ability to develop lasting relationships, and a constant community because of their continual movement.

In their review, Donohue (2022), discussed the theme of identity negotiation in relation to TCKs. Identity negotiation occurs when one begins to process who they are as an individual and understand where they fit into the greater community around them. Identity negotiation for a TCK occurs when they are made aware of the differences between themselves and those around them. When there are differences found, it may cause one to change aspects of their identity to make up for these differences (Benjamin & Dervin, 2019 as cited in Donohue, 2022). This can involve a child changing their behavior or accent to better adjust to those they are around.

This continual identity negotiation can be difficult and complex for one to process. In a study by Smith and Kearney (2016), the TCK student participants discussed the struggle they faced regarding fitting in, in the process of repatriation. Repatriation is defined as moving back to one's host or parent's culture and can significantly impact this identity negotiation (Donohue, 2022). From the outside, the child may appear to fit into their home culture, but they may share more similarities, culturally, with international students (Smith & Kearney, 2016). As a result, they would develop coping mechanisms that would allow them to adjust easier and involve them becoming "chameleons" to better blend or fit into their environment (Smith & Kearney, 2016, p. 964). This continual identity negotiation can be difficult and complex for one to process.

Donohue (2022) acknowledges how this evolving lifestyle of a TCK can cause difficulties in the development of their identity. However, they note that it can create an adaptable nature, as individuals repeatedly learn to adjust and readjust to new environments. This is beneficial as a TCK's evolution allows them to transition to new places or environments more easily, and settle in faster. TCKs can assimilate and adjust culturally, linguistically, and behaviourally.

Reverse culture shock is also something a TCK may experience in repatriation (Hartman, 2022). This involves a feeling of unfamiliarity and surprise that occurs when someone encounters a culture that they were once familiar with. For example, this may include a TCK returning to their home culture but experiencing shock and unfamiliarity, despite having been there before. Reverse culture shock can be seen in the study by Giboi and Nath (2023). The majority of participants (n = 6) reported feeling culture shock from their home culture, and due to their multicultural lifestyles, the participants noted struggling to adapt to a singular culture. One participant observed that they acknowledged the importance of knowing the language and

culture of their current country of residence. They also stated, however, that they realized that they do not have to “comply,” with this culture, and this realization made their life “much easier and much calmer” (Giboi & Nath, 2023, p. 46).

De Waal and Born (2021) discuss four types of cultural identity transitions and apply them to the context of TCKs. These transitions depict how one is affected by a culture and adjusts to it. A subtractive identity shift involves having a more positive attitude towards one’s host culture, than that of their home culture. Those with this mindset are therefore more likely to struggle in the repatriation process as they feel like an outsider in their ‘home’ (De Waal & Born, 2021). An individual with an affirmative shift exhibits the opposite attitude and looks forward to moving home. An additive shift is a TCK who approaches both cultures, home, and host, positively, appreciating both individually. Finally, the intercultural cultural identity references an individual who has encountered several cultures and approaches their home, host, and other cultures from an open, and optimistic attitude. These different mindsets influence the way that one may transition into a new cultural environment and impact the adjustment process of an individual.

There is a difference between one's ethnic identity and cultural identity, as evidenced by a study conducted by Kim et al. (2019). One’s ethnic identity is related to their culture and parents' household. A cultural identity is more complex and can encompass one’s ethnic identity while including other cultures or practices. A child born in America, to American parents that grew up in Peru may be considered ethnically American, but culturally could represent both American and Peruvian cultures. One’s cultural identity can be impacted in different ways depending on the factors that surround one’s transitions, including repatriation (De Waal & Born, 2021).

Giboi and Nath (2023) discuss how seven out of 10 of their multicultural participants identified having a complicated “identity, perspective, or...experiences” (p. 49). There were negative emotions tied to this description as participants displayed “frustration” or stated that it could be “difficult or exhausting” (p. 49). Due to the complex experiences of multicultural individuals, and the various connections they may have to several countries or cultures, questions of identity may prove to be difficult to answer. Participants described their cultural identities through terms such as being “bi-cultural or tri-cultural” (p. 50), which demonstrates a connection to two or three cultures. The word “blend” was also used to describe how some participants felt as though they were a mixture of a few countries or all the countries they had resided in (p. 50).

