

A Phenomenological Approach to Understanding Early Adult Friendships of Third Culture Kids

Kyoung Mi Choi and Melissa Luke

Syracuse University

A phenomenological qualitative approach was used to explore the experiences of six Third Culture Kid (TCK) participants regarding their early adult friendships at one midsize university in the United States. The term TCK refers to a person who has spent a significant amount of his or her childhood outside of his or her own country and culture of origin and who has assimilated these cultures into a third culture. TCK participants identified making friends as the most challenging issue in their adjustment to the United States. Four themes emerged from the participants' narratives, with four illustrative metaphors drawn from the participants' own words to describe the psychosocial phenomenon related to forming their friendships, including (a) a sense of restlessness: a square peg trying to fit into a round hole, (b) a desire for stimulation: being halfway there, (c) coping strategies to compensate or manage the lack of friendships: filling the void, and (d) multiple identities and multiculturalism: being chameleon-like. The findings suggest that the notion of friendship may need to be reconstructed when applied to TCKs who described distinctive social and cultural experiences that were influenced by frequent multicultural transitions.

Keywords: Third Culture Kids (TCKs), friendship, early adulthood, transnational transition, college adjustment

In the 2006-2007 academic year, over 582,000 international students were enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States in order to pursue higher education degrees. This figure reflected a three percent increase over the international student population recorded in the 2005-2006 academic year (Bhandari & Chow, 2007). As the international student population has grown, so too has the academic literature related to international students' acculturation and adjustment

processes (Bradley, 2000; Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000; Pedersen, 1991; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). As increasing attention is given to international students, distinctions and differentiations within this population have emerged (Bradley, Parr, Lan, Bingi, & Gould, 1995; Giorgis & Helms, 1978; Sadowsky & Plake, 1992; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Some students, like Third Culture Kids (TCKs), are particularly difficult to categorize as a result of their unique experiences of having lived in more than one country during their childhood. Reflecting the multiple multicultural transitions that are part of their childhood, TCKs are sometimes called Global Nomads or sojourners (McCaig, 1992; Navara & James, 2002; Nette & Hayden, 2007; Schaetti, 2000; Useem, 1993).

KyoungMi Choi and Melissa Luke, Department of Counseling and Human Services, Syracuse University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to KyoungMi Choi, Department of Counseling and Human Services, School of Education, Syracuse University. Syracuse, NY 13244-5040. E-mail: kmchoi01@maxwell.syr.edu

Third Culture Kids

TCKs are one of the less known minority populations on college campuses and beyond (Barringer, 2001). The term TCK refers to a person who has spent a significant amount of his or her childhood outside of his or her own country and culture of origin (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; McCaig, 1992; Navara & James, 2002; Nette & Hayden, 2007; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti, 2000; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999; Useem, 1993; Useem, Donoghue, & Useem, 1963). As TCKs grow up, they are thought to synthesize elements of their first and second cultures into a third culture (Gaw, 2006). The third culture refers to a culture that is different from the TCKs parents' culture (i.e., the first culture is the country of citizenship) and different from the culture in which the TCKs are located (e.g., the second culture being the foreign host country/countries). Although there is no consensus within the literature as to what qualifies one as a TCK in terms of age of migration, duration, or number of countries, many authors define a TCK as a person who has spent the majority of their formative developmental period outside their birth country and culture (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). TCKs are described as having been exposed to many cultures, yet not having developed a full sense of belonging in any of the cultures they have experienced (Fail et al., 2004; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999).

Associated Characteristics

Children of international missionaries, diplomats, military personnel, and businesspeople are often identified as TCKs, and this population is continually growing as a result of globalization (Fail et al., 2004; McCaig, 1992; Navara & James, 2002; Nette & Hayden, 2007; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti, 2000; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999; Useem, 1993; Useem et al., 1963). Generally, TCKs have been associated with frequent travel opportunities and knowing and experiencing new people, cultures, and places (Barringer, 2001; Selmer & Lam, 2004).

Numerous positive characteristics have been attributed to TCKs, such as international experience, neutrality, open-

mindedness, flexibility, and tolerance of others' worldviews and cultures (Schaetti, 2000; Selmer & Lam, 2004). On the other hand, it is also suggested that the high global mobility experienced by TCKs can affect them in less than positive ways as well. The literature describes TCKs as facing unique difficulties in the development of an individual identity. These struggles may include difficulties in experiencing a sense of belonging, enculturation, identity, grief and loss, and faith (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti, 2000). It is theorized that TCKs' weak sense of belonging results from not having sufficient contact experience with either their home culture or the host culture(s) where they have grown up (Barringer, 2001).

