Third Culture Kids: Adjusting to a Changing World

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"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 frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background" (Pollock/Van Reken 2001, p. 19).

While there is an abundance of research on the adjustment of families and children who more or less permanently migrate to a given country, few studies exist which address the psychosocial adjustment of children and adolescents from "mobile" families. Frequently, these individuals do not develop a sense of belonging to any of their experienced cultures, past or present but rather feel most comfortable with other TCKs, bonded through their shared "third-culture" experience (see Figure 1 for hypothesized influences in TCK cultural adaptation). So far, a paucity of knowledge exists with respect to the support these youth might need as they are often considered well-off regarding their educational and parental background despite the documented unique challenges of recurrent adjustment to new socio-cultural environments during the developmental years (cf. *Pollock/Van Reken* 2001).

The following report presents selected results of the study, "Third Culture Kids: Adjusting to a Changing World" conducted by the Department of Educational Psychology at the Berlin Institute of Technology (cf. *Ittel* et al. 2009) in Berlin, Germany. This study concerned the individual-, familial-, peer- and social-level factors related to TCKs' self-efficacy amongst other individual factors that contribute to their socio-cultural adaptation to the host culture.

Fig 1. Cultural adaptation of the adolescent TCK (*Lowi* 2008; based on *Bronfenbrenner* 1986)
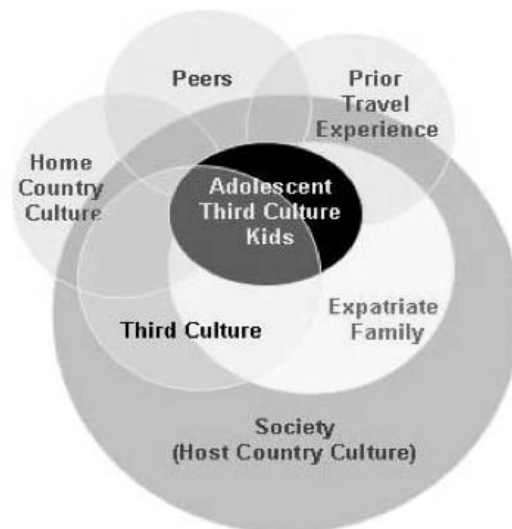
1   Introduction

The current *Zeitgeist* is one defined by globalization, that is, when "the movement of people, goods or ideas among countries and regions accelerates" (*Coatsworth* 2004, p. 38). With this most recent cycle of demographic, economic and cultural transformation comes the resultant migratorial flow of workers and their kin; indeed, the children of the mobile workforce have come to be a population in their own right, comprising the most rapidly-growing demographic of youth in post-industrial nations like Germany and the United States (cf. *Suarez-Orozco* 2005). As such, understanding the effects of multiple migrations on the development of this emergent group of children and adolescents, known as Third Culture Kids (TCKs), is of direct relevancy within both educational and broader societal contexts, particularly in consideration of the nascency of TCK research. Prior work has typically consisted of subjective, anecdotal and retrospective accounts (cf. *Useem* 1999), and there is still little systematic knowledge of the consequences of growing up global as a third culture child or adolescent.

To deepen the understanding of TCKs the present study explored the multiple determinants for TCK adolescents' successful coping and adjustment regarding educational, social and individual challenges of recurrent relocation in order to facilitate the socio-cultural adaptation process. Moreover, future extension of the given research endeavors to improve the institutional access to this critical demographic via the planned development of an evidence-based resource for the broad community who work with TCKs through curricular and pedagogical programming from an applied perspective.

One aspect of TCK socio-cultural adaptation addressed was the relationship between family and social bonds, general self-efficacy or locus of control and the ability to adapt

to a new culture. Self-efficacy, defined by *Bandura* (1987) as the level of confidence that individuals have in their ability to accomplish tasks, is theorized to affect not only migrants' perceptions of their abilities to perform successfully in a new and unfamiliar culture (cf. *Jones* 1986), but also their skills at connecting effectively to host culture members (e.g. peers) (cf. *Gist/Stevens/Bavetta* 1991), in essence, their ability to adapt to novel socio-cultural milieu (cf. *Harrison/Chadwick/Scales* 1996). Previous reports indicate parenting behaviours and self-efficacy are closely inter-related (cf. *McClun/Merrell* 1998) and that strong family bonds can be a boon when familial communication and dynamics are healthy.