Relationships

The life of a TCK involves the meeting of people all around the world, and the development of relationships. The friendships or communities of an individual may therefore replace a physical home and be a better representation of belongingness (Mosanya & Kwiatkowska, 2021). This is especially relevant for communities that have shared or similar experiences (De Waal & Born, 2021). For a TCK this may mean both friends or family, and essentially individuals who have had the shared experience of growing up in different places, who understand their continual transitioning lifestyle and their complex cultural identity. An individual’s relationships can contribute to their sense of belonging which can then influence their identity.

These transitions have an impact on the relationship that a TCK may form. A study by Hartman (2022) found that Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs) tended to have close relationships with their siblings, especially if they had attended the same boarding school. They also found that several participants reported having a very close relationship with the MKs who studied at

their boarding schools. 75% connected their feelings of belongingness to their relationships around them, particularly family relationships (De Waal & Born, 2021). Participants' relationships with their parents seemed to be more varied, however; as some stated that they had close relationships with their parents, whereas others reported difficulties with their parents due to being sent to boarding schools. Some participants, however, reported an overall lack of trust in their relationships due to their continual change in environment and people. When questioned about the most significant difficulty they faced living abroad, the most common answer was the constant loss of friends due to people moving away.

A qualitative study was done on TCKs using a poetic inquiry by the researchers, De Waal and Born (2021). Participants took part in writing free-hand poems, which they then discussed through a semi-structured interview with the researchers. The researchers asked participants to define belonging and the majority of the TCK participants reported their feelings of belongingness in connection to people. Participants associated belonging with their family, friends, or others.

Researchers, Guboi and Nath (2023) investigated the identities of individuals who are multi-country immigrants, having lived in three or more countries. Three significant themes were found concerning this subject: adaptation, connection and disconnection, and finally identity dimensions. Participants were divided in their reports of adjustment to a new country, noting the influences of past experiences, and the current climate of the new country. Regarding the connections and disconnections of the participants, however, the researchers found that relationships were highly discussed and essential.

The participants reported the value of having a community and support surrounding them and the influence it had on their overall "adaptation and well-being" process (Giboi & Nath,

2023, p. 46). However, nine of the participants also discussed how their continually transitioning lifestyle led to lost relationships. One participant described how some of their friendships “stuck [and some] didn’t” (Giboi & Nath, 2023, p. 46). The researchers concluded then that MCIs are purposely seeking “reciprocal relationships,” which occur despite one’s continual moving and can be maintained through a variety of sources, including virtual (Giboi & Nath, 2023, p. 47).

Cultural Outlook and Intelligence

Cultural intelligence is an individual's ability to interact in diverse environments. It can be influenced by various antecedents including traveling, having friends from different cultures, and watching movies from other countries. By participating in these experiences one can develop a greater level of cultural intelligence (Kadam et al., 2022). Individuals that continually take part in globalization, have been found to have a greater concept of multiculturalism and a more open stance towards diversity (Giboi & Nath, 2023). In a study conducted by Giboi & Nath (2023) eight out of 10 multicultural participants were more understanding of their cultural knowledge and they recognized the uniqueness of their diverse perspectives.

The international experience of a TCK significantly increases their cultural outlook, sensitivity, and cultural intelligence. There can be both benefits and disadvantages to growth in cultural outlook, which may otherwise be known as the paradoxical life (Akhund, 2021). The positive aspect of a wide cultural worldview is that a TCK may have a greater awareness of the world around them. In a study involving ATCKs, researchers questioned the participants about the advantages of having grown up abroad (Hartman, 2022). Several participants reacted positively towards having grown up abroad, discussing how it has helped them have more significant interactions with those of different cultures, a greater awareness of the world, and

more empathy towards those living abroad or those displaced. TCKs may also have more “positive diversity beliefs,” than those who are not TCKs (De Waal & Born, 2020).

A study conducted by researchers De Waal et al. (2020) investigated the differences in intercultural competencies between TCKs and non-TCKs. The researchers found that those who were TCKs held more positive diversity beliefs than those who were non-TCKs. Those who were TCKs also reported higher levels of intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, and building commitment. The results of this study display the potential benefits of living abroad on the cultural intelligence of a TCK. These positive experiences also apply to TCKs when they are adults or ATCKs, and while they may have an expanded worldview, they were also found to have a continued interest in travel, and cultures (Abe, 2018).

