THIRD CULTURE KIDS: THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF THIRD CULTURE IDENTITY

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communication

by
She-Ing Wang
Summer 2015
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Thesis of She-Ing Wang:

Third Culture Kids: The Co-construction of Third Culture Identity

Kurt Lindemann, Chair
School of Communication

Carmen M. Lee
School of Communication

Jang Min Choi
Department of Sociology

May 13, 2015
Approval Date
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, who have always sacrificed everything so that I could have the best education and upbringing possible. Thank you for being such a strong support system and excellent role models. Without you both I would not be where I am today or accomplished any of this. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to Rusty. You have made this journey such an exciting one and have never let me think twice about my decisions. Thank you for being my rock, always pushing me to be the best that I can be, and for your endless support. Francisco and Jack, thank you for always being there for me when I needed you and for being the most incredible brothers a girl could ask for. To my international school friends, especially those from Nido, thank you for inspiring me to write about a topic we have always kept silent about. A special thank you to Isa, Michelle, and Michael for your unconditional support, always. Last but not least, this thesis is dedicated to all Third Culture Kids out there. Wherever you may be, know that we hold the world in our hands and it is up to us to make the best of it.

我將此研究之貢獻歸功於我的父母，沒有您們的支持就沒有今日的我，感謝您們的奉獻與栽培讓我擁有最好的學歷，您們是我最佳的學習榜樣。此外，我也將此論文之貢獻歸功於Rusty，你讓我研究的旅程當中充滿刺激與挑戰，豐富我的人生使我更有自信，更感謝你當我永遠的靠山，總是給我滿滿的支持與鼓勵成究最棒的我。也謝謝我最親愛的弟弟Francisco 和 表哥Jack，在我需要你們的時候你們永遠都在我的身旁。也謝謝在Nido的朋友們，你們激勵了我寫作的靈感。最後，更感謝Isa、Michelle與Michael總是無條件的支持我。
“There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.”

–Nelson Mandela
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Third Culture Kids: Co-Construction of Third Culture Identity

by

She-Ing Wang

Master of Arts in Communication
San Diego State University, 2015

Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are individuals who have spent a majority of their developmental years outside their passport countries. They do not have a physical place they call home due to the fact that they have grown up in a variety of cultural settings, usually accompanying their parents as they relocate to cities around the world because of their careers. Instead, TCKs discursively co-construct an abstract sense of home, also known as a “third culture.” Through narrative interviews, this study identifies a discursive sense-making process enacted by all members of such community. These narratives allowed a better understanding of how third culture kids recounted a TCK identity and how they discursively communicated a sense of home through a discursive sensemaking process. With globalization creating a more diverse and connected world, the number of TCKs globally has increased and will keep increasing over time. Understanding how these individuals communicate is a first step into further acknowledging how and why such groups feel such marginalization as well as their processes of identifying with communities and how they view themselves.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................. vi
LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................. viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..................................................................................................... ix
CHAPTER
1 INTRODUCTION .........................................................................................................1
   Culture ............................................................................................................................. 4
   Identity ......................................................................................................................... 5
   Sense of Belonging ....................................................................................................... 6
   TCK Community and Technology ............................................................................. 9
2 METHODOLOGY ......................................................................................................13
   Narrative Interviewing ............................................................................................... 14
   Coding ......................................................................................................................... 15
   Online Observation .................................................................................................... 15
3 RESULTS ....................................................................................................................18
   What’s in a Name? Narrating the “TCK” Label .......................................................... 20
   “We are family”: Narrating Community .................................................................... 24
   “Yearning for a Little More of Simplicity”: Narrating Home .................................... 27
4 DISCUSSION ..............................................................................................................35
   Theoretical Implications ............................................................................................ 36
   Methodological Implications ...................................................................................... 39
   Practical Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions ....................................... 40
REFERENCES ..................................................................................................................... 44
APPENDIX
   THESIS INTERVIEW GUIDE ..................................................................................... 47
LIST OF TABLES

PAGE

Table 1. TCK Narrative Themes...........................................................................................................20
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge everyone who has been a part of my academic journey at San Diego State University. Dr. Lindemann, thank you for your endless support not only in this thesis, but also in all the seminars I took with you as well. You are a wonderful professor and it has been an absolute pleasure to be in your class and have you be the Chair of my thesis committee. Dr. Lee, I cannot explain what a great relief it was to have you around, especially during the first year of graduate school. I was a very lost and scared international student and talking to you always helped ease the stress. I am honored to have taken your intercultural communication seminar and to have you in my committee. Dr. Choi, thank you for accepting to join this wonderful committee and for giving me such wonderful input from the beginning, I am so very grateful. Dr. Taylor, I am so lucky that you took me in and volunteered to be my advisor at the beginning of this program. Thank you for being so wonderful to me and for your guidance. Last but not least, my wonderful cohort. Thank you for your friendship and for making this experience such an amazing one.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My Chinese heritage and features give away my ethnicity, and often times I express to people that I am from Taiwan, because that’s where my parents are from; it’s what I look like, and where I’m supposed to be from, technically. I have grown accustomed to my default speech patterns when speaking to certain people during first encounters, mostly accommodating what I say to they expect. It seems fair enough to categorize myself under this name anyway: Taiwanese. I was three months old when my parents immigrated to Chile from Taiwan to start their own business. Growing up in Chile, I knew I did not look anything like the local Chilean people did, but I had always considered that it was the place I knew best and therefore, where I was from.

However, I was wrong. Locals did not seem content with my answer and wanted to know where I was really from, shocked that I “spoke Spanish so well.” This still happens, and it’s difficult not to get offended, but I just go along with it. I started to tell people that I was from Taiwan, which always seems like a good enough reply, unless they now want to know where I learned my Spanish. Then I just decide whether or not to embark on my life story.

“I learned to fly before I learned how to walk” is a common saying among those who call themselves third culture kids (TCKs), which means that TCKs were likely flying on an airplane to another country before they could even walk (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Growing up in another country does not always mean a TCK feels at home in that country. On my many visits to Taiwan during school holidays, this “speech” that I had grown accustomed to using was not nearly as effective. Local Taiwanese people knew I was not from there because of the way I carried myself, the way I dressed, and my strong foreign accent when I spoke Chinese (Mandarin). My quickest way of resolving everyone’s questions was to just tell them that I was from Chile.
So where am I really from and where is home? I don’t have an answer to that, at least not an answer that would satisfy most people. All I know is that for the past 27 years, it is the question I have dreaded most when meeting new individuals. So much so that every time I hear it, I cringe a little, because I embark on a quick debate with myself on whether or not to tell every single person my real story. And those to whom I have told my story are not usually satisfied either, because I still haven’t given them an answer they want to hear. The truth is, I do not consider myself to have a physical home, nor have I ever felt like I belonged in any of the cities around the world I have lived at, worked at or visited.

***

In a world where people from different cultural backgrounds come together in the workplace, in the home, in cities big and small, and online, it comes as no surprise that a fairly new phenomenon has taken place among those who have been born or raised in societies other than their own. The phenomenon is the emergence of the term “Third Culture Kids” (TCKs) as a phrase to define people who have been raised in cultures different from their passport country (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Many who fall under this category have either moved away from their (or their parents’) passport country at a young age, or were born in a different country because of their parents’ jobs (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

Though the phenomenon of globalization is defined by some critical scholars as a new global colonialism that executes the ideologies and objectives of colonialism (Banerjee & Linstead, 2001), in this particular study it will be used as a means to explain the coming together of cultures and consequences of easier communication channels for citizens from around the world and, specifically, the TCK community. The world has become a more accessible place for individuals to travel and carry on with their daily lives in various locations, resulting in a considerable growth of people who belong to this group. Variations of this definition have been used to describe specific types of TCKs, such as business brats, biz kids (business kids), oil kids, or missionary kids (McDonald, 2010). Many other nicknames have been applied to this group of people, especially in scholarly research, such as global nomads, cultural hybrids and even cultural chameleons (Moore & Barker, 2012). Regardless of the name given, all of the above fall under the “Third Culture Kid” moniker.

In this research I will be defining them as Third Culture Kids (TCKs). Although the term includes the word “kids” in it, the phrase will generally be referring to third culture
individuals, inclusive of those who are now adults (also known as Adult Third Culture Kids or ATCKs) and continue living with the aftermath of being a part of this group. This study examines the communication practices of Third Culture Kids, how this specific community co-constructs a “third culture” identity through narrative and by doing so, a third culture home.

The existence of this specific group of people is not well known to the general public, and many times can lead to TCKs feeling left out from their surroundings. However, although the term “TCK” is not familiar to most of today’s society, many understand the term “Army brats,” or “missionary kids,” or maybe even “business kids,” and have an idea of one’s upbringing when referring to these names (Bonebright, 2010). So why exactly is the phrase “third culture” defining of this population? Pollock and Van Reken (2009) highlight a common misconception of this term, where many believe that this is used because third culture kids were raised in “third world” countries. They further explain that the first culture is considered the “home” culture (passport culture), the second culture the host culture (this could be one or multiple host cultures depending on each TCKs experience and upbringing), and the third culture as an abstract, invisible space in which TCKs share a commonality between these individuals living an international mobile lifestyle.

There are many positive traits that define this community. TCKs have the ability to positively impact society due to their global experiences and advanced education (Bonebright, 2010). In a study on adult military kids (who also fall under the description of TCKs), Ender (2000) found significant educational achievement within this population, in which more than 95% of international school students completed college. TCKs generally spend their developmental years in various international schools around the globe. Therefore, this statistic is representative of a growing group of individuals considered to be truly global. Becoming aware of a group of people who although have had successful educational upbringings still struggle with having a sense of identity, assists us in studying the reasoning behind these issues.