Research has indicated that TCKs often present identity confusion, and those who have difficulty embracing their past often have a difficult time in embracing their cross-cultural experiences and resolving their identity issues (Schaetti, 2000). Studies have also suggested that unresolved grief and anger can result from TCKs' early and prolonged separation from their parents, as many TCKs live in boarding schools during their childhood. A lack of exposure to and bonding with the first culture may remain an area of vulnerability for TCKs (Barringer, 2001; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001), as TCKs have been described as facing interpersonal difficulties during the reacculturation process (Pollock & VanReken, 2001). In a related vein, Schaetti (2000) identified four general themes appearing in the TCK literature: change, worldview, relationships, and cultural identity. More specifically, it has been suggested that given their unique experiences involving change, TCKs often develop a sense of belonging through social relationships rather than through cultural or geographic roots (Schaetti, 2000).

Friendship in Early Adulthood

Erikson (1980) asserted that the resolution of developmental tasks related to intimacy occurs during early adulthood. Accordingly, young adults are expected to develop a more complex and integrated identity, and then as a result be able to establish more intimate relationships with others (Crosnoe, 2000). The transition from

adolescence to early adulthood can cause a developmental and social shift (Levinson, 1996). Further, the transition to college has been described as significantly influencing an individual's experience of friendship (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). The high intercultural mobility of TCKs greatly influences their social relationships, with early childhood friendships accompanied by frequent losses and goodbyes (Barringer, 2001; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999). Although it is reasonable to speculate that the typical developmental tasks of early adulthood and the related social experiences may differ for TCKs, there is limited research in this area.

As young adults, TCKs have described feelings of restlessness and not fitting in the college environment or social context (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999). It is possible that because many TCKs attended international schools prior to college, they face challenges in interacting with classmates who have not experienced transnational exposure.

Moreover, it has been speculated that the frequent international transitions experienced by TCKs may contribute to TCKs' desire for ongoing mobility (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). In light of the frequent cultural, social, and environmental changes experienced by TCKs, the current research employed a phenomenological approach to

examine the complexity of TCKs' friendships. Specifically, the research aims to understand how TCKs construct friendships by giving voice to TCKs as they express their subjective and lived experiences.

Method

Participants

Six TCKs participated in this study. All participants attended a single, midsized urban university, located in the North East of the United States (see Table 1). One participant was a graduate student and five participants were undergraduates. Two participants were majoring in Communications, two in International Relations, one in Finance and Management, and one in Media. Five participants were female; one was male. Participants' ethnic backgrounds were diverse: Three participants identified themselves as Asian, one as African, one as European, and one as European American. Participants' ages ranged between 18 and 25 years old. Collectively, participants spent significant portions of their formative developmental years in 12 different countries, including Spain, India, Portugal, the Congo, Holland, South

Table 1
Demographic Information of the TCK Participants

Pseudonym	Kathy	Ace	Joyce	Sue	Emma	John
Age	22	20	25	18	18	18
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male
Countries of Transnational Transitions	China, Portugal, America	Philippines, Japan, America	Nigeria, Netherlands, America	Korea, America, India, America	America, Spain, America	Israel, Congo, Belgium, America
Parents' Occupation(s)	Business	Military	Missionary, Business	Business	Education, Art	Business
Previous School	International school	Military Defense school	International school	International school	Local school	International school
Interests	Media, Communication, Screen writing	Communication	Communication	International Relations	Religion, Screen writing, International Relations	Language (French), Business

Korea, the United States, the Philippines, Israel, Nigeria, Japan, and China. The parents of four participants had international business careers; one participant's parents served in the military, and the final participant's parent worked as an educator/artist. Only one participant's parents had an interracial marriage; the others had parents who shared the same ethnicity and host country. Two participants noted that Christian religious practice was a part of their daily lives, and another two expressed a strong interest in exploring religion and spirituality.

Sampling

Participants were recruited from an existing student organization called the Global Nomads. This student organization was organized under the university International Student Center and had been in existence for two academic years. There were three clearly stated criteria for participant eligibility in this study: (a) individuals who had spent more than half of their lives (between the ages 5 to 18) in a country other than their home/birth country; (b) individuals who moved involuntarily due to their parents' careers (i.e., missionaries, diplomats, military personnel, businesspeople, etc.); and (c) individuals who were currently enrolled as undergraduate or graduate students in the United States.

Several sampling processes were used in this qualitative research. Initially, the researcher contacted the president of the organization to explain the study and to request assistance in recruiting participants. The president informed the members of the Global Nomads about the volunteer opportunity to participate in this research. The president then gave each potential participant a research packet prepared by the researchers, including a cover letter explaining the study, a consent form, and a contact information sheet. A second sampling procedure included the researchers contacting advisors at the International Center for similar assistance in recruiting participants.

Procedure

Advisors contacted international students whom they

identified as TCKs and informed them of the opportunity to participate in the study. Participants indicated their willingness to participate in the study by returning the consent form and contact information sheet to either the president or the advisors. After the researchers collected the signed consent forms, the first author contacted participants by email to set up an in-person interview. Four months after the initial interviews, researchers invited participants by email to participate in an in-person focus group conducted on campus. The audio-taped focus group lasted approximately 120 minutes, during which researchers also took notes related to the content and processes within the focus group.

