The Development of Third Culture Kids: Counseling Implications

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Abstract

Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are children who spent a significant part of their upbringing in a country or countries different from their passport country. This paper summarizes and evaluates the research regarding the effect of this experience on the child’s development. In particular, this paper considers the cultural identity development of TCKs, the complex issue of belonging, and the unique strengths of this population. The counseling implications of the research are considered throughout the paper.
The development of Third Culture Kids: Counseling implications

There are many reasons, both professional and personal, why people chose to work abroad. With increased globalization, a growing number of professions require extended international sojourns (Lyttle, Barker, & Cornwell, 2011). One result of this global mobility is a rising number of children growing up in a country, or multiple countries, other than their passport country; these are Third Culture Kids (TCKs). Although there are other terms used to describe this population (e.g. global nomad), TCK is generally preferred by the members of this group (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). The implication of this label is that the first culture is that of their passport country, the second is that of their environment, and the third is a unique personally constructed culture. Although TCKs have been recognized as a significant population since the 1960s (Useem, Donoghue, & Useem, 1963), there has only recently been research that truly explores the unique circumstances of these children and its effects on their development. After a brief description of this population, this paper will discuss the current research and its counseling implications.

When considering TCKS it is important to recognize is that this is an extremely diverse population. TCKs in the same location will often differ according to both their passport country and other previous international experiences (Peterson & Plamondon, 2009). However, it is also valuable to consider the shared experiences and circumstances of TCKs and the ways in which this population differs from other immigrant or bicultural populations. For example, they are not usually immigrating permanently, they may experience multiple countries during the course of their development, and they often eventually return to their passport country to live or study (Moore & Barker, 2012). These shared circumstances shape the population and guide the research on TCKs.

**Cultural Identity Development**

The academic research on this population often describes the development of TCKs
as one of great advantages or of considerable drawbacks. This is typified by the discussion of cultural identity development. On the one hand, scholars have described the experience of these children as ‘global nomads’ who are constantly struggling to establish their own personal and cultural identity and feel like foreigners in every culture, including that of their passport country (Grimshaw & Sears, 2004; Tanu, 2008). The alternative definition sees this population as ‘cultural chameleons’: skilled at quickly adapting to their cultural surroundings (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004), highly culturally sensitive (Straffon, 2003), and able to forge their own unique cultural identity: the ‘third culture’ of TCK. Though seemingly contradictory, these findings can be combined to conclude that while TCKs often feel comfortable in many different cultures, they may feel at home in none. The implications of this dichotomy are the focus of this paper’s section on belonging.

A further analysis of the cultural identity of TCKs reveals a distinction between a ‘shifting identity’ and a ‘blended identity’ (Moore & Barker, 2012). Moore and Barker define the former as a preference to separate one’s multiple cultural identities and move between them depending on the environment, and the latter as integrating one’s cultural identities into a single amalgamated form. Through interviews with TCKs, Moore and Barker found these two identity models to be both common and mutually exclusive. Like any other cultural identity, both models can be subject to challenges and changes but neither is necessarily healthier than the other. Nevertheless, there is evidence that possessing a cultural identity that only acknowledges one of the cultures experienced can be problematic. Hoersting and Jenkins (2011) surveyed adults who had grown up as TCKs and found that those participants who moved abroad at a young age (under five) and spent a significant amount of their childhood abroad (over ten years) were more likely to score low on a self-esteem instrument. However, within this group, owning a self-identity that acknowledged or incorporated multiple cultures acted as a protecting factor against low self-esteem.
The counseling implications of working with TCK clients going through cultural identity development are myriad. Firstly, it is important to recognize that TCKs may have a more complex or variable cultural identity development journey but this does not necessarily mean that they are confused in their identity. Secondly, it is vital for counselors to be aware of the different forms of cultural identity with this population, as well as the strengths and risks associated with each. For example, when considering the blended and shifting identities, it is important to consider the different implications regarding stability and adaptability. Lastly, it is important to give TCKs the opportunity to develop their own cultural identity, one that does not have to match their parents’ cultural identity or conform to how they are described or defined by others.

**Sense of Belonging**

Although clearly connected to identity development, it is worth explicitly considering the topic of belonging. Even when TCKs incorporate the cultures of different countries into their cultural identity, many still feel that they do not belong to all or even any of these cultures (Moore & Barker, 2012). Understanding the events and circumstances that foster or prevent the feeling of belonging is a key consideration when serving this population.