Issues of identity, homelessness and not feeling a sense of belonging are main concerns within TCKs. Walker (1998) states that home assists in finding one’s identity and that having a sense of belonging is an essential part of being able to feel like one is at home. According to Giddens (1991) self-identity is achieved through the process of self-reflexivity.
and narrative helps this self-reflexive process through discourse. In other words, discourse and narrative instigate a process of self-reflexivity that helps us further our understanding of self-identity.

This study aims to study communicative patterns through narrative interviews as well as incorporating online observation to further understand how it is that this group co-constructs a community despite their physical dispersion across the globe. To create a foundation on the extensive themes that might impact the study of TCKs, I have derived from existing research on four main concepts that encompass the modern TCK: Culture, Identity, Sense of Belonging, Identity, and TCKs as a Community with the help of technology. These four concepts facilitate our understanding of TCKs in order to further comprehend the various communicative behaviors used within this group of individuals. These concepts will also be defined in order to establish concrete ideas of what it means when using broad topics such as culture or identity. In the following sections, each of these themes will be explored in detail in order to assess the importance of discourse when it comes to creating an identity.

**CULTURE**

The exposure TCKs experience towards a variety of cultures is what drives scholars to call them *true* multicultural beings. Culture has long been a concept commonly used in everyday speech; however, its meaning can have a wide array of definitions. It has been debated that the word “culture” is one of the most difficult ones to define in the English language, mainly because of it’s diverse usage, both in everyday dialogue and academia (Baldwin, Faulkner, & Hecht, 2006). Baldwin et al. (2006) establish that although the meaning of culture has long been debated, with some researchers collecting up to 150 definitions of the word, the term serves as an “empty vessel” waiting for scholars and even everyday individuals to fill it with meaning when communicating. They also determine that the concept of culture changes in the variety of disciplines that use this term.

For this research, I will be using the word culture as defined by Barnett and Lee (2002) where it is considered to be “a group’s shared collective meaning system through which the group’s collective values, attitudes, beliefs, customs and thoughts are understood...held by members of a community” (p. 277). It is important to establish such definitions because of the complexities that come with the term “culture.” Moreover, by
incorporating the terms “culture,” “community,” and “technology” under one study, this study establishes the necessity of examining the notion of creating culture within online communities, something we are seeing more and more often in this globalized world.

Constant exposure to many cultures has a significant impact in the lives of TCKs, and one of these impacts is the formation of multicultural beings. Scholars have long used the term “multiculturalism” as a means to refer to minority groups in national cultures and most importantly to explain a form of identity politics for these individuals in different societies (Turner, 1993). I will be using this term to describe in in terms of Moore and Barker’s (2012) definition, basing it on the notion that an individual is able to acquire at least two cultural identities, making him/her adaptive and open to change. Research suggests that TCKs have the capacity of being multicultural individuals (Berry, 2005). In other words, because of their unique upbringing, TCKs successfully adapt to two or more cultures as if they were locals. Therefore, they have the capability of adapting in a way that most of the world population will probably never really perfect. Psychological and emotional issues have been the main concern when studying these internationally mobile individuals (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Moore & Barker, 2012) however, many authors have focused on positive issues as well, and one of the main aspects is this multicultural ability that is almost innate to TCKs (Kim, 2008; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). This type of skill should be examined further as it opens doors on how we could better communicate cross-culturally. Researchers have additionally argued that TCKs’ multicultural identities have been linked to them feeling a sense of belonging in multiple places (Fail et al., 2004). Having multicultural identities therefore could tell us more about how such individuals are able to establish such connections.

**IDENTITY**

Multiculturalism has been of great interest to many scholars because of the communicative potential this skill establishes within communication competence in an intercultural setting. Many TCKs establish strong connections with the host culture(s) as well as with the culture their families are from. Moore and Barker (2012) determine that having bicultural or multicultural identities allows for beneficial competence of these individuals in intercultural communication. Furthermore, with being multicultural often comes the ability to
speak two or more languages at a native level and most importantly has the ability to allow for frame-switching to be established (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011). Frame switching is known as having the skill to switch between one culture to another instantaneously (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011). By acknowledging that TCKs’ cultural identities are often an amalgamation of many cultures, it is clear that frame switching is a skill acquired through multicultural exposure. However, as researchers have previously argued (Fail et al., 2004), although TCKs have the ability to adapt and belong everywhere, this multicultural ability could lead to homelessness.

This “third culture” space is comprised of TCK individuals, trying to find a “home.” This sense of homelessness is one of the biggest difficulties TCKs encounter several times during their lives, even going into adulthood because they grow accustomed to a life of mobility and constant moves across cultures (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). In the next section, I will be exploring how TCKs are able to form a sense of identity despite their upbringing.

**Sense of Belonging**

Early life experiences of our homes and those who surrounded us are what shape our future and our feelings towards these memories. These childhood experiences and acknowledging our cultural memberships to our environments are an important part of consolidating our personal sense of identity (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011). However, what happens if a child is exposed to extremely diverse cultural experiences and information, such as being raised in a variety of different cultures during these developmental years? In this section I will review the importance of having a sense of belonging and the strategies that help TCKs establish such a connection.

Parents of TCKs are often not aware of the impact that comes with a mobile lifestyle, especially the impact on children who are at a developmental stage in their lives. Merrill-Foster (1996) depicts the relocation of the parents (in this example, American parents) who transition between countries and highlights the parents’ perspective with the third culture kid experience:

> Adults leave America for the first time with a clearly defined sense of place. They are “Americans,” and often that sense of identity- of association with a place- becomes a yardstick by which they measure subsequent, wider experience. But
children assimilate new languages, cultures, scenery and people quite naturally and without distinction. This became clear one day when our fourth-grader came home from the international school in Tehran and asked, ‘Mom, where’s my home?’...He had no idea at all how to answer the question. (p. 152)

Having a “home,” whether it is a country, city, or town, is something that most people can relate to. What exactly constitutes the notion or idea of home? McKinnon (2007) describes home as a “site of both contradiction and contention...constituted through our personal experiences with various discourses and practices of belonging and exclusion” (p. 3). McKinnon (2007) finds this aspect to be true to people experiencing migration. Much like migrants, TCKs travel; however, their migratory experiences are continuous. The sense of home, however, could be very much comparable to McKinnon’s (2007) ideology of home. In other words, everyone’s personal experiences in a specific place, inclusive of behaviors and discourse, constitute whether those are considered a part of oneself. The embodiment of such experiences establishes one’s association with “home.”

For most, the idea of “homelessness” is unimaginable, and when individuals do use this term, they often relate it to having to move out of their parents’ house and having to establish or find a physical home of their own to start their adult lives. For third culture kids, “home” could be all the different cities they have grown up in, or it could even be an abstract idea of home and not necessarily a physical location (Fail et al., 2004). Furthermore, for many TCKs, they are unable to establish roots in geographical locations, more often linking the sense of home or belonging to significant relationships they have established while growing up (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011). Having strong group identification allows for these individuals to maintain some sort of sense of belonging. Therefore, by being able to relate with others who have had similar mobile lifestyles, TCKs create connections with people similar to them and therefore find themselves “belonging” to this group of individuals.

Growing up in international schools, where a large percentage of the student body is a TCK, Third Culture Kids are comforted with the relationships they build in these institutions. However, the transition into the “real world” is when TCKs first establish a sense of disconnect with themselves as individuals and those who surround them. TCKs finish high school at their respective international schools and attend universities around the world, setting aside their third culture identities as well as their TCK peers in order to adapt to their new environments (Fail et al., 2004). However, by doing so, they are placed in a setting they
are unfamiliar with and are surrounded by peers who have not had the same lifestyle they have had, leading to a sense of cultural marginality as well as “terminally unique” (Moore & Barker, 2012). In other words, after being in this new environment for some time, TCKs realize just how different they are from their local peers and that they will most likely never be able to relate with them because of their “unusual” upbringing. The effect of “entering” into society leads many of them to choose to hide their identities and their stories from those around them in order to “fit in” and feel like they belong.

Lacking a sense of belonging and constant relocation also means that TCKs suffer from emotional issues. Research on TCKs suggests that a large percentage experience low self-esteem and that many are emotionally unstable (Dewaele & van Oudenhoven, 2009). In Hoersting and Jenkin’s study (2011), they establish that TCKs partake in a process of acculturation, in which they must negotiate their own development, many times having to adapt to their current geographical location in order to feel like they somehow belong there. TCKs are constantly moving between different societies. For many, this sounds like a very positive experience in which one has the opportunity to travel the world; however, emotional issues regarding a sense of belonging in these “interim homes” are prominent. Hoersting and Jenkins (2011) call these feelings of not belonging “cultural homelessness,” in which individuals who have spent their developmental years abroad receive diverging messages about their cultural memberships. The authors further establish that these situations happen to individuals who have been raised in cross-cultural environments, and can also be attributed to those who are born into multi-ethnic families. Therefore, by studying TCKs and their sense of cultural membership, we can establish connections between TCKs and comparable groups who share similar characteristics, such as families constructed by multiple ethnic backgrounds. This could potentially lead to further research on communication within multiethnic groups, families, etc., where it is important to maintain a level of competency when communicating in an intercultural setting.

Communication has become a lot easier for TCKs after the Internet. For many, it has been an important avenue to keep in touch with those people from the multiple countries they lived in. Similarly, information has been more accessible and therefore, TCKs have been taking advantage of technology as a source for information and support.
TCK Community and Technology

Although the world is more diverse, many argue that it is getting smaller in the sense that it’s increasingly easier to connect and stay connected with others. Even so, the neighborhood we live in could be considered one of our closest communities, and this conception of communities forms the earliest foundation for our understandings of it. Traditionally, the term “community” has been anchored to a local ideal, in which we associate a physical location when belonging to a community (Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002). It wasn’t until the 1970s that scholars began to notice the proliferation of communities expanding beyond neighborhoods, a big part of this proliferation influenced by transportation and various networks of communication in a more developing world (Wellman et al., 2002). It was also during this time period where scholars also emphasized the importance of people having a sense of community, making it an important aspect for one’s well being (Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996). In this section I will define the idea of community that will be used within this study, as well as the growth of the concept of community and how it has been established as an essential part of the online world within the Internet.