Researchers

Recognizing that the interviewer is an instrument in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006), a brief description of the first and second author is provided to aid in the transparency of how their positionality may have influenced the research process as they conducted the interviews and analyzed the subsequent qualitative transcripts. At the time of the study, the first author was a fifth-year female doctoral student, identifying herself as an international Korean student, and having experience with the Global Nomads group on campus. The second author was a fifth-year Caucasian, female counselor educator, having previously conducted numerous qualitative studies. Both the first and second authors have former teaching and school practice experience.

Data Collection

Data was collected primarily through interviews. Consistent with recommendations regarding the minimum number of participants necessary in qualitative research to understand the essence of experience (Morse, 1994), researchers conducted six in-person interviews. Interviews averaged 90 minutes and were audio-taped in their entirety. All the interviews were conducted in a private setting, either in the library or at a university office. As part of the interview, researchers explained the purpose of the

phenomenological study and introduced participants to the term, TCK. Next, participants were asked a series of questions using a semi-structured interview guide. The questions can be largely categorized into seven areas: self-assessment about being a TCK, previous experiences (e.g., cultures, countries, and schools), transnational experiences, communication strategies and practices, friendships in the United States, other social support systems, and meanings of friendship.

Each interview began with a similar opening question, such as “How would you like to introduce yourself?” and then progressed based on the topics that emerged. Although all participants were asked questions about friendship, transitional experiences, and support systems, not all participants were asked the same questions in the same order. In particular, questions related to TCKs’ friendships included the following: *Please tell me about your friendships. What were your previous experiences with your friendships in the second country prior to coming to the United States? What were the positive or negative influences of your transnational experiences? What has been an obstacle as far as developing friendships because of your frequent transnational mobility? How do you keep in touch with friends? What negative or positive experiences have you had in relation to forming relationships in the United States? What support systems do you have that help you to build a friendship or maintain a friendship because you are a TCK? As a TCK, what does friendship mean to you?* At the close of the interview, each participant was asked to select a pseudonym, to which all quotes were subsequently ascribed.

In addition to interview data, researchers collected demographic information and conducted member checking processes, including transcript reviews, a focus group, and peer debriefing, where data was augmented. Therefore, data sources included verbatim interview transcripts and researcher memos, as well as both focus group notes and peer debriefing feedback. Researchers used memoing to create an audit trail throughout the research process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Researcher memos included notes taken during the individual interviews, noting nonverbal expressions such as crying, gestures, facial

expressions, long silences, or other indications of hesitations. After each interview, researchers took notes about the process, including written discussions of impressions, reactions, and potential emergent themes within and across interviews. Further, researchers made similar notes and memos while transcribing the interviews.

Once all interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and member checked to enhance trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers sent participants their interview transcripts via email and asked participants to review, and confirm or clarify what was written. As English was not the first language of most participants, researchers specifically highlighted any modifications made to the original quotes that were employed for language clarity. In addition, after transcripts were coded, participants were invited to participate in an audio-taped focus group on campus as a means of data triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Within the focus group, participants were presented with emergent themes and interview content and asked to provide feedback. To further increase the credibility of the data, researchers also utilized peer debriefing. Peer debriefing included researchers presenting the preliminary codes and sample excerpts to a group of advanced doctoral students and two counselor education faculty, asking them to match accordingly and provide feedback.

Data Analysis

The qualitative approach of phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997) was selected for this study because of its strength in extracting the essence of lived experiences from the participants in their own voice (Wertz, 2005). To ensure consistency across data collection and analysis, the researchers analyzed the data according to Giorgi’s five sequential steps: collection of verbal data, reading the data, breaking the data into meaning units, organization and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective, and synthesis or summary of the data (Giorgi, 1997). These steps allowed the researchers to understand the concrete descriptions of the TCKs’ friendships by reflecting upon

the details of and patterns across lived first-person experiences.

Once the interview data was transcribed and transcripts were sequenced into the order in which they occurred, the researchers independently reviewed all of the data in order to gain a global sense of each participant's experience. Then, the researchers met to discuss their general impressions. Following a second reading of the data, researchers met again to develop coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006) as a means of discriminating meaning units. Through this process, the researchers identified a series of meaning units in the participants' own words. Next, the researchers organized the meaning units into a chart and described using additional interview excerpts that represented the essence of the participants' experience of friendships. Said another way, raw data was organized and expressed through a psychological perspective (Giorgi, 1997). Throughout this process, researchers were able to reach a consensus in regards to all changes to the meaning units, which involved reorganizing and collapsing them several times over the coding process. This refinement process included incorporating feedback from both the focus group and the peer debriefing into the final stages of the coding process. In general, feedback confirmed and was consistent with findings. Lastly, relationships among the meaning units were discussed and synthesized before selected metaphors from the participants own words were employed to describe these relationships.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

As recommended by Hays and Singh (2009), researchers used several procedures to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the data in this qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in addition to the member checking and peer debriefing previously described. Consistent with earlier research efforts to bracket potential biases (Luke & Goodrich, 2010; Luke & Gordon, in press), one of the two researchers remained comparatively uninformed about TCK literature until after interview data was collected and coded. In addition to both researchers

coding the data, two additional coders were used to audit the coding process. The two additional coders each coded three out of the six interview transcripts, enabling the researchers to make comparisons across interpretations, consider different codes and meaning units, and most importantly, locate potential biases in the coding process.