One of the most common events that challenges a TCK’s sense of belonging is the transition to another country. TCKs can experience grief at the loss of their friends, community, and even identity, which is confounded by the need to acculturate to a new culture (Davis et al., 2010). Language acquisition in particular, though key to acculturation, has been found to be an extremely stressful task (Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the child is not experiencing the transition alone; McLachlan (2007) interviewed whole families to understand this transitional stage. Despite the strong negative emotions triggered by moving, including guilt and loss, it was found that families who experienced multiple transitions often fostered resiliency through
strengthening the cohesiveness of the family unit. The lack of regular contact with extended family and the inconsistency of the surrounding community promote a particularly strong bond between the members of the immediate family (McLachlan, 2007; Peterson & Plamondon, 2009). This bond should be recognized as a source of strength and support, as well as a factor that could intensify experiences such as separation, loss, or a child’s transition to independence.

Relocation of any kind can be a difficult and stressful experience but repatriation to one’s passport country in particular can give rise to many questions regarding belonging (Carter & McNulty, 2012). Many TCKs report feeling perpetually marginalized from the countries that they live in but this feeling is most frustrating when it is experienced in their passport country, as this is where they feel they should belong (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004). When TCKs return to their passport country to attend university, this reverse culture shock, combined with the transition away from the family unit, may explain why TCKs often struggle to adjust in their freshman year (Hervey, 2009). International schools failing to prepare students for this reverse culture shock or not recognizing it as a unique form of transition may exacerbate this problem (Limberg & Lambie, 2011).

While many TCKs may not feel as though they belong to any single culture that they experience, they often experience a strong attachment to other TCKs or multicultural individuals. When interviewed, TCKs commonly report a greater affinity with peers who have had multiple international experiences, regardless of the particular countries (Peterson & Plamondon, 2009; Wielkoszewski, 2005). These findings suggest that the shared experience of living overseas can itself act as a distinct subculture that TCKs are a member of. The existence of an international community, or at least a number of other TCKs, can be extremely important in facilitating a sense of belonging (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011).

Promoting the development of a sense of belonging in TCKs and preparing for
scenarios that could threaten this belonging are important roles for a counselor working with this population. Firstly, preparing for transitions or processing a past transition are essential tasks with this population. In a sample of children from missionary families, a comprehensive transition program was found to significantly reduce the stress and anxiety associated with the change (Davis et al., 2010). Secondly, TCK’s transitions to their passport country in particular should be carefully processed, considering their expectations and their cultural identity development stage. Thirdly, it is vital that the bond between a TCK and their family is recognized and any disruption to that unit, including something as simple as an extended school trip, is seen as potentially distressing. Lastly, if TCKs are not in an international community then it is important to explore opportunities for them to meet, spend time with, or even experience a counseling group with other TCKs or other individuals with multiple international experiences.

**Strengths**

Much of this paper has discussed the problems or issues that TCKs may face during their development. However, understanding the strengths of a population is just as therapeutically relevant. Some of these strengths, such as bilingualism and increased cross-cultural knowledge, are apparent, while other less evident strengths have been discovered through recent research.

There are many studies that demonstrate that TCKs are more culturally sensitive, less prejudice, and more open to new experiences than mono-cultured individuals. Melles and Shwartz (2013) found that exposure to different cultures as a child predicted less prejudice as an adult. Similarly, Dewaele and van Oudenhoven (2009) found that TCKs scored above average on instruments measuring open-mindedness and cultural empathy. Furthermore, Lyttle, Barker, and Cornwell (2011) found that TCKs reported higher interpersonal emotional sensitivity than mono-cultured individuals, a skill that has previously been
correlated with the ability to acculturate (Yoo, Matsumoto, & LeRoux, 2006). Lastly, Benet-Martínez, Lee, and Leu (2006) found that children who had experienced multiple cultures had increased cognitive complexity, allowing them to accurately interpret unique cultural experiences and events. There is also considerable evidence that TCKs are aware of these strengths (Russell, 2011), proud of their abilities (Burkhardt, 2013), and view their experience as a TCK as positive overall (Moore & Barker, 2012).

The studies highlighted in this section demonstrate that TCKs are not only knowledgeable about the cultures they have experienced but are also likely to be extremely proficient in other cross-cultural or multicultural settings. It is important to find ways to recognize and foster these strengths. For example, allowing a group of TCKs to arrange a cross-cultural event could be a particularly empowering experience. Furthermore, these strengths should also be considered during career counseling; it is not surprising that TCKs can excel in roles that require cross-cultural expertise or take place in multicultural settings (Greenholtz & Kim, 2009).

Conclusions

In conclusion, there are many important considerations when working with this population. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge and celebrate the uniqueness of each member of this population but also recognize them as a distinct subculture. Children may be from different passport countries but form a strong cultural bond through being TCKs. Secondly, counselors must be aware of both the needs and strengths of TCKs, addressing the former and fostering the latter. Processing their cultural identity development and protecting their sense of belonging are two crucial considerations. Lastly, one must remember that being a TCK is not an identity that is dropped after childhood; the effect of this experience often extends across the lifespan (Greenholtz & Kim, 2009). Therefore, all counselors should be aware of the implications for working with this population.
References


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