



Third culture kids and the consequences of international sojourns on authoritarianism, acculturative balance, and positive affect

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ABSTRACT

Third culture kids (TCKs) are the children of parents who live abroad in foreign countries. In this study we examined a population of US TCKs ($N = 170$) who have repatriated back to the US. We studied the factors that led TCKs to positive and less positive repatriation outcomes, including a focus on the variables of authoritarianism, acculturative balance, and positive affect. Multiple repatriations (i.e., parents moving back to the US between jobs) was related negatively to positive affect in men, and increased levels of authoritarianism in women. On the other hand, postings to multiple countries decreased authoritarianism for both women and men. TCKs who seemed comfortable balancing living abroad and in the US reported both good relationships with their parents and positive affect. Because they live in multicultural environments, TCKs are an important demographic to study in a rapidly globalizing world.

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1. Introduction

Karin (a pseudonym) is a third culture kid (TCK). She is a Caucasian American who grew up in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Bangladesh, where she attended American International Schools. Karin returned to the US for university. During orientation she introduced herself as American, but her new college friends realized that Karin considered Bangladesh home; she even acquired the nickname “foreigner” for saying football (for soccer) and lift (for elevator). “It’s true,” she said in an exploratory interview prior to this study, “it’s not like I grew up in the States.” Third culture kids like Karin may have extremely different backgrounds. For example, other interviewees included a biracial woman born in Columbia and raised in three different countries, a Turkish woman raised in Germany and France, and a man from India raised in South East Asia. All consider themselves TCKs. They share the experience of having spent significant time during their developmental years outside of their parents’ culture. According to Pollock and Van Reken (1999, p. 1), TCKs find themselves building “relationships to all of the cultures they inhabit, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others (with sojourner backgrounds).”

The term TCK was first coined in the 1950s by Ruth and John Useem (e.g., see Useem, 1973) to describe the three cultures that American children occupied living in India. The first culture referred to the country of origin of the parents (i.e., the United

States). The second culture referred to the host culture (i.e., India), within which existed the third culture (which has no relation to the Third World). The third culture was occupied by a transient community of expatriates, including other families from around the world who availed themselves of American and British international schools, recreational clubs, commissaries, and other amenities. Pollock and Van Reken (1999) now use the TCK term to include individuals from any country who have spent formative years in second and third cultures other than their parents’ first culture. Often the parents are diplomats, military personnel, missionaries, teachers, or working in international business. TCKs are different from immigrants in that TCKs rarely try to become citizens of the second culture. TCKs hold passports to the countries of their first culture and fully expect to return (often when they are 18). Psychological research on TCK populations is sparse. Research on the children of military families posted abroad and children with international school experience seem the most prevalent (e.g., see Eandler, 2002; Gerner, Perry, Moselle, & Archbold, 1992; Wertsch, 1991).

For many reasons TCKs are a population that provides fairly unique opportunities for psychologists interested in studying the effects of globalization on culture and identity. In the next few decades, as globalized market forces lead families from their first culture into a second culture, counseling psychologists may find themselves with increasing numbers of TCK clients who face challenges that revolve around reacculturation (Timmons, 2006). In this study we examine the effects of former TCK status on a population of emerging adults (Arnett, 2000) who have repatriated back to the United States. We investigated some of the factors that lead to TCK positive adjustment and comfort with multiple cultures. We

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also want to show how TCK populations can provide novel data for enhancing our understanding of core personality constructs like authoritarianism.

2. Cultural balance in third culture kids

While psychological research on third culture kids is limited, there do exist examinations of concepts and populations that are related to TCKs and their experiences. Arnett (2002), for example, examined the psychological consequences of the increasingly quick pace of globalization. In particular, globalization presents youth in every country with the opportunities and challenges of forging identities less rooted in traditional cultural roles (see, also, Berry, 1997; Phinney, 1990). In even more closely related work, Sussman (2000) examined the nature of cultural identity by focusing on sojourners, those who make cultural transitions for a limited time before returning home (i.e., sojourners are not immigrants). Although TCKs can be considered sojourners, they are probably better defined as sojourner children, or as the children of sojourners. TCKs did not make the decision to go abroad; they were taken abroad to accompany sojourner parents. Nonetheless, the literature on sojourners may be a reasonably good starting point for what to expect with TCKs.