Results

Friendship emerged as the core theme, with TCK participants identifying making friends as the major struggle in their social lives. Accordingly, TCKs discussed how their sense of restlessness and desire for stimulation contributed to their perceptions of friendship along with their challenging experiences and the meanings they attributed to friendship. The TCKs also spoke about strategies they utilized to form and maintain friendships over geographical distance and frequent moves, recognizing that these were distinct from the cultural practices and social norms of their current host country. Thus, participants expressed an awareness of the gap between how they as TCKs defined and had expectations of a friendship as compared to their non-TCK peers in the United States. Further, TCKs identified various behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual coping strategies that they used to deal with their struggles in forming friendships. Four distinct themes emerged from the TCKs' narratives: (a) a sense of restlessness: feeling like a square peg trying to fit into a circular hole; (b) a desire for stimulation: being half-way there; (c) coping strategies to compensate or manage a lack of friendship: filling the void; and (d) multiple identities and multiculturalism: being chameleon-like. In the following sections, each of the four themes will be discussed further, using participants' quotes to provide a thick description (Hays & Singh, 2009).

Sense of Restlessness: Feeling Like a Square Peg Trying to Fit Into a Circular Hole

The TCKs in this study spoke of a sense of restlessness

and attributed it to their frequent moves. A desire for ongoing intercultural transitions was internalized, even when the TCKs spoke about needing to adjust to and settle in their current environment. Sue illustrated this notion: “I do not have permanent settlement. ...It is temporary everywhere.” Emma also stated this when she described, “You are almost condemned to never feel like you are at home.”

In particular, this sense of restlessness appeared to hinder the TCKs from connecting to non-TCKs in the U.S. college environment who had not experienced similar transnational transitions. The TCKs described having a hard time feeling understood by the non-TCKs around them. Ace stated, “Not only [would] I have to explain where I went, but I would have to tell how I felt when I went [there]. Too much detail, it gets tiring.” TCKs reported that sharing similar cultural experiences and places was a key way to connect to others, and this connection happened naturally with other TCKs. John described that he would feel comfortable being friends with “people who are more like me. ...someone [who may have], traveled a bit at least and lived [in] one or two countries.” Ace further described this “either/or” perspective in social relationships by saying that if she were writing a poem about friendships, she would title it, “Having a connection or not having a title at all,” because she thought that there were two types of people: those with whom she could connect, and those who did not understand her or could not remember her at all.

In addition, the TCKs in this study noted that the multiple transcultural moves throughout their life resulted in frequent good-byes, which caused great pain and loss in their social relationships. Joyce described this by saying, “I am really good at hopping [over the goodbye and pain] and moving on. I miss people but I learned to deal with it, otherwise, you are just crippled. You wouldn’t do anything otherwise in life, if you move that much.” Joyce also noted her fear of intimacy, saying, “I have been more the type to run from people. ...I am always scared about marriage...I move so much. [I wonder], am I going to be good at keeping [a marriage] and be used to one person for that long?”

The TCKs in this study also often spoke of experiencing a feeling of being misunderstood, undervalued, and

culturally out of place. Ace described her “out of sync” feelings by using the metaphor “a square peg trying to fit in a circle hole.” She said, “That’s how my friendships feel like right now.” Two additional TCKs, John and Emma, both noted that despite their similar outlooks with their non-TCK peers on some topics, their behavior, feelings, and perspectives related to friendships were different from mainstream cultural norms in the U.S. Illustrating this, John described his feelings of “unfitness” and explained, “I know something is missing and I feel something is missing.”

A Desire for Stimulation: Being Halfway There

Not only did the TCKs in this study identify difficulties adjusting to changes in their lives, particularly related to friendship, but they also spoke at length about how thrilled and exhilarated it felt to be in a new environment. Ace noted her positive perspective on such changes, saying, “I enjoy being in places that I don’t know anything about it. I enjoy not knowing what’s going to happen next or not knowing anyone.” Emma also described her desire for new things and new experiences, and noted how she “always likes to go further. It [multiple transcultural transitions] makes you really thirsty for other places.” She described this as a desire “to complete” herself, further suggesting that in order to do so, one had to “keep building yourself... You want to keep seeing, and you want to keep understanding.” The participants also described the sense of living “in-between” as also affecting the ways in which they were able to make friends in their current environment. In Emma’s case, she felt that she was “halfway from being a Spanish person” and at the same time “halfway from being an American.”