In a study with ATCKs, Luring et al. (2019), found a positive relationship between the cultural experiences of the participants and their personal development. One’s development was found, however, to be influenced by the level of engagement an individual had with their hosting culture. Personal development was found to be most prominent among the participants who had a greater engagement with the communities they were amongst. An individual may be living in a culture different than that is not their ‘home,’ yet if they are not intentional in their interactions within that culture, they may not have the same growth as those who are more fully participating in their host cultures.

A difficulty that TCKs may experience is their lack of stability. They are essentially culturally suspended and may not settle in a singular geographical location for long (De Waal & Born, 2021). These continual transitions can be distressing and discouraging for a child, as they leave behind the comfort of friendships and a familiar environment and readjust to a new environment. The different cultures may also lead to an overwhelming number of perspectives

that can end up becoming conflicting and confusing for a child. This is especially true when a child begins to think more about who they are, their identity, and their sense of belonging.

Cross-Cultural Transitions

Transitions are a significant factor in the life of a TCK. This transitional lifestyle involves changing schools, communities, and countries. One leaves a place they may feel comfortable at, and people that they know, to go to a place where they may need to learn a new culture, another language and meet new people. De Waal and Born (2021) found that their participants had individually experienced moving to a new country one to eight times before the age of 18.

Psychological struggles can arise from these continual cultural transitions. Transitions have been shown to contribute to increased levels of mental health disorders such as anxiety disorders for TCKs. When studying MKs returning ‘home’ after living overseas, more than half displayed high-stress levels. At the same time, around 43% reported higher levels of anxiety and depression and lower overall psychological well-being levels (Miller et al., 2020). A study involving TCKs in an international school in Abu Dhabi also found that they displayed more depressive symptoms than non-TCKs (Thomas et al., 2021). These results emphasize the need for transitional programs, ensuring that the TCKs receive the appropriate care that acknowledges their identity development, mental health, and understanding of their complex cultural background.

College Transitions

Transitioning to college may also be a difficult process for an individual. It is a major life process and can impact one’s narrative identity (Patterson et al., 2022). Narrative identity is an individual’s perspective and interpretations of their experiences, and how they believe these experiences have influenced who they are (Adler, 2019). College can be a period of growth and

excitement in one's life as it encourages new social connections and relationships, and provides a new environment and anticipation for what the future may hold (Patterson et al., 2022). A college transition can however also be taxing and difficult, leading to the development of various mental health problems for college students (Kneeland & Dovidio, 2020). Identity development can also influence this process and the way that one adjusts to college.

A transition to college may be particularly difficult for a TCK. The college transition can be challenging for any individual as they learn what it means to be away from their family, while simultaneously adjusting to a college education and curriculum compared to a high school one (Bethel et al., 2020). College individuals are learning new levels of independence, how to live with new people, and how to balance social activities with sleep and school. This transition is complex for an individual, however, for a TCK there is an additional layer added to this as they may be adjusting to a 'new' or foreign culture. Tan et al (2021), describes TCKs in this position as being 'hidden immigrants.' Essentially stating that they are individuals who look and maybe talk like those around them, but within and culturally are different like an immigrant.

An individual's sense of self or identity can impact the way they adjust to new environments and, in this case, transition into college. One's narrative identity may be based on one's environment and is influenced by context events, including academic situations as well as social situations (Lilgendahl & Mclean, 2019). The community that an individual has on a college campus can also influence their transitions. As well as this, it is beneficial for one to participate in the reflection and processing of their transition. This gives an individual time to process the changes that have taken place, and potential identity shifts that have occurred from these changes.

Specialized Programs

Special programs can be set up by schools, or organizations to help the transitional process of TCKs, adjust to new cultures, or going to college. These programs can integrate the children into the community, develop their identities, and provide a safe support system that they may turn to in times of need. TCKs often lack the support they may need; thus, schools with international students can develop a program to provide essential support for them (Miller et al., 2020). This may involve helping them to reorient their mindsets. Encouraging and teaching TCK students to have a more malleable emotional mindset, can allow them to process their emotions better, and result in better mental health (Kneeland & Dovidio, 2020). Having a close community in college can also impact one's transition and adjustment to one's new environment. Therefore, a program that offers community-based activities may be helpful to get TCKs involved and connected to one another. This can ease their transition and surround them with others of similar mindsets and backgrounds (Patterson et al, 2022).