Communities are important for the well being of individuals because they create a network of support and conviviality. I will be approaching the concept of community through Wellman et al.’s (2002) definition, in which it is considered to be “networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belong, and social identity” (p. 153). Various elements come together when establishing a community and in the case of TCKs, including their lack of a sense of belonging, blended in with multicultural identities is what brings this community together. Being able to relate with each other, especially by identifying with similar issues or just knowing that others are living through the same situation is a way of relief for many of these individuals. This is where the Internet takes on a key role and turns this global TCK community into an online community.

Online communication allows for TCKs and even other online communities to literally connect with each other. These connections affect how individuals behave socially as individuals of society (Kozinets, 2010). We belong to an era where technology has been incorporated into our everyday lives. Not only do we use technology, but also for many of us, we are fully dependent on it to be able to carry out personal and work life. TCKs are
especially linked to the Internet when it comes to communicating with those they have left behind. In a previous section, I established the definition of culture that has been implemented to this research study. Although that was an indispensable concept to consider in a study such as this one, it is also important to define what is known as cyberculture. According to Escobar (1995), cyberculture focuses on new technologies and how their cultural constructions (and reconstructions) assist in their creations. In other words, technology brings with it specific cultural conditions that allow for new cultural inventions to be adopted.

TCKs use technology in order to maintain a form of communication with their TCK peers. One such outlet is the use of social media, especially in platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. I have previously mentioned the concept of community and how TCKs around the world establish a sense of community despite not being physically congregated in one location. The online communal experience however, is widespread and allows for the participation of 1.5 billion global Internet users nowadays (Kozinets, 2010). During its origins, online communities were mainly based on anonymity, where members of such communities were not expected to physically meet. However, online gatherings have brought together the ideals of community and culture to the online world on different websites, including social networks, constructing new connections and communities (Kozinets, 2010). Many groups, including TCKs, adopt this fairly new phenomenon and approach.

When conducting research to be able to better understand a group of individuals, especially one that dedicates their communication strategies through internet use, online observation is the ideal methodology in order to approach it. As opposed to online methods in order to gather data, such as online surveys, the researcher is able to use the information that has been posted to the public in online forums or social media in order to observe behaviors and themes.

As mentioned previously, the narrative process is a self-reflexive one that can lead to a discursive reflections of self-identity. Turner and Reynolds (2011) determine that people carry out their daily lives in a socially structured system, which are delineated group-based perceptions, cognition and conduct. In other words, the way we act and perceive information is highly defined by the groups we belong to. By not belonging to any group or community, TCKs lack identifying with others and therefore feel like they are marginalized and always a
minority (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011). Narrative interviewing will shed light onto the ways TCKs communicate culture, sense of belonging, community, technology and identity. I will also be able to establish how this is communicated and how this particular community creates a connection. Therefore, the following research questions have been established for this study:

RQ1: How do third culture kids narrate a TCK Identity?
RQ2: How do TCKs narrate a sense of home?

As mentioned previously, globalization has created a diverse world, and therefore the human population has become more multicultural than it has ever been in the past (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). With the establishment of such a term as “third culture kids,” we are able to categorize and acknowledge this population and their impact on society. There is great significance in studying the TCK population because results can aid in the psychological well being of these individuals, especially in their adaptation processes to new cultures. In a society where TCKs live among us in virtual invisibility, we can begin to understand how to coexist and relate with these people, especially nowadays in an economic environment where intercultural communication is necessary to create successful collaborations. Creating a better understanding of not only TCKs, but of international beings with whom we interact with from time to time, allows for better communication practices that should be learned and
applied when establishing relationships with individuals cross-culturally. Moreover, a qualitative research study on this particular group of people adds to the intercultural communication literature, especially in globalized and often-changing societies.

In this chapter I have overviewed the main aspects that entail the TCK community and how they co-construct a third culture identity by discursively narrating their stories. More importantly, I have established the importance of crucial themes when studying this group of people, such as culture, identity, sense of belonging, and technology. The importance of narrative and the use of online observation have also been described as an essential part of this research. The following chapter will explain the methodology that was used for this research study.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The bell rings and we all head out of the classroom. The fresh mountain air hits my face as I walk out the door towards my locker; I had just finished my last class of high school at my international school. A couple of friends joined me as we walked in unison to put our books away, all of us in silence. We saw some other classmates hugging each other and crying, my vision started blurring at the sight of this. I started pre-school at this school when I was three years old, and for fifteen years this place had been my home. We lived in a bubble nested in the foothills of the Andes Mountains, where individuals similar to us and of all nationalities and backgrounds came for an education. I never had to worry about anybody asking me where I was from, and even if they did ask me, my story would suffice because theirs was probably even crazier. Most of my friends had lived in at least five different countries before they had arrived to my school. My graduating class represented 38 different countries, and we all knew each other by first and last name. We were all respectful to each other and we never saw divisions of social cliques like the ones seen in U.S. American teen movies. Most importantly, everyone here was my family and graduating from this school meant that we were all heading to different parts of the world to continue with our lives, expose ourselves to a society that would never truly understand us.

***

In Chapter One I explored research that argues that TCKs establish a narrative identity despite their physical dispersion across the globe. By having experienced a unique lifestyle in which they have been exposed to a number of different cultures from a young age, they have innately gained insight on worldly views and perspectives. However, because of the ways in which TCKs communicate who they are, they can often be misunderstood. Pollock & Van Reken (2009) explain that many times when TCKs attempt to communicate with non-TCK peers, they get carried away by telling their stories about traveling to different
countries and this could many times be perceived by others as showing off. This could lead to a disengaged connection between TCKs and non-TCKs, resulting in TCKs not having a sense of belonging and feelings of homelessness. By further studying this group’s narratives, we are able to gain insight on themes that they experience on a day-to-day basis and the foundations of how they communicate as a group of people who co-construct “third culture” identity. Because culture is ever changing, especially in our interconnected world today, the Internet was used as an observational tool to gather information on the TCK community.

After receiving IRB approval, a qualitative approach was taken when conducting this study, specifically utilizing narrative interviewing, autoethnography, and online observation. The researcher took a complete participant role (Tracy, 2013) within the interview process, where she was already a member of the group being studied. This led to a number of advantages, such as an incentive to studying this particular community and most importantly, openness of participants during the interview process (Tracy, 2013). As expected, interviewees asked the researcher about her TCK experience, expecting narratives of shared experiences. The fact that I also identify as a TCK had a big influence in gaining access to interviews, Facebook groups, and online forums.

**Narrative Interviewing**

Narrative interviewing allows for thick description and the analyses of such discourses in order to further understand communication processes within this population. Furthermore, qualitative research applies well to this specific topic because instead of asking about what people report they do, the research itself provides the context and information of what is actually being done and most importantly, discursively communicated (Tracy, 2013). When it comes to culture-specific topics, it is helpful to take a qualitative approach to further explore what is salient within the issue.

Narratives are a meaningful way of collecting data because it is often times individuals themselves who organize personal and cultural meanings within their narratives (Lawlor, 2000). As mentioned in Chapter One, Giddens (1991) establishes that self-identity is reflexive, and therefore can be analyzed through the narratives of individuals. The interview guide used for this study assisted in making the interview process more
conversational, where interviewees were able to reflect on and share their experiences, rather than just answer with yes or no replies (see Appendix).

Participants included sixteen TCKs currently located in sixteen different cities and six different countries. Of the sixteen interview participants, seven were male and nine were female, all of whom were given the option to choose a pseudonym for the study or to be assigned one by the researcher. This study led to a total of 21 hours of interview time and a total of 25 hours of online observation on TCK online forums and Facebook groups. Thirteen interviews were conducted via Skype, whereas three others had to be conducted over the phone because of limited Internet access or unfamiliarity with online voice/video calls. Interviewees ranged between the ages of 24 and 64. Participants were recruited through Facebook posts in four different groups on the social media websites catered towards TCKs.

**CODING**

Coding was initiated after transcription notes were sorted and highlighted in a variety of colors to indicate initial codes that surfaced from the interviews. Coding is a way of cataloguing the data collected and sorting it to represent some sort of phenomenon (Tracy, 2013). Second-level coding proceeded with explaining the data collected and assisted when creating a hierarchy of the TCK narrative. The themes that surfaced from this coding: Narrating the “TCK” Label, Narrating Community and Narrating Home. Each of these themes seemed to be a part of the narrative process each TCK underwent in order to tell their TCK experience.

**ONLINE OBSERVATION**

Because TCKs have such mobile lifestyles, there isn’t a specific geographical location in which they meet as a mass. Unless they live in highly popular and highly culturally diverse cities around the world, such as Los Angeles, New York, London or Sydney, it is difficult to find TCK meet-up groups. This does not mean that there are only TCKs in these cities, but instead that TCKs are blended into different societies and do not communicate their identities in order to adapt to the space around them (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). In order to reach out to other TCKs, the internet is used as a platform to stay in touch with former TCK friends, where they become a part of online groups that allow for
virtual gatherings of TCKs, or to just simply share their stories. Therefore, by establishing the Internet as a key “location” for observation in this study, I focused on online social media websites (Facebook and Twitter) catered towards TCKs to reinforce the themes that simultaneously appeared within the narratives coming from the interviews. TCKs are constantly on the move and it is many times difficult to establish in-person connections with this community. By reviewing social network comments, I was able to supplement communicative patterns that brought forth themes from narrative interviewing.

This study revolved around TCKs from different countries. Most research on TCKs is ethnocentric in the fact that studies have mostly been conducted on American TCKs, specifically in the realm of American missionary families and American military families. Research on international beings as TCKs needs to be further studied in order to fully understand Third Culture Kids as a global community and not only focus on TCKs originating from one specific nation. By taking a more collective approach, we are able to be inclusive and add to the literature on intercultural communication from an actual multicultural perspective.