The TCKs’ desire for change also became a pattern in their friendships. Joyce had advice for other TCKs: “I would say, make new [friends], but don’t drag the old into your new because you won’t be able to [them].” In a related note, all of the TCK participants in this study expressed a strong desire and initiative to meet new people. John observed, “I know that just growing up as a global nomad, you always consistently want to put yourself out there. Anyway, I mean, you seek to meet new people.” In

speaking about her proactive initiation in friendships, Sue observed, “I am the one who goes first and talk[s] to them.” Similarly, Emma described this by remarking, “I usually start the conversation. ...I love to make these little connections even though I might never see [these people] again.”

Coping Strategies to Compensate or Manage a Lack of Friendship: Filling the Void

Most of the TCK participants acknowledged difficulty in forming meaningful friendships in their current environment. Loneliness, depression, and anxiety were common psychological symptoms experienced by the participants, and these were often attributed to their lack of social and cultural connections. Emma illustrated this by saying, “When you are alone... most people think too much... it is more likely to be sickening. You are more likely to end up hurting yourself with your thoughts if you spend too much time alone.” Expanding on this connection, Kathy wondered aloud if her struggles with an eating disorder might have been a way to deal with her social isolation, saying: “There was nobody to tell me [to eat]... so that’s how I stopped eating. I first stopped with [salad] dressings, then stopped with processed food... Because there was nobody to look [after me]..., maybe that’s how I started.”

In order to fill the void that comes from the described lack of social connection, the TCKs developed ways to feel connected with other objects, activities and spiritual practices. Emma noted, “Books saved me because I was lonely, but I was able to make connections with books.” Joyce used her physical housing to ground her life, saying, “I don’t go [out] with friends, but I do like something to be grounded in my life. Even though I am jumping around, I need roots and I need to come home. ...It tends to be where I rent.” Emma, Sue, and Joyce all mentioned using their spiritual practices as a way to connect to a higher being and to feel at ease in their struggles to connect with friends. As Emma stated, “I think about what is the nature of life, what is it that is important. [I think it is] going back to your center point, whether you are going to pray to one God.” Sue also alluded to how her spiritual life compensated for

what was lacking in her social life, stating, “When the Bible says [something]...[to know that] God says [something] like that, that really comforts me.” Similarly, Joyce mentioned, “I am relaxed because I know God brings people into my life: I’ve never chosen my friends... It’s by hand of God: he wants them in my life, he wants me in their lives.”

In addition, the TCKs employed various coping strategies to compensate or manage their lack of social connections and friendships, including intentionally trying to remain detached and being selective with how they use self-disclosure. Joyce reported: “So what I do...without thinking, is to start pulling away before I go. It is so subconscious.” Joyce also recalled using disconnection and detachment before forming relationships, acknowledging, “I couldn’t make a commitment. ...I’ll be gone. In dating...I don’t waste time [with it], can’t be bothered, I’ll be gone. That was always a phrase in my head: *I’ll be gone*.” Similarly, all participants stated that they were selective about whom they chose to disclose personal information (e.g., upbringing, background) as well as when. Ace illustrated this when she recalled how she answered the question, “Where are you from?” by saying, “I was trying to think of the fastest way to answer. ...I didn’t want to tell them my whole life story! And then have people think I am weird.” Joyce also remarked that “there are parts [of me]” that she chooses not to show to others. Similar to selective disclosure, the TCKs in this study spoke of the importance of not displaying their emotions as another means of managing the impact of their frequent goodbyes. As Sue stated, “I know how to control my emotions. ...I don’t want to get hurt again...” Joyce even recollected how she would avoid any type of confrontation, not wanting to reveal how she felt: “I wouldn’t be able to talk to [friends] about issues. [If] someone really hurts [me] or something irritates me, I’d [soon] be gone, so [I] wouldn’t even bother to resolve it.”

Multiple Identities and Multiculturalism: Being Chameleon-like

The TCK participants described developing multiple

identities that they used to blend in and adjust to their frequently changing environment or situation. Emma stated, “I don’t think anyone has a fixed personality. We show different signs [personality traits], so in this meeting I am quiet and with this group of people I am excited.” Multiple identities were also used to disguise their confusion with their identity. Emma described her chameleon-like qualities by saying that “playing different roles is really interesting because it makes you really ask yourself, Who are you? Are you really shy? ... I am nothing and I am everything.”

However, TCKs also identified instances when their chameleon-like qualities facilitated their social relationships. In particular, the TCK participants identified their increased sensitivities to differing social classes, economic privilege, oppression, and racism as assisting them in interpersonal relationships. Kathy reported, “I guess I can be more accepting of people’s differences... I think that helps me to be more accepting of different races and nationalities, gender and gender orientation, or whatever you have, disabilities.” Moreover, the TCKs expressed feeling comfortable with living in different circumstances. For example, Sue said, “I am still contacting my friends; my house is everywhere, all other countries..., so whenever you go and wherever you go, you know that there is someone who is waiting for you in that country.”