When conducting a study with Korean cross-cultural kids, the researchers noted implications that may be beneficial to working with TCKs (Lee et al., 2022). They first suggest encouraging cultural assimilation. This can include providing a child with the opportunity to connect with individuals and activities of their home culture, while also providing an opening to do the same for the host culture. By working with individuals who are having a difficult transition and negative affect to cross-cultural transitions, encouraging positive mindsets can be beneficial to this process. Finally, problems that arise when an individual is already in another culture may be prevented or decreased if they receive the appropriate education or training on living in a foreign country and understand themselves as a multicultural individual.

When studying international students, researchers Zhou et al (2020), found that they were not more likely to have more mental health struggles compared to their domestic counterparts. However, they were found to face difficulty in seeking help for struggles they may have been facing. Both international students and TCKs experience multicultural environments and transitions, and it may be beneficial for programs to take this into consideration in ensuring that both populations are aware of the help available to them, and are encouraged to take advantage of it.

When caring for missionaries overseas, organizations often take into account the need for multicultural care to be provided. The needs of those who are living or have lived overseas are unique. In the same way an organization may provide help for missionaries moving abroad, it is important to provide help for when they move back ‘home.’ This involves providing care that meets the unique needs and acknowledges the distinct cultural lives of missionaries, and their kids (Davis & Baraka, 2021).

The Missionary Kid Scholarship program at Liberty University is a scholarship opportunity for MKs to attend university at a discounted price, while also providing a unique community and support that acknowledges the needs of MKs (Liberty University). To be in the program a student must be a US citizen in a full-time undergraduate program, and whose parents are currently serving as overseas missionaries or are on an approved one-year furlough. A student in the MK program must also be considered a ‘dependent’ under the age of 24, able to complete FAFSA and keep up with their financial aid.

The Present Study

The purpose of this thesis is to gain a greater insight into the cultural changes of university-age TCKs. It specifically seeks to understand how the multicultural upbringings and

cultural identities of MKs have influenced their cross-cultural transitions to university. The researcher hopes to gain a better understanding of the relationship between the multicultural backgrounds of Missionary Kids (MKs), specifically, and their adjustment process to being in university.

This may shed light on areas within the school system that are lacking in caring for this demographic, as well as key figures or programs that have been beneficial in this cultural transition. Using interviewing, standard questions created by the researcher, and the gathering of similar themes within the participants' experiences, the study hopes to ascertain the cross-cultural transitions of university-level Missionary Kids (MKs) at Liberty University.

Methods

Sample

This phenomenological study was made up of a sample of three females and four males. Each participant was over the age of 18, a current undergraduate student in university, and a part of the Missionary Kid Scholarship program. Out of the seven participants, three were in their sophomore year, three were juniors and one was in their senior year at university. The participants were between the ages of 19-23, and each represented a different area of study. All the participants were US citizens while two participants held dual citizenship. Each participant had lived in two to six different countries at some point: five countries in Asia, three in North America, one in South America, two in Europe, two in Africa, and two in Australasia.

Research Design

This study was conducted as a phenomenological research study, which seeks to understand the root or purpose of an experience. The purpose of this study was to better comprehend the phenomenon of the cross-cultural transitions of TCKs, specifically MK. A

phenomenological study is valuable in the process of researching this subject, as it uses methods such as interviews to learn of the shared and similar experiences of individuals regarding the research topic. It is also ideal when the focus of the research is gathering qualitative data (Creswell, 2007). The current study utilized qualitative research as it involved the discussion of experiences and gathered similar themes between the participants' interviews.

The interview was based on a semi-structured interview created by the researcher. The interview comprised of 12 separate questions, of which eight questions had one to three follow-up questions. The interviews were semi-structured as the interviewer would ask clarifying questions related to the answers provided by participants, along with the structured interview questions used in Appendix A. This was to prevent miscommunication and ensure a better understanding of the subjects being discussed. An example of this included asking P2 to clarify the ages they lived in different cultures. The first eight questions gathered demographic information to gain a greater insight into the participants, and their background and to allow potential connections to be made when the data would later be analyzed. The latter half of the interview involved more open questions, regarding the cultural experiences of the participants, and their transition process to university. For greater detail see Appendix A for the complete list of interview questions used.