***

I am sitting in a room full of strangers, they are all being nice to me, but I don’t want to talk to them. My parents are from here, but it doesn’t mean that I am, or does it? I just smile and listen, dreading every second that passes by. I wished I was back in High School. I missed my friends, teachers, and people who just simply understood. Here I am in a crowded circle as these nice people ask me questions about myself, and think that it is so cool that I can speak three languages. I hate being the center of attention, and they are so nice, but I absolutely dread every second of it and it makes me feel bad about not wanting to share more. I resort to constantly making up excuses about having to go home to spend time with my grandmother. I shut myself in my room most days just feeling sorry for myself. I absolutely do not fit in here in Taiwan, what am I going to do?

***

By conducting a study with the incorporation of narrative inquiry and autoethnography, I was able to examine the sense-making process of TCKs when narrating their “stories.” Tracy (2013) explains the choice for a qualitative study best by describing the funnel metaphor. Just like a funnel would, the topic of Third Culture Kids is a broad one; it is
a community of individuals who live dispersed around the world but have one main cohesion between them, the abstract or invisible “third culture” they all relate to. By continuing to analyze the narratives of these individuals, we are able to circle around through the “funnel” and analyze our data in a way that specifies what the purpose of the study is (Tracy, 2013). As mentioned in Chapter One, a qualitative method, more specifically through narrative interviewing, allows for a more naturalistic approach to the study of narratives. Narratives function as a form of making sense of one’s self-identity (Giddens, 1991); therefore, by establishing qualitative methods to this research, data was collected by each TCK’s narrative. By taking a qualitative approach, I paved a path for future research within the realm of study of TCKs and similar communities. The following chapter focuses on three themes that characterize the TCK narrative when communicating about themselves and individuals of their community.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

After leaving Taiwan I felt like a failure. If I couldn’t even survive in my own “home country,” where was I supposed to go? I moved back in with my parents in Chile and applied to universities in the U.S. with the hopes of getting accepted. The waiting killed me and I started to worry. What if I didn’t get accepted? I had to have a backup plan, so I took a college entrance exam for a Chilean university, got accepted, and decided that I would just stay in Chile. On my first day of class at this university I received an acceptance letter from my top choice university in the U.S. I was absolutely devastated; I had already enrolled as a student and did not want to have to drop out of another university and be a failure once again, so I decided to stick with my decision to stay in Chile. I hated it.

Despite having grown up in Chile my entire life, I realized that this was not the Chile I knew. The Chile I knew consisted of diversity, multilingual people, and no discrimination, all protected inside my international school bubble. “Hey, what school did you go to?” Everyone in my Chilean university kept asking me this, and once I told them, I got laughed at and called “gringa.” I had never been called names before or been judged just because of what school I went to. I retracted from having any sort of relationship from anybody in my cohort. Everyday I would go to class and drive back home, even if I only had one-hour breaks between classes. Sometimes I would leave and just sit in my car to avoid talking to people. I felt like a foreigner because people kept pointing out to me that I was.

One day a girl called Camille yelled out to me as I headed towards my car. “Where are you going? Class starts in like forty-five minutes!” She hooked her arm into mine and literally dragged me to the dining area. “I’m starving,” she said, as she forced me to eat lunch with her. It took someone with a strong personality to make me snap out of my rejection towards everything and introduced me to the real Chile I was living in. We would hang out often and she would tell me about her country (and, in a sense, my country, too) and all the
pop culture and news that I had missed out on all those years, even slang words I had never made part of my Spanish vocabulary. Some people still called me *gringa*, but I didn’t really care anymore, it turned into more of a term of endearment. In fact, one of the most recent e-mails I received from her reads: “My dear friend, always such a gringa. Why did you leave us to go study in the U.S.? You know you’re actually Chilean, right? Come home soon, we miss you.”

***

This chapter aims to address the themes that assist in answering the research questions previously mentioned in Chapter One:

RQ1: How do Third Culture Kids narrate a TCK identity?  
RQ2: How do TCKs narrate a sense of home?

TCKs’ narratives were characterized by themes that are very specific to this community, a discursive process of sense-making that illustrates the powerful and fluid nature of identity, culture, and home. As mentioned in Chapter One, the term third culture refers to a makeshift “invisible” culture that connects all TCKs’ shared experiences, global transitions, and mutual understanding (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). After online observation and sixteen in-depth Skype interviews, various overarching themes began to emerge regarding how TCKs communicated, acted, and reacted to similar situations in different stages of their lives.

Three different themes surfaced during the research process, further clarifying different discursive behaviors employed by TCKs during the narrative interviewing process: Narrating the “TCK” label, Narrating community, and Narrating home. These three communicative themes assisted in describing and revealing how they, as a global community, communicate their “third culture” identity. In this section, I will first review each of these predominant themes in order to yield the results to the research questions previously stated. In the following section, Table 1 offers a snapshot of the findings discussed in the rest of this chapter.
Table 1. TCK Narrative Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Narrating the TCK Label | Discovering the term “TCK” is a life-changing instance in the lives of TCKs. TCKs’ discursive enactment of the TCK term conveys relief, frustration, and privilege. | • Provides a sense of identity for TCKs  
• TCKs refer to having this term as relieving, a “huge weight off their shoulders.”  
• They communicate frustration over mislabeling from non-TCKs. |
| Narrating Community  | TCKs view other TCKs as family members. This pattern was representative of their own TCK friendships as well as any TCK, even strangers. | • Provides a sense of community  
• Allows TCKs to communicate with others like them.  
• Provides a “safe” network of support.  
• Allows a sense of familiarity and understanding. TCKs had certain expectations from other TCKs. |
| Narrating Home       | Two main avenues: Home as acceptance and Home as Dislocation. Some TCKs accept their new host countries and are content with their situation. Others felt a sense of dislocation, like finding a place of belonging was out of reach. | • Provided a sense of belonging by talking about current situations and how they have embraced their “new life” although they are still TCKs.  
• Some TCKs are unable to accept their current situation and feel a sense of dislocation. |

**WHAT’S IN A NAME? NARRATING THE “TCK” LABEL**

TCKs have long been trying to find themselves and their place in the world. One of the most difficult situations that TCKs face is having to answer the question, “Where are you from?” This simple question that most people could answer with one word or at least a phrase is one of the most complex questions to which TCKs worry about having to respond. One main commonality between TCKs interviewed indicated that the timeline of their TCK experience was emphasized by them finding the term “TCK.” This term served as a label and helped describe themselves and their experiences, making it a relatable signifier for all TCKs. After their discovery of such a term, they automatically acknowledged themselves as
a TCK, linking them to other individuals “just like them.” When talking about the term TCK, three issues were constant in the narratives of TCKs: relief, frustration, and privilege.

TCKs who grew up in an age without the Internet and without access to much information had to cope with their issues by hiding their feelings from the world around them, a lot of times even from their families. Kandi and Jim, are both TCKs and over the age of 60.

Kandi describes her relief when she first heard about the term TCK and the moment in which she realized that she was a TCK:

I was in my mid-50s and I received an alumni magazine from my international school in Singapore. There was a short paragraph on TCKs in there and I thought to myself ‘what the hell is that!’ So you know, I looked at the Internet. I spent almost an entire weekend reading and looking at things and ordered the book. Not only did it describe my upbringing, but it answered a lot of questions. For like six months I was telling everybody I knew and they didn’t get it and would just say “sure…”[laughs]. (Interview, February 27, 2015)

Similarly, Jim speaks about his fairly recent first encounter with the term, TCK:

It was on Facebook, where I obviously was able to connect with people from the past, High School primarily. Somehow, someway, it popped up and I thought, “wow, there’s a group of us called Third Culture Kids and it makes sense you know!” (Interview, February 22, 2015)

Although Kandi and Jim are both TCKs, they both grew up in a time where the Internet and information in general was not as easily accessible. Research on TCKs was minimal and in its early stages. In the interview process, the term “Third Culture Kid” was mentioned as a crucial point in every TCK’s life, most of them even considering it to be life changing. Having a name that signified some sort of attachment to their lifestyle and experiences was what TCKs needed in order to take a first step into belonging and lead to relief.

When referring to non-TCK individuals, TCKs also commented about how frustrating it was for them to be inaccurately labeled by these individuals. Narrating frustrations were common within TCKs, perhaps imbedded in the pre-conceived notion that non-TCKs simply did not understand them. Tim reflects on his experience:

I got really frustrated at people mislabeling people or saying that because you’re part of this, you can’t do this. I find that people use difference to drive people apart. I remember when I first came to the United States and some of the questions I would get asked after I said I was Nigerian was if I lived in a hut, if I
slept with a lion, if I ate monkeys…they were just reciting the whole Lion King experience for me! What I ended up doing was getting over it. I used it as an educational experience. Everybody always wants to put you in a box. (Interview, February 22, 2015)

Tim had grown up in many different places. His father, a Nigerian diplomat, moved around five different continents during Tim’s upbringing. Mislabeling usually surfaced when asked where he was from. Because of TCKs’ unique upbringings in various places around the world, they did not like being categorized into one specific “box” and would especially show discontent when they were being labeled by non-TCKs. The issue was not only “what” they were being labeled, but “who” was labeling them as well.

Although TCKs show frustration when non-TCKs “put them in a box” and label them, when the name “TCK” was first introduced to them at a certain point in their life, it was a significant and pivotal moment for each one of them. It is also imperative to note that despite age differences between interviewees, their reaction to finding out that there was a term that described them was fundamentally the same throughout every person interviewed. This similarity can be reflected in the following interview excerpt: “I am fine with my identity, I just didn’t know how to explain it to others. So now I’m just like “this is the phrase, this is what it means.” And if someone wanted to look it up, they could look it up” (Jenny, Interview, February 26, 2015).