The TCKs in this study described prioritizing the characteristics of a friend somewhat differently than what they observed in their American, non-TCK peers. All TCKs discussed valuing open-mindedness, multicultural experiences, and shared worldviews in their friends over individual characteristics such as age, race, and/or gender. Ace talked about different levels of relationships and her desire to have a core relationship, which consisted of “friends who would die for” one another. John also talked about “good friends” whom he could trust and would have “no problem opening up to” as being people who he could share values with, rather than merely sharing the same geographic location. Joyce echoed these ideas of friendship by saying, “True friendship would recognize that we might not [frequently] talk, but when we do talk, it is intense.” Lastly, the TCKs in this study appeared to possess a cross-cultural skills set, including speaking multiple languages and experiencing

comfort in interacting with people of different cultures. Sue summarized the importance of utilizing her multicultural experiences in a globalized arena stating, “If we use that advantage with great care, then it will help you in the future because the world is getting smaller, and having international friends will help you a lot.”

Discussion

This research used a phenomenological approach to explore TCKs’ subjective experience of friendships, including the coping strategies they used to transition to a college setting in the United States. Summarizing developmental research, Crosnoe (2000) wrote that interpersonal, ecological, and system theorists agree on the point that friendship functions as a resource for young people to accomplish age-related tasks. Consistent with previous developmental research, the TCKs in this study expressed their desire to connect to both other TCKs and non-TCKs. However, they described developing distinctive expectations and patterns in forming and maintaining friendships, understanding these as being related to their high degree of mobility.

The findings in this study were consistent with earlier descriptions of TCK’s friendship patterns and characteristics (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999; Schaetti, 2000). The TCKs experienced a strong sense of restlessness and a desire for stimulation across various aspects of their lives, including friendships. Though these drives often serve a function, they can become barriers to building the type of friendship that non-TCKs may define as normative. Most of the TCKs in this study did not have a childhood best friend with whom they grew up and shared experiences throughout elementary and highschool. Participants expressed that they did not often feel that they fit in with the current cultural norms: One participant described herself as “being weird.” However, just as normalcy is socially and culturally constructed, TCK friendships need to be defined in the context of their particular circumstances.

Most of the participants attended international schools,

here they developed friendships with other TCKs. Unfortunately, upon transition to a university in the U.S., TCKs described experiencing difficulties in adjusting to the local cultural norms. In their new environment, the TCKs interacted with classmates who, by and large, had not experienced frequent moves, intercultural transitions, or possessed a deep knowledge of other cultures and worldviews. TCKs felt that this hindered them from developing meaningful relationships. Thus, they talked about developing coping strategies to manage and compensate for their lack of social connection, which can be understood as both functional and dysfunctional. For example, detachment and selective self-disclosure were often described among the participants as a means of self-protection, a way of coping with separation, but they also acknowledged that this also contributed to their sense of isolation.

Multiculturalism is a unique attribute shared by TCKs. The TCKs in this study identified 12 countries to which they belonged, but they still shared “a dynamic sense of cultural space” (Gaw, 2006). TCKs displayed multicultural competencies as described by Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992), consisting of awareness, knowledge, and skills. They spoke of being socially conscious, understanding diverse cultures, traditions and lifestyles, and being equipped with linguistic and interpersonal communication skills. Findings in this study were consistent with Luebke and Gaw (2000) who described TCKs as ethno-relativists, saying that they (a) demonstrated acceptance and awareness toward different values and worldviews, (b) empathized with people who were culturally different, and (c) exhibited flexibility about their identities responding to diverse cultural contexts through their intercultural communication skills. Given this, TCKs may possess the attributes and skills necessary to become campus leaders who can promote systemic change on campus, yet the TCKs in this study were not involved in such activities.

Although the TCKs in this study all identified themselves as “global nomads,” most were first introduced to the term “TCK” during the interviews. It is important to recognize that the precise definition of TCK is still evolving. Some

scholars include children of refugees, asylum seekers, immigrant workers, and exchange students in this category (Navara & James, 2002; Nette & Hayden, 2007; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). As such, this research did not distinguish the subgroups within the population or how they may differently experience social and cultural adjustment, social connectedness, and friendship. For instance, children of missionaries might develop coping strategies to deal with their adjustment stressors differently from children whose parents are embassy staff or military personnel. A study by Navara and James (2002) found differences in the level of coping and adjustment of missionaries as compared to those who were expatriates in international business, the military, or higher education. In this study, the single male participant expressed a number of divergent experiences from the five female participants. Of note, the female participants placed a priority on closeness and disclosure in friendships, while the male participant emphasized shared activities in his friendships. This can be understood as a reflection of socialized gender differences (Maccoby, 1998).