Procedure

The researcher completed the Collaborative IRB Training Initiative (CITI) and received IRB approval. Participants (n=3) were recruited through convenience sampling. This technique involved the researcher recruiting personal acquaintances that fulfilled the sampling criteria. Snowballing or chain sampling was also used to recruit participants (n=4). This involved the

researcher enlisting the help of their participants to identify other individuals who matched the sampling criteria and would be willing to participate in a study.

A consent form was sent via email to each of the participants using the website Docusign. The signed consent form was returned and a 30-minute interview was set. Once the researcher received the consent form, they would arrange a time to meet with the participants through text messaging. The participants were made aware that the interview would last at least 30 minutes, and that it would be audio recorded.

The interviewing process took place over the course of two weeks. Each interview was held at the main Liberty University, Jerry Falwell Library, in a reserved private study room. The interviews were audio-recorded using an iPhone recording application and transcribed using Otter_ai and MacWhisper software. Following the interview, the researcher reviewed the transcripts for accuracy and made the appropriate correctional changes. These changes were minimal and included correcting misspelled words, adjusting grammatical errors, and clarifying the identity of the individual speakers. The transcripts were then provided to the participants, via their email, as a courtesy. Each participant was interviewed once, and each interview was conducted by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through the online research program, Dedoose. The program gathers key themes from the audio recordings and arranges them through a coding system. This could include phrases, or words that were similar and were shared across the various interviews.

Results

Theme 1: Friendship Expectations

The first theme that emerged was the expectations that participants had in regard to friendships. Individuals at times struggled to develop friendships. Participant 6 (P6) relates their upbringing as a TCK to their ability to have friends. They expected that it “would be easier to make friends freshmen year than it was.” P6 described their connection to “TCK culture” and how it, along with their North African host culture encouraged friendships that “get really close, really fast.” Comparing it to America where they state that “people take forever to become friends,” as they form “shallow” friendships that later get deeper. P4 strengthens this point by stating that they had “made a lot of friends” but found it difficult to “get close” in these friendships. The gender expectations influenced P3’s cross-cultural transitions as they were surprised by the “interactions” between males and females. As they had grown up in the Middle East, and witnessed their father predominantly spend time with men, and their mother with women as per that culture.

Theme 2: Social Communities

The social communities of the participants were in part discussed as being an aid to them in their process of cultural adjustment and is a second key theme. Four of the participants, P2, P4, P5, and P6 discussed the benefits of their relationships with their roommates, as well as the community provided in their halls. P5 emphasized this point further by describing how their roommate helped to bring them “out of (their) shell,” brought comfort, and was able to explain “certain things about the culture” that they did not “pick up on” like “sayings.”

Two participants, P3 and P4 listed siblings, specifically their brothers as factors that helped in their cross-cultural transitions to university. While P6 discussed having a relationship

with their roommate, and those a part of the spiritual leadership team on their hall, they also noted that they expected “more community on the hall.” They stated that they knew only a few people during the first year of university in their dorm building hall.

Regarding friendships made, there is a theme of participants being friends with like-minded individuals who may have come from similar backgrounds. P2 discussed their first-year roommate who had been an MK “a long time ago” but was still able on some level to relate to P2, as they had that shared experience of living abroad. P3 however discusses how they did not as much “connect” with the other MK students but describes how they were able to become “really good friends” with the international students. Friends of multicultural but not necessarily MKs were also discussed as P6 described their close friendship with another student at the university who was a child of Peruvian immigrants but had grown up in the United States. They were able to “explain American culture” to P6, and they were able to “sympathize” with the struggles of P6 and “offer up counter viewpoints.” P6 describes how this friend was a “wonderful example” for them as they were a “blend of cultures” but also “really loved, and valued, and respected America.”