Having a phrase or name to describe who they were was the first step into attaching themselves to a name. The second part of this sense-making process after realizing there was a term that described them consisted in the search for definitions and reminiscing about the times they have felt different in their surroundings.

One of my TCK friends put something on Facebook about TCKs and this was about six years ago. I looked up the term and I was like “WOW, I’m not that weird!” I think it’s been very, very helpful with little struggles in life that I just didn’t understand how other people did it and just by realizing that I’m a TCK became so much easier. I belong in my sense of not belonging anywhere. Before that I felt I was on my own on a little cloud moving around in the world and now knowing that there’s millions of us, it just feels really nice to belong to a group. (Nicole, Interview, March 1, 2015)

This feeling of ownership is a sore spot with many TCKs, as evidenced in many interviews. TCKs commonly stated that non-TCKs did not understand them, regularly referring to non-TCKs as “mono-cultural” individuals. TCKs also spoke highly about
themselves, and often commented on the privileged life they have had in being raised in international locations and how being a TCK allowed for mutual understandings.

It’s like a point where you’re speaking a code language to each other. The eyes are different. When I tell a mono-cultural person about a story where I grew up, their eyes will kind of graze over and they don’t get it. Whereas you tell a story like that to a TCK, they come back with their own similar story and it’s like you share the same experience. Even though it was in a different country, in a different language, and a different culture, it’s still the same cross-cultural story. We’re quick to recognize and understand each other’s stories and we find ourselves becoming close friends a lot faster. (Jake, Interview, March 1, 2015)

Jake’s reflection was common to a lot of other TCKs interviewed. They kept referring to their experience to be the same privileged one, as all TCKs in general. Much like Jake described, their lives and stories might have consisted of different experiences, but the cross-cultural story was the exact same.

Having touched upon the importance of having a term to describe one’s self and how the term TCK created a sense of belonging within these individuals, it is also important to note that they formed a sense of identity by attaching themselves to this term. Therefore, by considering themselves to be TCKs, this is an essential part in the narrative of identity within TCKs. Hoersting and Jenkins (2011) establish how important it is to acknowledge our memberships to our surroundings and environments. Determining a sense of identity comes with being able to connect to our cultural memberships.

The fact that TCKs have had differing surroundings during their childhood could be one of the reasons why they feel so disconnected with those who have not had similar upbringings. Previous research has already determined that identity is a recurring struggle for the TCK community (Berry, 2008; Collier & Thomas, 1988; Cottrell, 2008; Dewaele & van Oudenhoven, 2009; Fail et al., 2004; Finn, 2002); however, none of these studies have referred to a lack of identity due to not having a name to “label” them.

Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) helps us explain this phenomenon between TCKs and their association. SCT explains that social categorization processes help an individual determine the in-group and outgroup status of individuals, in a way de-personalizing oneself to belong to a group (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Finding out about this “name” was a life-changing moment for them, relieving a lot of insecurities. In other words, TCKs felt that they, as individuals, were different from the people surrounding them. Once they found the
term TCK, they began a self-categorization process, which placed them in the in-group category of “TCK,” and they categorized non-TCKs as part of the out-group. Therefore, identifying this term as a label was an important turning point in their narratives of identity. I will further discuss these issues of self-categorization in Chapter Four and broaden discussion on why these results are so important when it comes to finding a sense of identity by having a term that defines oneself. In the following section, TCK narratives about their community determined specific characteristics not commonly found within the traditional sense of community.

“WE ARE FAMILY”: NARRATING COMMUNITY

Once able to associate themselves with the term “TCK,” they instantaneously wanted to find more information regarding “other people like them.” TCKs communicated a sense of familiarity when speaking about the TCK community, even setting certain standards and expectations for their TCK peers. This concept of community is defined in this study as “networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity” (Wellman et al., 2002, p. 153). Certain characteristics of this specific community have aspects that vary widely from traditional communities. As mentioned in the previous section, the term “Third Culture Kid” was an essential part of finding some sort of identity and sense of belonging for each of these individuals. Originally, I was looking at TCKs and defining them to be mainly and specifically an online community. However, after my research was conducted, results indicated that TCKs are a global community that uses the Internet as a means to find out about their “TCK-ness” as well as a tool to connect to other TCKs and share their experiences. The Internet is merely an instrument to communicate with other TCKs, but not a requirement to be a part or belong to the TCK community.

TCKs narrated a familial connection, seemingly more than just talking about a connection to people who belong to the same community. In Chapter One, research established the importance of communities and how it is essential for one’s well being to belong to a community (Pretty et al., 1996). This is not necessarily a connection between TCKs who have had long-lasting friendships with each other, but between all TCKs, even if they were initially strangers to each other.
When you meet a TCK that you don’t like, it’s like you’re much more disappointed. It’s like finding a second cousin that’s an asshole...It’s like “aw shucks...but he’s family.” It’s not like “okay he’s an asshole and he’s not in my family, so okay it doesn’t matter.” When you meet a TCK that has the same upbringing as you and he’s an asshole...it’s like, “oh that’s such a shame.” ‘Cause there’s something about TCKs where you want all other TCKs to do well. You do feel like part of a family so you want us to all be part of this tight family and you want all of us doing well. (Henry, Interview, February 28, 2015)

Henry’s comments reflect his feelings when meeting TCKs he does not like. His reaction portrays the disappointment that one might when a family member who turns out not to live up to expectations.

This attitude of wanting all TCKs “to do well” is meaningful in the sense that they might not all know each other, but they want TCKs to be emotionally well, much like a person would want any family member to be. For some, even their own family members could not fill the supportive role they needed from someone close to them. Many TCKs filled this position for each other.

Coming back to the U.S. was very tumultuous. I don’t remember how I found it, but I somehow ran into a missionary kid and went searching on the Internet. I was one of the first members of MKPlanet, it filled such a void at the time. It helped my transition immensely. Having that community to empathize with and to realize that what I was going through was okay. My dad has never been sympathetic to the idea of being a TCK and having it as an identity. He sees it more as a problem you need to get over. So having that community was absolutely invaluable for the first two to three years of living in the States. (Joy, Interview, February 27. 2015)

In Joy’s recounting, her family was not understanding of her issues as a TCK. As Merrill-Foster (1996) indicates, the parents’ perspective on the TCK experience varies widely because these adults leave their country of origin with a clear and much defined sense of belonging and place. Much like Joy, some of the interviewees who did not have the support of their family members or who did not feel their family understood them, sought out to other TCKs online to find the relief they needed in order to cope with their situation. In these circumstances, other TCKs that they did not personally know, served as a replacement for familial support. As mentioned in Chapter One, TCKs encompass many subgroups, such as military brats, missionary kids, and business kids (McDonald, 2010). The website mentioned by Joy, MK Planet, briefly reflects the role of technology and how it connects the
The functions that websites such as these have played in the lives of TCKs will be further explored in Chapter Four.

By engaging themselves in this community, TCKs are able to see themselves as a larger entity, something greater than just the traditional sense of community, which usually refers to as being in the same physical location (Wellman et al., 2002). Most importantly, this specific community showed great interest in creating a network of sociability, support, and information with their TCK peers. Jake’s experience reflects an important role that TCKs play in his life, going through hurdles to have those people who are important to him present although they are physically far away:

I recently got married and I got a friend to set it up. My wedding was broadcast live on Youtube and I was able to e-mail a link to all my friends in Ecuador and they could watch my wedding live. My wedding was also bilingual; we got someone to translate it to Spanish while it was going on. (Interview, March 1, 2015)

Jake and his spouse are U.S. Americans. The reason he looked into all these details for his wedding was so that his TCK friends (international school friends and people he grew up with in different places) could be “present” and witness his wedding day. Such sacrifices from one TCK to another were not rare. They reflect deep compromise from one individual to another as well as commitment to those who are in their TCK community. This is shown in both Sarah and Scott’s comments when referring to their TCK peers. Sarah, a TCK currently residing in the United States explains that others thought it was odd that she would do what she did to see a TCK friend of hers: “One time I went to meet up with a friend that I was really good friends with and I drove like four hours to spend an hour and a half with her and then I drove four hours back” (Sarah, Interview, February 23, 2015). When referring to the international school friends he grew up with, Scott confesses, “I would honestly drop anything to help them if they needed it” (Scott, Interview, February 24, 2015). “Drop[ing] everything” for someone else is not generally something that most people would do for just anybody. This reflects high levels of commitment within members of the TCK community.

When recruiting for individuals to interview for this study, I shared my information in various TCK groups on Facebook, divulging myself as a TCK as well. The response within minutes was overwhelming. What fascinated me the most was that after thanking each one of them for volunteering their time to be interviewed, almost all of them replied with “Of
course! Anything for a fellow TCK,” or a similar comment to that. The act of support and helping out another TCK was their way of creating community and helping those people just like them.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the term “community” signifies a network of individuals providing “sociability, support, information, sense of belonging, and social identity” (Wellman et al., 2002, p. 153). Research further states that it is an essential part of one’s well-being and that “sense of community is not necessarily rooted in actual experience, but in the perception that one is part of the ‘common good’ which will be accessible to you should the need arise” (Pretty et al., 1996, p. 366). This description encompasses TCKs’ reflections on their connections to other TCKs. They are in fact a part of a community; however, not a common one where they are all located in one location. However, although they belong to a physically dispersed community, their commitment to one another communicates a familial connection and it is something that they expect from each member who is a TCK.