Limitations

As in all research, there were a number of methodological limitations within the current study. Although TCK is an umbrella term that refers to a group of people who grew up outside of their home countries during their childhood due to their parents’ careers, the fact that participants in this study did not first self-identify as TCKs may have impacted the research process. In addition, although there was cultural diversity across the sample, there was a restricted developmental range within the sample, with all participants in early adulthood and enrolled at the same urban university located in the northeast United States. It is possible that some of the findings related to friendship reflect this commonality, as opposed to being solely related to the TCK experience. A final limitation may have resulted from the differing levels of acculturation, articulation, and elaboration of detail across the TCKs within the interviews. As a result it is possible that the

researchers were unable to access the full experience of participants.

Implications

Findings from this preliminary study of TCKs experiences of friendship should be considered preliminary. However, when the findings are contextualized within the extant research, there are numerous implications for the education and counseling fields.

Counseling Practice

The findings of the study provide useful insights for counselors and higher education advisors on university campuses. First of all, acknowledging the unique attributes and needs of this population are necessary to appropriately serve them. TCKs have been called “hidden immigrants” (Bell, 1997), and TCKs themselves are often unaware of the term and their uniqueness. Given that TCKs feel a sense of belonging through shared characteristics within relationships rather than their geographic locations or cultural upbringing, it may be necessary for universities and college campuses to provide a space and opportunity for TCKs to interact with one another and develop meaningful relationships.

Second, findings indicate that TCKs possess unique strengths that may be understood as having great potential. Selmer and Lam (2004) suggested that TCKs exhibit distinct characteristics in their perceptions of being international and as such, might be the best candidates for global leaders. To diversify and internationalize higher educational settings, campus administration may wish to seek out TCKs to serve as primary contacts to recruit and support international or diverse cultural populations (Trice, 2004). It may be a great benefit for universities, educators, and college students to acknowledge and utilize the multicultural skills and knowledge of TCKs. One creative possibility capitalizing on TCKs unique assets involves training TCKs to facilitate intercultural dialogues between various cultural groups within the campus. Another less

involved strategy might be to include TCKs as a multicultural group in the socio-cultural training of counselors.

Future Research

There are a number of possible next steps that can be employed to follow up this initial study. Comprehensive TCK research, using well-designed methods could better inform counselors, advisors, and other educators as to how to provide social support and environments where TCKs can develop positive and effective strategies for establishing meaningful social relationships.

Current findings suggest that further exploration of TCKs’ use of coping strategies is warranted. Thus, researchers could use a quantitative methodology to measure various coping strategies used by TCKs and assess their effects on levels of social connectedness, well-being, or other traditional measures of successful college transition (e.g., academic achievement, persistence, satisfaction).

A longitudinal research design would enable identification of how the timing of developmental transitions may affect TCKs’ friendships and coping strategies later in life. Life course theorists consider friendships to be dynamic and interactive relationships that are embedded in social and developmental trajectories (Elder, 1998). As a person ages, he or she is thought to experience more complex roles and environments; therefore, one’s friendships may also change. The current study examined TCKs’ experiences and perceptions in early adulthood, but future research may want to compare these in earlier and later life development stages.

In addition, future research may wish to consider an inverse variable relationship, that is, how friendships influence transitions among TCKs. This could be accomplished using both qualitative and quantitative means. Findings from the current study suggest that TCKs seek quality in friendships; therefore, asking what qualities in a friendship contribute to smoother transitions and adjustment would be valuable.

Lastly, this research briefly touched upon resources used by the TCK participants to maintain friendships in other

countries. The participants mentioned their frequent use of the internet and Facebook, a social cyber network site, as the main mechanism. As such, it may be worthwhile to investigate differential usage of these types of resources, including formal and informal cultural and social events, advanced technology, and extracurricular support programs provided by international schools, colleges, and sponsor organizations, among TCKs, international students, as well as domestic U.S. students. By examining how various student populations use these resources, we can better understand how they contribute to the development of effective social coping strategies, the experience of meaningful relationships, and the enhancement of multicultural competencies for all student groups.

Conclusion

Society is becoming increasingly multicultural: the fields of business, psychology, and education are paying more attention to TCKs (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Selmer & Lam, 2004). As a result, there is increased discussion about the characteristics, obstacles, and unique contributions of TCKs in the existing literature (Fail et al., 2004; McCaig, 1992; Navara & James, 2002; Nette & Hayden, 2007; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti, 2000; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999; Useem, 1993; Useem et al., 1963). However, there is little research that has addressed the distinctive characteristics of TCKs' friendships. This current research offers an initial understanding of how TCKs perceive their friendships and how they experienced transnational mobile transitions in their early adulthood. Thus, this preliminary qualitative study fills a gap and can be used to serve educators, counselors, and advisors to assist in understanding and developing programs for TCKs in college campuses.

