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Does the third culture kid experience predict levels of prejudice?

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to explore whether levels of exposure (as measured by number of years spent abroad and number of countries lived in) predicted levels of prejudice (as measured by the Quick Discrimination Index and the Social Dominance Orientation Scale) in Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs), as well as whether there was a significant difference in levels of prejudice between American ATCKs and non-American ATCKs.

One hundred and ninety-six ATCKs completed a web-based survey including measures of discrimination and social dominance, as well as demographic information. Only number of countries lived in significantly predicted scores on the Affective subscale of the Quick Discrimination Index (QDI). American ATCKs reported significantly higher levels of prejudice than non-American ATCKs on the Cognitive subscale of the QDI and the Social Dominance Orientation scale (SDO).

> "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it solely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one corner of the earth all one's lifetime" (Twain, 1869, pp. 491–492)

1. Introduction

In the 1950s, Drs. John and Ruth Hill Useem, anthropologists and sociologists, coined the term Third-Culture Kids to describe the children of American Foreign Service officers, missionaries, technical aid workers, businessmen, educators, and media-representatives living in India – the first culture being the country from which the parents originated (the home culture), the second the country in which the family was currently living (the host culture), and the third, the expatriate community in the host country (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Useem, 1993). Later, Pollock and Van Reken (2001), authors of *Third-Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing up Among Worlds* defined a Third-Culture Kid (TCK) as:

> a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK 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 experiences, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background (p. 19).

When they reach adulthood, TCKs are referred to as Adult Third-Culture Kids (ATCKs). As Pollock and Van Reken (2001) note: "no one is ever a former third culture kid [. . .] because their lives grow out of the roots planted in and watered by the third culture experience" (p. 27).

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With the burgeoning globalization over the last century, TCKs and ATCKs are becoming more common. The Internal Revenue Service (2009) reported the estimated number of US citizens living abroad at 7 million in April of 2009. The Institute for Public Policy Research in Britain (2006) reported an estimate of 5.5 million British citizens living abroad in 2006, effectively 9.2% of the UK population. Kano Podolsky (2004) quotes the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and reports the number of Kaigai-shijos (the Japanese term for "Overseas/Returnee Children") from 2002 as 52,046. The total number of TCKs or ATCKs worldwide, however, is currently unknown.

Despite the prevalence of (A)TCKs originating from a variety of different counties, the majority of (A)TCK research has focused on US (A)TCKs (Fail, 1996; Hylmö, 2002; Lambiri, 2005; Pearce, 2002). Consequently, a number of (A)TCK researchers have called for further research identifying the differences between US (A)TCKs and non-US (A)TCKs (Hylmö, 2002; Lambiri, 2005): "There should be and indeed there is a growing interest and need for data from other countries [. . .] Because it is such a large and important community, the desire for more information about TCKs outside the US is growing" (Lambiri, 2005, p. 34).

Quantitative studies on (A)TCKs have been sparse. One of the 'top eight' research needs in (A)TCK studies, identified by major (A)TCK researchers and professionals, is the use of measures to validate the theories that make up the (A)TCK profile (Lambiri, 2005, p. 1). These researchers posed some questions:

> Three of the widely accepted traits of TCKs are their openness to other cultures, their cross-cultural sensitivity and their comfort with diversity. If TCKs took one of these tests would the results match the expected patterns? [. . .] Are TCKs in fact more culturally sensitive? If so, which ones and why? (Lambiri, 2005, p. 8)

Much of the qualitative research, formal and informal, has recognized (A)TCKs to be more open to and tolerant of diversity than their national counterparts. Sheard (2008), in an informal study of TCKs attending an international school in China, found many of the students to express tolerant views. One student believed the increase in tolerance to be related to a decrease in xenophobia (Sheard, 2008). Another saw the increase in tolerance as a necessity of living in an international community.

Eakin (1998) posits that overt racism is not as common in expatriate communities as it is the TCK's home culture and warns that the minority TCK may encounter prejudice that he/she is not used to upon returning to his/her culture of origin. A TCK reflects upon these differences: "The contrast between the U.S. racial divide and the open multicultural environment I was accustomed to could not have been more stark" (qtd. in Eakin, 1998, p. 57). Smith (1996) found ATCKs to report that their time abroad had caused them to develop greater religious and racial tolerance.

Pollock and Van Reken (2001) found that TCKs are often less prejudiced due to their time among culturally and ethnically diverse people. They report that a few TCKs, however, become more prejudiced as a result of their experiences and go on to suggest that this increase is related to their position of privilege in the host culture.

Quantitative studies on (A)TCKs thus far have only measured concepts related to prejudice rather than prejudice itself. Dewaele and van Oudenhoven (2009) found TCKs to have significantly higher scores than non-TCKs on the Openmindedness dimension of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). This dimension evaluates for open and unprejudiced attitudes toward out-group members, as well as diverse cultural norms and values.

Peterson and Plamondon (2009) found ATCKs who had lived in more countries (i.e. experienced more assignments abroad) to be less authoritarian than those who had lived in fewer countries. Authoritarianism in this study was measured by Altemeyer's Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale (RWA), a scale that is positively correlated with prejudice, discrimination, feelings of moral superiority, and a lack of openness and introspection (Peterson & Plamondon, 2009).

Straffon (2003) used Hammer and Bennett's Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to measure the intercultural sensitivity of TCKs attending an international school in southeast Asia. He found only 3% to have Ethnocentric worldviews, with the vast majority having Ethnorelative worldviews. Straffon (2003) also found that the relationship between the length of attendance at an international school and IDI scores was statistically significant at each stage of the model except minimization (other stages included Denial, Defense, Acceptance, Cognitive Adaptation, and Behavioral Adaptation), suggesting that the length of time spent in international schools is associated with higher levels of ethnorelativism and lower levels of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism has been found to be strongly related to racism, xenophobia, and prejudice (Hooghe, 2008).

Gerner, Perry, Moselle, and Archbold (1992) compared the scores of US TCKs attending international schools in Egypt and Thailand to US teens attending a public high-school in the Midwest on their family relationships, cultural acceptance, travel orientation, language acceptance, stereotype scale, and future orientation. They found US TCKs to self-report as being more culturally accepting, having more interest in travel and learning languages, and being more interested in a future international lifestyle than non-TCK US teens.

Due to the limited quantitative evidence that the TCK experience impacts prejudicial attitudes, this study seeks to add to the literature by asking the following question: When controlling for age and gender – both variables related to prejudice (Nelson, 2009; Sidanius, Cling, & Pratto, 1991), does an ATCK's level of exposure to and contact with different cultures during his/her developmental years predict his/her levels of reported prejudice? Additionally, in order to respond to the need for research on the differences between US (A)TCKs and non-US (A)TCKs (Fail, 1996; Hylmö, 2002; Lambiri, 2005), this study examined whether and how the levels of prejudice reported by US (A)TCKs and non-US (A)TCKs differed.