“Yearning for a little more of simplicity”: Narrating Home

When asked about the idea of home and belongingness, TCKs’ narratives took different paths. It is important to note that most TCKs did not consider themselves to necessarily “belong” anywhere. Sense of belonging was instead translated into how TCKs communicated belonging to the culture they were currently in, whether it be their passport country or not. Narratives of home from all TCKs followed the same path, from relief once they found the label “TCK” (and frustration at non-TCKs attempt to label them) and a sense of family in the community of TCKs. When asked about “home,” however, narratives diverged into two separate patterns: Home as Dislocation and Home as Acceptance. In this theme, “home” translates into what their current lifestyle is. It is not a physical location or who they feel close to, but instead, the lifestyle they have learned to adopt in order to carry-on with their lives.

A lot of them initially struggled with self-identity, an important part of the progression and understanding of the TCK self. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Giddens (1991) establishes the importance of the “self” and how each person’s identity results in a
reconstruction of their narrative. Throughout each interviewee’s narrative, a cohesive sense of acceptance of their lives helped each person’s assimilation to their current situation and therefore led to a more positive perception. Walters and Auton-Cuff (2009) also referred to humans having two different aspects to our identities, our outside identity and our inside identity. Through the use of narrative interviewing, TCKs were able to construct and share their own narrative and therefore discursively enact their self-identity.

In the case of this last theme, narrating home was also a process of self-identification for TCKs, many times reflecting a positive or negative outcome. TCKs’ outside identity generally switched depending on the place they moved to, this was part of their approach to hide and attempt to blend in with the rest. As a process however, in order for TCKs to reach the point of either “home as dislocation” or “home as acceptance,” they had to go through the process of narrating their own stories and accept their current lives or struggle with a sense of dislocation.

TCKs narratives began by explaining their account of returning to their passport country. This is something they all went through at a time where they were on their own for the first time in their lives, leaving behind the TCK lifestyle, as well as family and friends. This was a common situation among most TCKs interviewed.

Moving back to the States was a big experience. I was totally unprepared...totally unprepared. I had gone back to visit family multiple times as I grew up, but that didn’t necessarily mean immersing myself in American culture. So when I went back and had to stand on my own two feet and interact with Americans who were not entirely prepared for who I was...and I wasn’t prepared for trying to be an American in America. Part of it was that I wasn’t quite ready to leave Indonesia. (Dennis, Interview, February 22, 2015)

Dennis’ experience reflects a perceived sense of insecurity, where assumptions were made based on what others were thinking about him. Many TCKs experienced this, confusing their own feelings of not being ready to leave their TCK environment, to negative feelings towards their new surroundings.

For those who realized that their own cultural knowledge of their passport countries was widely different to what they thought, they felt more detached or “left out” of their surroundings. Most TCKs interviewed went through this phase, where being different made them feel distant from the rest and eventually led them to reminisce about their past TCK life and hesitate about where they were at.
I had no clue what the style was. I came back and wanted to blend in, but didn’t even know where to begin to look for what was in style or what everyone was wearing. I was feeling totally out of place with the clothes that I had. One of the biggest feelings was the feeling of being real overwhelmed and the desire of wanting to blend in with everybody and feeling like I stood out. Even if I didn’t stand out necessarily, but just feeling like I did. When you’re networking with people you kind of start feeling out of place. The more people I get to know who aren’t TCKs, and they feel like they’re my friends…and I feel like they’re my friends too, I don’t want to be a hypocrite, the more you realize that people don’t really know you. And you remember back to the times where you met other TCKs and you just automatically related to them. Even if I grew up in South America, I had a friend that grew up in Africa, so totally different cultures that we came out of, but we related right away. (Grace, personal communication, March 2, 2015)

Grace mentions wanting to fit in and even small details, such as worrying about clothing seemed to be an important factor when trying to fit in. At the age where one goes to college, having some knowledge of pop culture and what is popular at the time seemed to be essential for blending in with the rest. This is a result of individuals growing up in different cultures, often times mirroring those they are surrounded by (Isogai, Hayashi, & Uno, 1999).Grace’s remembrance not only reflects her perceptions of her peers, but also communicates a greater disconnect between her and her non-TCK friends. Her experience also highlights an important aspect of TCK communication strategies.

Most commonly, what TCKs seemed to appreciate about their upbringing was the element that they stood out from the rest and were, in some way, unique. However, when it came time for them to transition and move to a new place, this time surrounded by non-TCKs, they disliked the fact that they stood out and instead wanted to “blend in.” What resonates within this narrative is the TCK’s need to assimilate when returning to their passport country. The fear of being misunderstood and feeling disconnected with those around them triggers a defense mechanism of keeping quiet in order to blend in with the rest.

Another important reason for wanting to blend in was also related to wanting to be more “normal.”

Our lives are defined by complexity in terms of our life story and part of it is the yearning for a little bit more of simplicity, I think, and just not having to explain everything all the time or being clueless all the time, doing the whole smile and nod type of thing. I think that even though we love our TCK experience to death, at least most of us do, I think a lot of us envy people that have just grown up in a mono-cultural environment, and have had friends they have known since they
were little, we are comforted that maybe we could be like that. (Bob, Interview, February 23, 2015)

This excerpt from Bob’s narrative is important to discuss because of the way he communicates that he feels comforted by the fact that perhaps he can have a life like his non-TCK peers, where they have long-lasting friendships. Bob is stating that he is envious of those who have lived a mono-cultural lifestyle and therefore yearns that he will be able to do so as well, communicating an acceptance to the culture he is currently in. Although Bob has communicated acceptance to his situation like many TCKs interviewed did, a large portion of the interviewees also had completely different results. This was the decisive point on how each TCK communicated belongingness, either home as dislocation or home as acceptance. Although it is not quite clear what happens in the narrative process to instigate two drastically different results, it is important to look at the factors that encompass each one.

Home as dislocation was generally associated to negative perceptions of the place they were currently living in, as well as the individuals surrounding the TCK. Individuals who communicated dislocation viewed it as something that they would never be able to experience and were very adamant about not assimilating.

Moving around a lot, I didn’t really care if people liked me or not. Even now, I’ve lived here for about a year and I still don’t really care about the local culture. I have walls up and am guarded because I’m like ‘well, you just don’t know, and I don’t have to perform to your way of doing things because I’m not going to stay here long enough to learn all your customs...like it’s not the only way it’s done so I don’t have to conform.’ (Sarah, Interview, February 23, 2015)

In Sarah’s narrative, it is significant to emphasize on her comment of not staying in one place long enough to have to conform. However, even if she did stay somewhere for a long period of time, she is reticent to doing so because “it is not the only way.” She communicated rejection towards assimilation and as she mentioned, kept her guard up and did not care if others liked her or not.

TCKs who communicated home as dislocation also criticized other TCKs, especially those who shared positive thoughts towards being a TCK.

I’m annoyed that everyone always says things that are positive about being a TCK. There’s this, there’s that...and I like things to be portrayed in an honest and truthful light. It’s not all perfection and beauty and traveling. People who are TCKs make it look so pretty, and it’s not, I haven’t had anything with incredible prettiness attached to it. (Jenny, Interview, February 26, 2015)
Although each TCK has their individual and unique story, Jenny was not the only person interviewed to communicate such thoughts. In this case, the TCK narrative that followed home as dislocation, executed dislocation not only with the TCK individual and his or her surroundings, but reflected a dislocation with other TCKs who communicated differently than them. As mentioned previously, TCKs who negated any form of conforming to their surroundings, saw it very difficult to have a stable life and communicated frustration over the information that was available to them because it didn’t help them specifically.

I’ve had two TCK crises in my lifetime, and the frustrating part of it was not finding [assimilating] anything, like not being fluent in any language, mixing foods, that was frustrating. I don’t think there’s enough information on TCKs that would actually be helpful. I had a friend that showed me TCK lectures on tape, that was twenty years ago and I think the current information is the exact same.

(Abby, Interview, March 1, 2015)

Although this will be further discussed in Chapter Four, it is important to mention that the narratives for all TCKs were fluid in the sense that TCKs all communicated their returning to their passport country experience, including the struggles. However, their narratives changed drastically between accepting their current life, to feeling it as a sense of dislocation.

TCKs whose narratives reflected home as acceptance had a more positive outlook towards their experiences and sought ways to improve their sense of belonging and assimilation. Their comments not only reflected clear acceptance of their situation as TCKs living in non-TCK environments, but also reflected a sense of fluidity in their lifestyle as something that could be viewed as strength and, in effect, be turned to their advantage to positively impact their lives. The process of assimilation and adaptation to their current location was the same for all TCKs. They all returned to their passport countries and had difficulties. However, those who communicated home as acceptance learned different ways of managing their issues, accepting them as they were, and channeling them in a way to benefit them.

TCKs have a huge advantage. If they want to, they can use it because yes you can adapt, you can fill a lot of roles, and it’s purely because you have been on that runway where you’ve got to figure out your own life. You’re constantly learning in so many ways that are outside a classroom. There’s a chapter in the TCK book about how you’ve got to get beyond feeling sorry for yourself and that you’re not in this life anymore and figure out how to use it to your advantage and it was
like...there was this switch that went off. Since I read that line, I’ve really embraced my TCK-ness and I’ve talked about it in business, in personal relationships, in brand new first meeting settings and I really use it as my hook. You want to show people that you’re an advantage to them too, that you’re not isolating yourself...that “by having me in the room, things could get more interesting!” (Scott, Interview, February 24, 2015)

Much like Scott, other TCKs spoke about trying different things to make new friends. TCKs who communicated making an effort to fit in and who approached non-TCKs themselves had a less traumatic assimilation process towards their surroundings.

I found some friends that kind of took pity on me and treated me probably more like an international student and kind of taught me about American culture and that was very helpful so I kind of formed friendships on asking for help. There are some people that I’ll meet for the first time and they’ll be like “well, where are you from?” and a lot of times what I’ll start of with is “well, I’m what you call a third culture kid, which means that I was raised in a lot of different countries.” (Lisa, Interview, March 25, 2015)

Some TCKs who had assimilated to their situation also recognized the importance of the support system they had while returning to their passport country. The notion of having a strong support system seemed to be an essential aspect when it came to having a more emotionally stable outlook on life. Moreover, those who communicated home as acceptance spoke about finding a sense of belonging within marrying their significant other and building families of their own.

