



The lived experiences of Third Culture Kids transitioning into university life in Australia



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ABSTRACT

This study presents a new orienting framework to aid in the understanding of how Third Culture Kids' (TCKs) transition into university life in Australia. The framework was developed after analysis of data from a qualitative phenomenological research project using data from 12 in-depth interviews with Australian TCKs aged 18–27 years who, had spent 3–18 years living in Africa, Europe and Asia and had been in Australia for seven months to nine years. After thematic data analysis was conducted four themes emerged from the data which resulted in the development of a TCK Transition into University Model. This model includes four stages; (a) preparedness prior to transition, (b) initial experience during transition, (c) adjustment during transition and (d) stabilisation. Each of the four stages provides information about participants' practical, social and emotional experience of the transition to university life in Australia. The key findings included participants who received preparation from their school and family prior to moving, had practical support in Australia and engaged in Australian social networks and university life experienced improved emotional health and made way for a positive transition. Participants who were socially isolated and had limited practical support experienced relatively poor emotional health and transitional hardships. The findings from this research suggest that a TCKs' emotional and mental health during transition is either negatively or positively affected by the preparation they received prior to moving, the practical stressors they encountered upon arrival and the social integration into Australian social networks and universities. Further qualitative research in the area of TCK transition experiences should consider including the narratives of TCKs from various geographic backgrounds, sexualities, abilities and ethnicities to diversify and build on the evidence base around the TCK phenomenon.

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1. Introduction

With the expansion of global economic markets and advances in transportation and communication in today's society, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of mobile families for the pursuit of business, education, missions and humanitarian aid (Berry, 2008; Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009; Landis, 2008; McLachlan, 2007; Sussman, 2002). The children of mobile families are generally referred to as Third Culture Kids (e.g. TCKs; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

According to the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2010), there has been a steady increase in the number of Australian-born citizens departing Australia from the late 1990s to 2009. Australia is a country of considerable

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emigration and re-migration as Australian citizens move from country to country for employment opportunities (Hugo, 2008). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006), and Bryson and Power (2006) approximately two-thirds of all Australian expatriates return to Australia within two years of being overseas. As a result, an estimated 11,000 Australian internationally mobile children aged between 0 and 18 years of age transition into Australian society each year.

The term, TCK is synonymously known as “Global Nomad”. This is an individual who has lived outside of their parents’ ‘passport country’ before adulthood due to their parents’ occupation (McCaig, 1994). More specifically, the term TCK was developed by sociology professors who studied the experiences of American expatriate families in India (Useem, Donoghue, & Useem, 1963). One of their key findings was that children in expatriate families were forming a ‘third culture’ by integrating elements of the first ‘passport’ culture and second ‘host’ culture. Three decades later (Useem et al., 1963), Pollock and Van Reken (2001) further define the term as,

A person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, their sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background (other TCKs). (p. 19)

The transient lifestyles that most TCKs acquire tend to result in a lack of connection to any specific culture (Useem & Downie, 1976). Instead of finding a sense of belonging in a geographic location, TCKs find this belonging in the relationships they form with others in transient communities as they share a common life experience (Langford, 1999; Mclachlan, 2007; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Vanclay, Higgins, & Blackshaw, 2008).

Even though there are well-regarded transition models utilised to prepare TCKs encountering change, development of a contemporary TCK transition framework based on the lived experiences of TCKs is still needed. The majority of published literature on the transitions of TCKs is based on the experiences of Americans with a focus on issues that relate to missionary TCKs (Bikos et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2010; Hervey, 2009). This study broadens the body of literature around TCK transition by considering the experience and emotional health of Australian TCKs transitioning into university life in the country of their parents’ citizenship. The findings from this study propose that TCKs encounter four key stages of transition: preparedness prior to transition, initial experience during transition, adaptation during transition and stabilisation.

2. Transition models

Presented below is a critical analysis of the existing body of evidence on conceptual frameworks that relate to TCKs’ transitional experiences. The researcher has selected the following models as the most applicable to understanding the TCK transition phenomenon: Pollock’s (1990) transition model and J.T. Gullahorn and J.E. Gullahorn’s (1963) W curve model. Furthermore, the researcher provides a contextual overview of the rationale for this research by examining TCKs’ experiences of social engagement, managing practicalities and emotional health during transition or repatriation. Repatriation is when an individual transitions into their ‘passport country’ after living abroad (Cox, 2004). This is further examined through a discussion on the gaps in the existing evidence base literature.

2.1. Pollock’s transition model

Pollock (1990) developed a five-stage model of transition within the context of international schools in order to understand the transition process that TCKs encounter when faced with multiple transitions. Stage one of Pollock’s model (involvement) encompasses a TCK’s commitment and sense of belonging to where the TCK is currently living. Stage two (leaving) depicts a TCK’s experience of anticipation, distancing from family and friends as well as denial, while stage three (transition) is characterised by feelings of anxiety and chaos when the TCK physically moves to the new location. Stage three can also be referred to as a crisis phase, where everything may change in a limited amount of time but can also be an opportunity to start afresh and to reinvent oneself (Schaetti, 1998). Stage four (entering) involves a TCK experiencing isolation or vulnerability as a result of being uncertain about one’s social position in the new community. Finally, stage five (re-involvement) is when the TCK successfully experiences inclusion and sense of belonging in the new location.

Both Hill and Hayden (2008) and Dixon and Hayden (2008) conducted mixed methods studies utilising Pollock’s transition model as a guide to strengthen understanding of internationally mobile primary aged-pupils’ transition into school in Switzerland and Thailand. Both studies concluded that the children could easily identify with the five stages in Pollock’s transition model, highlighting the applicability of this transition model in aiding children’s transitions into international schools. However, both studies were limited as they only focused on children aged 10–11 years and were conducted in only two international schools. This emphasises the necessity to broaden the evaluation of Pollock’s transition model by considering the inclusion of research participants from various backgrounds and ages.

2.2. W-Curve theory

Research focused on missionary TCKs transitioning into college found that many participants faced re-entry hardships upon arrival to their ‘passport country’ or country of citizenship (Bikos et al., 2009; Hervey, 2009). To further understand an individual’s psychological wellbeing and emotional reaction during re-entry into their ‘passport country’, Gullahorn and

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