That notwithstanding, the question remains whether a strong sense of self-efficacy further supports the process of multiple migrations TCKs experience throughout a developmental phase that is defined by the pursuit and shaping of an individual identity and a sense of self. Specifically in regard to the internationally mobile child, *Ezra* contends "(...) a child who has a strong personality, who is independent, confident and a risk-taker, is more likely to adapt with ease to new situations" (2003, p. 139). It then follows suit that parents and siblings may buffer the challenge of adjusting to the foreign culture by way of enhancing general self-efficacy. As TCKs are often inordinately reliant upon their nuclear family for affirmation, behavior modeling, support and security due to the shared and ever-changing environment (cf. *McCaig* 1984), two suspected associations (see Figure 2) were examined in this study:

1. TCKs with high-quality family bonds will display significantly greater levels of self-efficacy as compared to those without this form of social support and constancy, and
2. TCKs displaying high levels of self-efficacy will report of fewer problems in the process of socio-cultural adaptation to a new culture.

Fig 2. The inter-relationships between close social bonds, general self-efficacy and socio-cultural adaptation
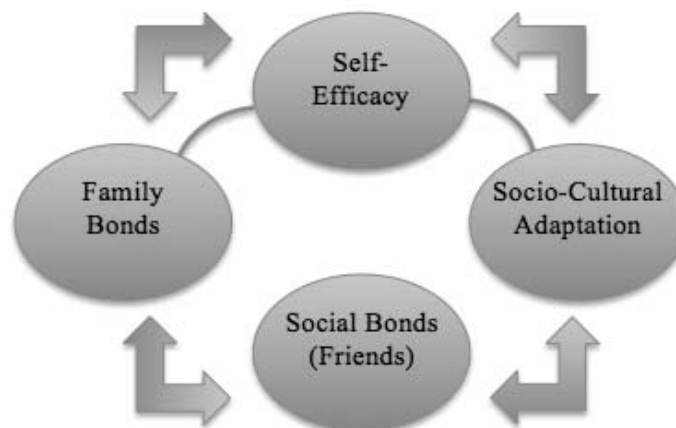
2   Method

In total, forty-six 12-19 year-old students from 24 nationalities representing all continents with an average of 2.7 relocations who were sourced from international schools within the Berlin-Brandenburg area in Germany, completed a questionnaire targeting the role of individual resources, family characteristics, peer and other social relations, school, and internet usage during their cultural adaptation. Of immediate interest were the inter-relationships between students' self-ratings of self-efficacy[2] as captured by the Locus of Control Scale for Children (NS-LCOS) (cf. *Nowicki/Strickland* 1973, α = .76.), socio-cultural adaptation[3] (Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) (cf. *Ward/Kennedy* 1999, α = .93), family bonds (Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS) (cf. *Barnes/Olson* 1982, α = .89), social connectedness (Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (R-UCLA)) (*Russel* et al. 1980, α = .91) and perceptions of general social bonds, encompassing separate subscales of social support for family and friends (Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (cf. *Zimet* et al. 1988, α = .92).

Data were analysed via the statistical programming software programs SPSS 17.0 and PASW 18.0. The standard alpha-level of significance ($p = .05$) was adopted to test all hypotheses. Due to the small sample size, nonparametric methods were used to investigate the hypothesized associations.

3   Selected Results and Discussion

The interrelations between TCKs' socio-cultural adaptation and their general self-efficacy, family relationships, perceived social support of friends and family, respectively, and social bonds, analysed via correlational and chi-square analyses (grouped according to low, moderate and high levels of self-efficacy) revealed a number of significant associations.

With respect to gender differences in adjustment difficulties, female TCKs were less likely to report difficulties in socio-cultural adaptation than their male counterparts, in accordance with previous evidence indicating women may adjust more readily to a new culture (*Petersen/Plamodon* 2009, p 761; *Sussman* 2000).