Everything got better after I met my husband, it made everything make a lot more sense. A big thing is that I moved past that stage of life pretty quickly...we got married the summer after my junior year [college]. It moved me right past that young adult searching for yourself stage...Then I wanted to figure out my career and started a family so it made all those questions sort of pale and I was just past that stage in my life where those questions were overwhelming. (Rebecca, Interview, March 24, 2015)

In many of these narratives, TCKs described a perception of non-TCKs as “not caring” or “uninterested” in their TCK upbringing. Their denial towards leaving their TCK life and having to return to a country “they belonged to” created a lot of inner tension within these individuals, many times leading them to shut out their new surroundings. The way in which they referred to “others” not caring about their stories were many times communicated in a rather condescending manner, often times not being aware of such comments, this will be discussed in the following chapter as future directions this type of research could focus on.
With my passport in hand I sat by my boarding gate and people watched. I actually do not like flying in itself, but am comforted by being at an airport. I was moving once again, this time to Australia. I thought about the friends I was leaving behind and also nervous about arriving at this new city. Arriving was always the worst part of it all because you literally do not know a single person there. You have nobody to confide in and you’re all alone. That’s usually the scariest part of it all for me, it’s when I shed the most tears and feel the most sorry about myself. I also think about how it bothers my parents that I cannot just find a place to live in and stay there. Despite the hardship however, I keep moving. I can’t really explain it to anyone because this has been my life since I can remember. I live in the airport, it’s the only constant thing I know of and actually feel comfortable even in the most chaotic and busiest airports. I arrived in Australia and found my way to the hostel I made a booking at. I checked-in and just sat there, figuring out my plan for the next few weeks. Two days later, I felt so lonely that I stepped into a mall just so that I could have some sort of conversation with another human being. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for myself.

I have reviewed three themes that help clarify the two research questions at hand: How do TCKs narrate a TCK identity and how do TCKs narrate a sense of home. These themes characterize TCK narratives and how they communicate about the term TCK, the TCK community, and belongingness. Both research questions asked about how TCKs narrate a TCK identity and how do they narrate a sense of home. The first one stressed the importance of the “TCK” label and how having that name available to them, helped shape some sort of identity and assisted in TCKs having a phrase to attach their experiences to. The second theme centered on how TCKs communicated about the TCK community. TCKs’ discourse about each other depicted feelings of stronger bonds, such as those we see in relationships within families, differing from dynamics between individuals belonging to traditional communities. Within the communication of community TCKs also discussed certain expectations they had about individuals in the community, and how it was disappointing if these individuals did not conform to such expectations. In order for TCKs to adapt during their transitions back to their passport countries, they felt the necessity to blend in with the people and their surroundings. The third theme involved two different outcomes
that stemmed from their own personal narrative of home: home as dislocation and home as acceptance.

Given the data collected as well as previous research, these narratives showed a true depiction of TCKs, their feelings, experiences, and struggles. Although each person’s story was unique, these patterns echoed over and over again within their narratives. As mentioned in the methodology section of this study, I believe that the data collected was significant due in part to the interviewer being a TCK as well. Instead of viewing me as a researcher, many of these individuals were just looking to tell their stories to somebody who “understood” them. After reviewing the results of this study, the following questions emerged:

- Do TCKs’ negative perceptions of what non-TCKs might think of them lead to negative outcomes inflicted by themselves?
- Is the feeling of not being understood ironically related to TCKs not necessarily understanding other individuals?
- What can the co-construction of TCK identity through narrative tell us about this “familial community” that is widely geographically spread out?

While not the research questions that guided this study, they are nonetheless important to understanding the TCK phenomenon. As such, they will guide my discussion of the implications of this research in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION

“Well, it’s complicated. I grew up in different cities and had to move around every two to three years because of my dad’s job. Now I’m here in Sydney temporarily getting my undergraduate degree.” A fellow co-worker in Sydney, Australia was telling me about herself when we first met at our office job. Those cue words, “it’s complicated” and “move around” triggered something within me that led to immediate excitement because I knew for a fact that I had found another TCK.

“Wait, so you’re a TCK?” I asked.

Her eyes widened as she yelled out “How do you know that phrase, are you a TCK too?!?”

What’s funny is that every time I have met a fellow TCK, we can hardly contain ourselves in expressing how happy we are to meet each other. The connection of being a TCK seems to surpass the fact that we don’t know each other, leading to immediate hugs and endless sharing of life stories. I generally cringe when having to explain my upbringing to people; however, it’s different with TCKs. I crave to hear their stories and cannot wait to talk about mine.

***

The present study has thus far reviewed the importance of TCKs as multicultural beings in an ever-changing globalized world. The effects of globalization have in fact created a fast-growing number of the TCK population. However, this community, although globally aware and multicultural, maintain themselves hidden within the different societies they live in in an attempt to adapt or blend-in with their surroundings. The results of this study have yielded an array of data that helps unpack discursive sense-making processes within the TCK community. These results also generate further questions on how narratively communicating about oneself can result in two different outcomes for individuals belonging to the same
community. I will begin by reviewing the results of this study, explain how previous research has helped explain these results, and describe how the data contributes to TCK literature as well. After reviewing the theoretical implications, I will also be explaining methodological implications regarding the use of narrative interviewing and online observation of the TCK community as well as limitations and future directions for this type of research. Each of the interviewees’ “stories,” sometimes difficult to discuss, are constructions of their life stories and experiences and reflect their own self-identity. This helps us better understand this specific population and what they portray as their cultural identity. The narrative process served as an essential methodology in order to formulate self-identity within TCKs and cultural identity with the TCK community as a means to describe the notion of home and belonging.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has further confirmed data that has been of interest in prior TCK research. Issues regarding low self-esteem and cultural marginality are both prominent when referring to TCKs’ sense of identity and their lack of sense of belonging (Dewaele & van Oudenhoven, 2009). Research has shown that marginalization leads to higher chances of depression and low self-esteem (Peterson & Plamondon, 2009). TCKs are not necessarily a group of individuals marginalized by structural barriers such as oppressed people marginalized by discrimination or political agendas; their barriers are usually imposed by themselves through self-marginalization. However, we can still use this research to understand the stigmas attached to them and how they might deal with the effects of those. Therefore, it is important to further investigate the reasons behind such behaviors and what TCKs themselves communicate about these issues.

TCKs start off as individuals who have had a particularly unique international upbringing. Their knowledge of the term “TCK” is an essential moment in their lives where they instantly discover that their differences are not that different and they automatically acknowledge themselves as part of the TCK community. This process can be directly associated to Self-Categorization Theory (SCT). In this study, TCKs’ timelines reflected finding the label TCK as a critical moment when they started to categorize themselves as part of a group or community. SCT “specifies the operation of the social categorization process as
the cognitive basis of group behavior” (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123). The focus is therefore not the unique individual, but the group the individual pertains to instead (in-group), in this case TCKs. The realization of a term to define themselves played an important role in the self-categorization processes of TCKs, bringing with it self-perception and behavior that was normative to the TCK in-group. This creates a new extension to SCT, where within group behavior we can additionally supplement this definition with discursive sense-making processes as a way to reach an understanding of self-identity.

By applying narrative inquiry to this specific study, we can also confirm that SCT can also be studied as a discursive sense-making process. Walters and Auton-Cuff (2009) state that the fine lines between individual identity and collective identity are constantly in motion. TCKs are constantly battling between both, even when expressing their individual identities, they are representative of the collective TCK identity. Their strong attachment to the TCK community could be one of the reasons why their feelings towards being TCKs were so strong and embedded within who they were as individuals.

Although TCKs mindsets and upbringings make them unique and internationally aware, it is important to also stress on certain unwilling attitudes TCKs enact when returning to their home country. They have had to acculturate to cultures different from their own and have grown up among a variety of different cultures. Dewaele and van Oudenhaven’s (2009) study confirms that acculturation strengthens cultural empathy and open-mindedness. Cultural empathy has long been stressed as one of the most positive aspects of being a TCK (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Not only does it explore the processes of being more accepting of other cultures and opinions, but it also reflects on ones ability to acculturate. This process of acculturation seems to be an enjoyable one for most TCKs; however, this was not the case when it meant returning to their home country. The irony lies in the fact that an individual who is easily adaptable to different cultures, is either unable or unwilling to do so when it comes time to return to their own passport country.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, all TCKs went through a process of narrating their experiences as TCKs when they were younger and traveling with their parents, as well as their experiences when returning to the passport culture, where all of them had issues reintegrating into their “homes.” Although a lot of them communicated their assimilation to their current situations and were somewhat content and accepting of their lives, others
communicated a sense of perpetual dislocation. The process of narrative was the same within all these individuals, the outcomes were however divided into “home as acceptance” and “home as dislocation.” Specific experiences were widely different among every individual interviewed and therefore it was not possible to conclude what it was that led to TCKs communicating two completely different narratives.

Although the Internet played an important role for support and informational purposes, it was not a defining aspect of TCKs. It is imperative to stress that before this study was conducted, I believed that TCKs were part of an online community and considered them as such. Although certain online communities are created by TCKs in order to interact with other TCKs, results yielded that TCKs were a global community all on its own and only used the Internet as a channel of communication. Although the use of technology was an extremely popular aid for them in communicating between TCKs, it did not mark an essential aspect of the TCK identity.

There were various websites that were designed as a TCK library, where individuals were able to gather information on being a TCK and how to cope with it. Most people however enjoyed forums from these websites. For example, a few of the interviewees were a part of MKPlanet, a website created by missionary kids for missionary kids. In this website, there are various links leading to resources, such as online articles, for individuals to read. Moreover, the forum seemed to be the most popular section within the website, many topics reaching more than six thousand posts. Websites such as this one, as well as Facebook groups, and even online magazines specifically catered to TCKs, are all online avenues created as resources for TCKs. These resources serve as a sense of familiarity, adding a “location” to where TCKs can read about and share stories and experiences in order to feel a sense of belonging.