Theme 3: The Missionary Kid Scholarship Program

Several participants noted the benefit of the Missionary Kid (MK) program in their cross-cultural transitions. P1 and P6 specifically mention the head of the program. P1 discusses the freshmen year class provided by the MK program that revealed to the client that they “had things to work through” that they did not realize. Furthermore, P6 discusses how the head of the program “challenged” them, specifically regarding loving America, their ‘home country,’ while equally embracing “the love,” for their host country even when they would “rather be overseas.” The MK program also offers lead groups or bible studies. P2 noted these lead groups as being a

positive factor in their transition to university. They discuss how their lead group was “really helpful,” and describe it as being “fun...and beneficial.” P7 describes how the program was a “welcoming” place of acceptance that one does not “have to fight for” and compares it to being “on the mission field.”

Theme 4: Multicultural Identity

The theme of one's multicultural identity was a fourth theme that developed from the research process. Each participant discussed their relation and connection to more than one cultural identity. P2 cited how others recognized this about them as well. As a person told them that they are “not American,” but that they more so represented “Latin culture,” despite having US citizenship. P3 acknowledged that they were “different from” individuals of their host country, however they stated that they “still claim it as home.” Possessive pronouns were also used in reference to one's host culture as P5 used the term “in my country” in reference to their host country. The use of the term ‘my’ suggests a personal relationship or connection to that country, despite the fact it was not their country of citizenship. P7 discussed the differences in the way they act, depending on where they are.

P1 notes that they would get “scared” of revealing their cultural identity to others. This was because they would often be asked questions that they were unsure of how to answer or could not relate to. They gave the example of an individual asking them, and talking to them about anime, a specific type of animation that is often related to P1's host country. For P1 however, they do not generally have an interest in this subject, but they state this is often “the first question” they receive when discussing their cultural identity.

Additional Findings

Two participants, P5 and P6 both discuss the differences in church cultures between their host country and America. P5 discusses how in their home country in the church that their family is establishing, it is common for people to commune after the service, as they describe themselves staying “two hours after the church is done,” and how there is a “good sense of community.” P6 discusses this further as they state that their experience of overseas churches are “very tight-knit, it’s small and intimate,” with a culture of “hospitality and fellowshiping.” Furthermore, P6 compares this to American churches describing the difference between the two, and P5 mentions that the sense of community is something that American churches can learn.

Discussion

This study investigated the impact of the multicultural upbringing of Missionary Kids (MKs) on their transition into university, and their overall adjustment process. The results found a great emphasis on the community surrounding the participants, that influenced their transition process. These communities were often those proximally close to the participants, such as individuals in their dormitory halls or their roommates. Those of similar backgrounds to the MK participants were also positive influences as participants shared multicultural background experiences with those around them, and found comfort in the acknowledgment that each understood, to an extent, the cultural experiences of the other. This was also found in the study by Hartman (2022) who found that the participants in their study were close to the MKs they grew up with. In particular, the MK program was stated to be beneficial across almost all the participants. It was described as being a welcoming community, that provided the individuals with the opportunity to better understand who they are as TCKs while providing a community that could relate to their multicultural lifestyles. When discussing the implications of their

research, Miller et al. (2020), note the importance of programs set up specifically for TCKs to help them transition effectively to new environments. The MK program is a key example of what this can look like when applied to a university context.

The upbringing of the MK participants however did bring difficulties, in the form of friendships. Friendships are an ideal part of one's experiences with transition as they can provide one with a sense of belonging, especially when friendships are formed through related experiences (Mosanya & Kwiatkowska, 2021) (De Waal & Born, 2021). Due to continual transition, TCKs learn to adapt quickly to their environment, and make friends (Donohue, 2022). However, some participants struggled to make deeper friendships in university and believed that friendships would be easier to form. P4 described how they made a "lot of friends" in their first year of university however they describe how it was "really hard to get close" to people. Some participants engaged more so with other MKs, or international students, while others connected more so with those that were around them, despite cultural backgrounds. P7 notes how they were "excited" to "try something different" and how they "love" the MKs but it was not a "huge priority" for them. P1 and P6 on the other hand describe the benefit of the MK program provided on campus, and the community gained from that being beneficial to them. Overall, the participants were positive about their transitions to university despite being raised in a multicultural, and often changing upbringing. All the participants took pride in their host countries. Difficulties were faced as participants held expectations or assumptions that were not fulfilled, but they all had individuals or communities around them that aided them in this adjustment process.