References

- Barringer, C. F. (2001). *Counseling Third Culture Kids*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Counseling Association, San Antonio, TX. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED451459&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED451459
- Bell, L. (1997). *Hidden immigrants: Legacies of growing up abroad*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Cross Cultural Publications.
- Bhandari, R., & Chow, P. (2007). *Open Doors 2007: Report on International Educational Exchange*. New York: Institute of International Education.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2006) (Eds.). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bradley, G. (2000). Responding effectively to the mental health needs of international students. *Higher Education, 39*, 417-433.
- Bradley, L. J., Parr, G., Lan, W. Y., Bingi, R., & Gould, L.J. (1995). Counseling expectations of international students. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling, 18*, 21-31.
- Chen, C. (1999). Common stressors among international college student: Research and counseling implication. *Journal of College Counseling, 2*, 49-65.
- Crosnoe, R. (2000). Friendships in childhood and adolescence: The life course and new directions. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 63*, 377-391.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Elder, G. H. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development, 69*, 1-12.
- Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Fail, H., Thompson, J., & Walker, G. (2004). Belonging, identity and Third Culture Kids: Life histories of former international. *Journal of Research in International Education, 3*, 319-338.
- Gaw, F. K. (2006). Mobility, multiculturalism, and marginality: Counseling Third Culture students. In J. A. Lippincott & R.A. Lippincott (Eds.), *Special populations in college counseling: A handbook for clinicians* (pp. 64-77). Alexandria, VA: American

- Counseling Association.
- Giorgi, A. (1997). The theory, practice and evaluation of the phenomenological method as a qualitative research procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 28, 235- 261.
- Giorgis, T. W., & Helms, J. E. (1978). Training international students from developing nations as psychologists: A challenge for American psychology. *American Psychologist*, 33, 945-951.
- Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2009, October). Why should we believe you?: Maximizing trust worthiness in qualitative research. Paper or poster presented at the meeting of Association of Counselor Education and Supervision, San Diego, CA.
- Levinson, D. J. (1996). *The seasons of a woman's life*. New York: Knopf.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Luebke, P. T., & Gaw, K. F. (2000). Intercultural sensitivity and culture shock. In R. J. Simpson & C. R. Duke (Eds.), *American overseas schools* (pp. 51-91). Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.
- Luke, M., & Goodrich, K. M. (2010). Chi Sigma Iota chapter leadership and professional identity development in early career counselors. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 50, 56-78.
- Luke, M., & Gordon, C. (In press). A discourse analysis of school counseling supervisory email. *Counselor Education and Supervision*.
- Maccoby, E. E. (1998). *The two sexes: Growing up apart, coming together*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McCaig, N.M. (1992). Birth of a notion. *The Global Nomad Quarterly*, 1, 1.
- Mori, S. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78, 137-144.
- Morse, J. M. (1994). *Critical issues in qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Navara, G., & James, S. (2002). An investigation of missionary adjustment in Nepal. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 26, 694-708.
- Nette, J., & Hayden, M. (2007). Globally-mobile children: The sense of belonging. *Educational Studies*, 33, 435-444.
- Pedersen, P. (1991). Counseling international students. *The Counseling Psychologists*, 19, 10-58.
- Pittman, L. D., & Richmond, A. (2008). University belonging, friendship quality, and psychological adjustment during the transition to college. *The Journal of Education*, 76, 343-361.
- Pollock, D.C., & Van Reken, R. E. (2001). *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Schaetti, B. F. (2000). Global nomad identity: Hypothesizing a developmental model. *Dissertation Abstracts International: A*, 61, 9992721.
- Schaetti, B. F., & Ramsey, S. J. (1999). The global nomad experience: Living in liminality. *Transition Dynamics*. Retrieved from www.transition-dynamics.com/liminality.html
- Selmer, J., & Lam, H. (2004). "Third-culture Kids" Future business expatriates?. *Personnel Review*, 33, 430-445.
- Sodowsky, G. R., & Plake, B. S. (1992). A study of acculturation differences among international people and suggestions for sensitivity to within-group differences. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 71, 53-59.
- Sue, D. W., Arredondo, P., & McDavis, R. J. (1992). Multicultural counseling competencies and standards: A call to the profession. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 20, 64-88.
- Trice, A. G. (2004). Mixing it up: International graduate students' social interaction with American students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45, 671-687.
- Useem, J., Donoghue, J. D., & Useem, R. H. (1963). Men in the middle of the third culture. *Human Organization*, 22, 169-179.
- Useem, R. H. (1993). Third Culture Kids: Focus of major study. *International Schools Services*. Retrieved from <http://www.tckworld.com/useem/art1.html>
- Wadsworth, B. C., Hecht, M. L., & Jung, E. (2008). The role of identity gaps, discrimination, and acculturation

in international students' educational satisfaction in American classrooms. *Communication Education*, 57, 64-87.

Received November 18, 2010
Revision received January 25, 2011
Accepted February 14, 2011

Wertz, F. (2005). Phenomenological Research Methods for Counseling Psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52, 167-177.