Synthesizing several theories, Sussman (2000) showed that repatriation is generally a time of unexpectedly high stress for sojourners in a way much more intense and disturbing than moving to a new foreign country. Upon repatriation core self-concepts start to come under question. Sussman (2000, p. 365) suggested that repatriates find themselves evaluating “their personal values, cognitive maps, and behavioral repertoires against the prevailing cultural norms at home”. While individuals also do this during the sojourn when adjusting to a new country, the task at repatriation is made psychologically more meaningful because repatriates often find that their new sojourner identity no longer matches the “taken for granted” cultural identity of their home country. Sussman (2000) argued that terror management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997) becomes relevant. The theory of terror management suggests that cultural rootedness diminishes personal terrors of dying, and threats to cultural identity results in increased anxiety. Repatriations are stressful precisely because they involve threats to an individual's past and present worldviews. Thus, we might expect that multiple repatriations would be especially problematic as each repatriation has the potential to dredge up discontinuities between the identity concerns of a TCK (growing up in fluid, multicultural environments) and the behaviors and attitudes of peers raised solely in the US. All other things being equal, those TCKs who repatriated only once at some point in their lives should be better adjusted than TCKs who were taken abroad multiple times and experienced multiple repatriations (and, hence, multiple threats to their cultural identity).

Repatriations need to be distinguished, though, from multiple assignments to different countries. For example, some TCKs grow up in multiple countries but experience only one repatriation (e.g., having missionary parents posted to three different regions of the world before coming back to the US). The fact of having spent time in multiple sojourns (as long as they are not associated with multiple repatriations) may not be so problematic for TCKs. As discussed by Sussman (2000), there are many strategies available to TCKs for transitioning into a new culture. Preferred strategies may vary according to personality. For example, people high on openness may be more likely to adopt an “additive” strategy whereby host culture customs, foods, and values are embraced readily; highly open people may look forward to the excitement and challenge of adapting to new sights, sounds, smells, and

experiences. TCKs who sojourn in multiple cultures also have the third culture as a relative constant. That is, third cultures for US TCKs are often built around international American standard schools and experiences. Many TCKs are surrounded by other sojourner families who can be used as a reference group. (Note that this third culture community is not available during repatriations back to the US.) Clearly not all TCKs will enjoy multiple relocations abroad, but the effects of multiple second culture postings should not be especially correlated one way or the other with the later adjustment of TCKs as a group.

Bad experiences while abroad, though, ought to be problematic for TCKs. As expressed by Minatoya (1992, p. 50) in her sojourner memoir: “Often a person interacts with a place and time in a manner that fails ‘to take.’ Occasionally, the result is a combusive moment when history is made – when revolutions and inventions and abominations are born. More frequently, the result is a drying and darkening, like a grafted bough that cannot thrive and fails to die . . .” Given that they are children, TCKs do not have much choice but to endure any negative experiences that they face in a foreign country. Unfortunately, these nadir memories should be related to later unhappiness.

On the positive side, TCKs are different from most sojourners in that TCKs have parents nearby as a stable support system. Research and anecdote suggest that TCKs have unusually close bonds with their parents, the ones who shared their global adventures (Jordan, 2002). In addition to parental support, TCKs have an “adjunct” status conferred upon them by the parents’ sponsoring organization (e.g., being the daughter of an American diplomat). Sponsorship privileges (such as access to a company swimming pool) are filtered through the parents. A close relationship with one’s parents, therefore, should foster positive feelings about the TCK experience. Indeed, according to attachment theory, parental support may be especially important for helping TCKs to achieve a sense of intercultural balance and worldview (Schaetti, 2002). The parents are “experts” in the first culture, and through humor, discussion, and behaviors, possess the resources to help their children integrate second culture (and third culture) experiences with the baseline established by the first culture.

3. Authoritarianism in third culture kids

The ability to operate effectively in different cultural worlds is a positive outcome for evaluating TCK experiences. An important negative outcome revolves around the variable of authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Authoritarianism has an almost 60-year history in personality and social psychology research. Fortunately, large elements of this research are reviewed in chapters by Brown (1965), Dillehay (1978), and Winter (1996). One of the key researchers in contemporary studies of authoritarianism is Altemeyer (1981, 1988, 1996). In his work Altemeyer focuses on the assessment of right-wing authoritarianism (as measured through the RWA scale). People who score high on the RWA scale have the following personality characteristics: (1) a high degree of submissiveness to established authorities, (2) a willingness to aggress in the name of their authority, and (3) a high level of concern with being conventional and proper. Among the well-documented correlates of authoritarianism are the following: prejudice, discrimination, feelings of moral superiority, international belligerence, lack of political knowledge, simplistic cognitive structure, and lack of openness and introspection (e.g., see recent studies by Cohrs, Moschner, Maes, and Kielmann (2005), Duckitt (2007), Duriez and Soenens (2006), Heaven and Bucci (2001), McFarland (2005), Petersen and Dietz (2000), Peterson, Duncan, and Pang (2002), Van Hiel, Pandelaere, and Duriez (2004) and Whitley and Aegisdottir (2000).

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