Conclusion and Future Research

Third Culture Kids (TCKs) have grown up in a multicultural environment that is a mixture of their parents' culture and their host culture. An essential subject regarding TCKs is their identities. Their identities are often complex as their interactions with several cultures and values have formed them. Another common theme is the relationships formed by TCKs. Studies found that TCKs are closest to those with whom they have shared experiences, which is often their immediate family and other TCKs who have grown up in the same environment as them (Hartman, 2022). Living abroad positively develops the cultural intelligence of a TCK as they have been found to have a greater awareness of the world, diverse beliefs, and a greater empathy for those of a different culture. Transitions are an essential feature of a TCK's life; however, they can lead to mental and emotional health struggles. Therefore, transitional programs must be set up for TCKs to integrate them into a new culture while also providing comfort to them from a safe place that understands what they are going through.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the small number of participants. The participants were made up of seven individuals. Interviews for a phenomenological study do not require a greater number of participants (Creswell, 2007). In this study, however, it may have been beneficial as the experiences of MKs can be so varied as they come from cultures all around the world. Therefore, having a greater number of participants may have provided a greater amount of data, signature statements, and significant themes that would have better accounted for the vast diversity of the MK experience.

Another limitation was that this study may have benefited from a pilot study to identify ideal questions to ask during the interview. The structure of the interview was semi-structured,

following a standard template of questions written by the researcher, allowing for expansion on discussion points made by the participants. A pilot study, however, may have helped craft questions that were more specific to the demographic, and their cross-cultural transition experiences. Increasing the number of questions and detailing them better to the subject being studied may have provided greater insight into this topic.

A third limitation is that all the participants were gathered from the population of a Christian university. The environment and community provided at a Christian university will likely differ from other campuses, in particular secular or state universities due to differences in foundational focuses and beliefs. This study heavily centers around the participants' adjustment to a singular and specific Christian university. Therefore, this decreases the generalizability of the results and acts as a possible limitation.

Future Research

Implications for future research could examine the impact of the education that MKs or TCKs have received whilst growing up and its influence on their transition into college education. The participants in this study were involved in several types of education including home-school, online school, and public and private school. P1 for example notes how their international school followed the American education system which allowed them to “ease” into the American college system. P6 notes the benefit they found in doing online school growing up as it taught them to be “self-paced...self-motivated,” and overall “well equipped academically. Participants in this study displayed positive responses to the impact that the education they received growing up had on their transition to university. It may be interesting, however, to understand the potential differences between those who grew up under opposing education platforms in their transition to university.

Another interesting point of research may be studying, in greater detail, the impact that the continent or specific culture that a TCK has grown up in and the influence that it has had on their transition to university. P4 discussed how they had learned about the difference between “task-based cultures” which they observed in American culture, compared to their host culture which was largely a “people-based culture.” They describe how this is something that they realized they would need to get used to, providing the specific example of talking to other people as a “worthy waste of time” in their host culture, compared to America where they found it was “not so much.” P1 notes the way they appreciated when people would “work together and communicate” in their host culture and describes how they may find themselves “lost” in conversations in their home culture. They also noted that the economy of their host culture was an influential factor in making their transition to college easier. They came from a “technologically advanced ...(and) wealthy” country, easing their transition to university in America as their home culture was, to an extent, similar in these aspects to their host culture. The traditions and the norms of one’s host culture can impact their understanding of another culture and influence their cross-cultural transitions. Therefore, this would be an interesting topic to investigate to better understand the differences between these norms and the way they comparatively impact the cross-cultural transitions of a TCK.

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Appendix A**Interview Questions**

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your gender?
4. What academic year are you in at Liberty University?
5. What are you currently studying at Liberty University?
 - a. Where do you see yourself after you graduate?
6. What is your country/ countries of citizenship?
7. What country/countries have you lived in?
 - a. How long did you live in each country?
8. What type of education did you receive growing up?
 - a. How has this impacted your transition to university?
9. Tell me about the country/ cultures that you most strongly identify with?
10. What were your cultural expectations when first coming to university?
11. What have been some of your cultural experiences at university?
 - a. Have you experienced culture shock?
 - b. Have you received questions or comments relating to your cultural identity?
12. How have you felt you have adjusted to the culture at Liberty University?
 - a. What were easier cultural adjustments?
 - b. What were more difficult cultural adjustments?
 - c. What were the more significant factors and people influencing the adjustment process?