In essence, their sense of belonging and third culture identity is enacted when communicating with other TCKs and these websites make it more accessible for them to do so. Denizen, an online magazine catered to TCKs, offers articles about different TCK stories around the world. The name choice for this particular online magazine is interesting because it means resident, native or local. Many TCKs expressed that they always felt like a foreigner, hence not having a sense of belonging or home (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). This insinuates and sends out the message to TCKs that “this online space in which you are
browsing through right now, you can call home. Everybody here understands you, and every story in here will be relatable to you.” If host countries or international schools were the “safety bubble” for TCKs during their developmental years, the Internet and these websites have become a virtual replacement for them. The Internet has turned into a safe space for TCKs, where not only can they share with other TCKs without worrying about what others might think, but they can also access more information about Third Culture Kids.

TCKs’ co-construction of third culture identity can be reflected through their narratives. Three fundamental themes: Narrating the term TCK, Narrating Community, and Narrating Home are all communicated by TCKs when talking about their experiences.

**Methodological Implications**

Narrative interviewing was an essential aspect of the present study, leading to honest and truthful results from the interviewees. One important aspect to keep in mind is that this methodology was effective because the interviewer was also a TCK. When conducting research within communities, it is important to keep in mind the communicative practices of the community. Research shows that TCKs are more open to communicating with other TCKs because it is familiar to them (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). This enabled more willingness and openness towards questions from the researcher and more disclosure from the interviewee. Therefore, narrative inquiry allowed for a discursive sense-making process for the participants interviewed and led to the themes previously mentioned. This type of methodology assists in research because it functions as a means to self-identity. We are able to gather more extensive data on each individual’s choice of disclosure and it aids in explaining what constitutes as their own self-identity.

We can advance this type of methodology in the future in order to not only identify self-identity within individuals, but cultural identity as well. TCKs’ identified themselves as part of the larger TCK entity or community. Through the use of narrative inquiry, a sense-making process was discursively enacted and therefore indicated associations of individuals within this community with their own cultural identity.
Main takeaways from this study include identity development and group behavior within this specific community. There are various factors that come into play when studying identity and specifically identity formations within different communities or groups. Moreover, each person is in effect unique, making it a complex process to study such issues. However, studies such as this one help unpack and ascertain how and why individuals belonging to a particular community communicate such issues. We can also study the factors that encompass these groups, and if this methodology could possibly be replicated within other similar groups that feel marginalized in their surroundings. Studies such as this one on TCKs can be used to study various groups who feel like they do not belong and have trouble “fitting in.” Although there are various aspects that separate these different groups of people, the core feelings of belonging and self-identity could follow the same developmental patterns.

Another aspect of TCKs that seemed to be prominent within interviews was the behavior many times attributed as arrogant by TCKs themselves. Results from the interviews indicated that TCKs would often come off as demeaning when talking to non-TCKs about their international experience and would therefore hide their TCK identities from their non-TCK peers. This was very common among those interviewed, and could be explained by Peterson and Plamondon (2009) when they refer to “authoritarianism in third culture kids” (p. 756). Individuals with high levels of authoritarianism typically expose three main characteristics: a high level of submissiveness towards authority, willingness to aggress on behalf of such authority, and high levels of apprehension about being conventional and proper. The authors moreover describe those individuals who fall under this category, portraying them as people who travel in tight circles during developmental years and are comforted by the association of people who have had similar experiences and outlooks on life as them (Peterson & Plamondon, 2009). The main way to lower degrees of authoritarianism is by being exposed to different cultures. Therefore, what they call repatriation or returning to their “home” countries serve as a threat to TCKs, and lead to high
levels of authoritarianism within these individuals. Future research on TCKs could concentrate on this specific aspect of communication strategies employed by TCKs.

Future research on TCKs should also focus on the phenomenon of TCKs actively using online resources to seek out those like them. The behavioral aspects of this community can potentially shed light on many issues regarding this group of people, but can also assist researchers in studying communication strategies employed by individuals who seek support to those similar to them through the Internet. In the technological era we are in now, everything is being transferred through the Internet and therefore different online communication behaviors will need to be studied and should be the focus of future research.

Another theory that should be employed for future research on TCKs is cross-cultural adaptation theory and how it helps guide those who relocate to unfamiliar environments to maintain functional relationships with host cultures (Kim, 1988). Although this theory has been applied mostly on studies regarding immigrant populations, relocation factors are also significant within the TCK lifestyle and community. Although relocating permanently does not apply to TCKs, each move to a different city is still a new environment for these individuals. Studying the effects of multiple moves on this community would add to research on this specific theory.

The limitations to this study include sample size and methodology. Although sixteen TCK individuals were interviewed for this study, a larger sample would have further reiterated the findings of this research paper. Furthermore, interviews were conducted via Skype because of TCKs’ various locations in the world. It would have been ideal to be able to interview these individuals face to face in order to also study non-verbal behaviors. Most TCKs interviewed were American TCKs, meaning that their passport country was the United States. A more diverse sample size would have been ideal in order to analyze whether their passport culture had an effect on sense of belonging and behavior. Although narrative interviewing was a very effective methodology for this study, a mixed methods study could’ve yielded more concrete results to corroborate findings from the interviews.

TCKs have been around for decades; however, prior to having a term to coin these individuals they were just considered to be weird, unique, and simply different. Each TCK, no matter the age, has had a similar, but different story to share. Just like any individual, they are complex and unique in their own ways. However, their experiences and upbringings have
led them to enact a common third culture identity. This co-construction of what is known as the “third culture” within the term “third culture kid” is what unites this community. This study has encompassed communication strategies and behaviors employed by TCKs and unpacked the reasoning behind these behaviors. Often times, this community is a silent one, hiding among all of us in society in an attempt to fit in; however, many have come out of their shells and enabled us with their stories through this study using their narratives. It is important for future research to further explore what factors affect TCKs so much so that results in either home as acceptance or home as dislocation.

***

I got off Skype after my last interview, took a deep breath, and proceeded to turn on some upbeat music before standing up and walking as far away from my computer as possible. This had been a pattern during the entire interview process and I had to take some time after each interview to literally disconnect myself and think about something non-TCK related after some intense conversations. Clearly this was impossible, but I tried, I really did. Perhaps it was emotionally draining because it was all very relatable and almost too real. The countless stories I had heard, the ups and far too many downs were all too familiar. Everyone’s story was unique, although the struggle was real and their issues is what resonated among them all.

The 13-inch computer screen sitting on my desk had been the access point of communication with sixteen different individuals, all located in different parts of the world. Some stories really stuck with me, while others haunted me because I realized that some TCKs are so affected by their global transitions and upbringings that it sometimes leads to very isolated outcomes. One of the interviews stuck most with me because of how exceptional her story was.

“Twenty-eight” she said.

I replied, “I’m sorry, the connection must be failing, can you repeat that?”

“Twenty-eight, I’ve lived in twenty-eight different countries.” Then it was silent. Twenty-eight. I could not believe it, I had never heard of a TCK having lived in so many countries while growing up. I tried to hide my shock and continued with the interview.

It’s hard…it’s very hard…we would sometimes move every three months...usually it was every six months, and would stay a maximum of one year in a place.
Yeah...it’s very, very hard. It’s hard to own furniture, it’s hard to decide...I don’t know, I was extremely hesitant to move my things from one place to another and so, I don’t know, it’s a constant stress to decide where to live and...and...yeah.

Between all her long pauses and sighs, all I wanted was to tell her, “give me your address. I’m coming over to see you.” Despite it all however, I stayed put and just listened. I wondered why I felt such immense pain while listening to her story, was it only because I was a TCK as well and I was supposed to understand? Many TCKs I knew had lived in many countries while growing up, but in average, nobody lived in more than fifteen places before they turned 18. Was it because of her story in particular? Whatever it was, it was definitely taking a toll on her and it was extremely difficult for me to listen.

I have been surrounded by TCKs since I was three years old. My most precious memories and closest friendships are with those who are now physically furthest away from me. I have realized that just like anything else, it takes time to adjust to certain things. Leaving my TCK bubble was the biggest culture shock I have ever experienced. It has now been ten years since that happened, and I must say that I am really enjoying the new me. Although more recently I have craved for some sort of stability, such as having a stable career and a permanent address, I still can’t fathom a life where I am in the same place all the time and for the rest of my life. I still get itchy feet once in awhile, however, there’s nothing a weekend trip can’t fix.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

THESIS INTERVIEW GUIDE

Rapport-building questions:

- How old are you?
- What’s your passport country?
- What countries have you lived in and for how long?

Culture:

1. How would you define culture?
2. In your opinion, what culture do you consider yourself to be a part of?

Sense of Belonging:

3. What does friendship mean to you? Tell me about your closest friendships.
4. Describe what it was like moving from one country to another growing up?
5. If you had the chance to turn back time and decide where you got to live during your childhood and adolescence, what would change?

Identity:

6. When was the first time you heard about this term, TCK? Can you describe that experience for me?
7. Have you met other TCKs after you graduated from High School? If so, could you share that experience with me?
8. What was it like moving away from your family for the first time and having to adjust to living by yourself in society?
9. How would you describe a TCK and how do you feel about being categorized as such?

TCK online:

10. How do you keep in touch with your school friends from your childhood?

11. If you didn’t have the Internet, would you say you’d still manage to keep in touch with them?

12. Would you say the Internet has been a helpful tool as far as communicating with your school friends?

13. Do you and your school friends belong to any groups on social media? What kind of group is it and what do you usually share on there?

Catch-all questions:

14. Is there anything you’d like to share that you haven’t mentioned about TCKs?

15. What would you like your pseudonym to be in this study?