Self-efficacy and socio-cultural adaption
TCKs who indicated high levels of general self-efficacy were significantly more likely to report fewer difficulties in socio-cultural adaptation. In contrast, those who displayed lower levels of self-efficacy recounted significantly greater difficulty in adjusting to the new culture $X^2 (4, N = 44) = 19.89, p < .01$.

Social support and socio-cultural adaption
A positive relationship between friends and family in terms of social bonds was also observed ($r_s (45) = .45, p < .05$) although no direct relationship between family and socio-cultural adaptation was detected. Conversely, findings indicated a negative association between friends and difficulties in socio-cultural adaptation ($r_s (45) = -.42, p < .01$), speaking to the buffering potential of close friendships although past research into this relationship is scant.

Confirming the initial hypothesis and prior literature (cf. *Lam/Selmer* 2004), TCKs with high self-efficacy were significantly more likely to report high quality family bonds, whilst those with low self-efficacy did not report a positive close connection to their family (X^2 (4, N= 44) = 12.313, $p < .05$). However, as high-quality family bonds and socio-cultural adaptation were not directly associated, these bonds may instead indirectly promote socio-cultural adjustment for TCKs, whereby a strong sense of self-confidence, fostered by the family, scaffolds the process of adjusting to a new culture. Future research will need to explore moderating/mediating associations between these factors to confirm these results.

The findings at hand did, however, further demonstrate the close relationship between friendships and socio-cultural adaptation although many TCKs are believed to struggle with intimacy and are hesitant to develop new friends in the face of potential and past experiences of friendship loss (cf. *Pollock/Van Reken* 2001).

Participants were additionally asked about their Internet usage to depict means of maintaining social contacts or seeking out support from friends around the world. Our data suggest that TCKs who frequently utilize the world-wide web (e.g. to skype with past classmates) and make use of internet communities of other children and adolescents with similar multiple migration backgrounds (e.g. http://tckworld.com/) to connect and maintain contacts are less likely to have difficulties in the adaptation process ($U = 41.5$, $p < .05$) ($MR = 22.48$, $MR = 10.42$). Virtual and direct communication with friends as well as strong self-confidence is purported to be central in the process of successful socio-cultural adaptation. Added research is required to extend these findings and elaborate on the mechanisms through which family, friends, gender, and means of communication impact on socio-cultural adaptation.

4   Future Research & Applications

The aforementioned findings act as a basis for further empirical inquiry, which requires a subsequent large-scale study of international scope in order to confirm and extend these preliminary results. To this end, the development of a specific measure to capture self-efficacy regarding socio-cultural adaptation of TCKs is needed. To further advance the understanding of the inter-relationships amongst the key factors in the personal development of TCKs, a longitudinal study would proffer causal associations of the directional impacts amongst the variables.

Just as *Gist/Mitchell* (1992) contend that self-efficacy can be augmented through training, so follows the requirement of educational institutions to meet the advancing yet under-addressed demands of supporting these transnational students as they embark on their cross-cultural journey of self-definition and development. In following, educational training for TCKs and teachers alike would do well to thereby focus in on strengthening the self-efficacy of TCKs- the "prototype citizens of the 21st century" (cf. *Ward* 1984 as quoted by *McCaig* 1994), facilitating efficacious socio-cultural adaptation by way of bolstering close family bonds and friendships, online, in the classroom, and beyond.

Annotations

1   The authors would like to acknowledge the dedicated contribution to this project by *Paula Albert*, *Jan Conrad*, *Joscha Dapper*, and *Julia Funk* (2009).
2   This study adopts the position of *Judge* et al. (2002) that general self-efficacy, self-esteem, locus of control, and emotional stability may reflect a higher order construct of core self-evaluations (CSE) and is presumed to be related to the general belief in one's ability to adapt (cf. *Harrison* et al. 1996).
3   The ability to cope in everyday life within a new culture (cf. *Ward/Rana-Deuba* 1999).

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