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And now the telling of…

An Application of the Communication Theory of Identity:
Third Culture Kids

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Introduction

In the age of globalization, technological and transportational advancements have greatly shaped the infrastructure of today's society. From traveling leisurely to expanding a company to a new continent, people are more geographically mobile. In turn, this has contributed to the growing formation of a "global village" and has greatly impacted individuals on a socio-cultural scale. This increase of geographical mobility has led to family relocations to new countries. Reasons include occupational responsibilities, entrepreneurship, military relocation, and religious missions. Cultural identities and boundaries, which were once simplified and discrete, are now obscured. A phenomenon that encapsulates the rise of these convoluted cultural identities is Third Culture Kid (TCK)—a true product of globalization. As global interconnectedness continues to increase, the phenomenon of the TCK is only expected to grow in prevalence. As such, this phenomenon warrants a research proposal as a means to better understand this growing population as it counteracts the norm of individuals who have a single national identity.

A TCK is defined as an individual who has spent his/her developmental years in a culture apart from his/her parents. Through this multicultural experience, a hybrid identity of a home culture (parent's) and host culture is negotiated into a "Third Culture" (Lijadi & Schalkwyk, 2017). As most TCKs have lived in more than one host country, their "Third Culture" is a compilation of the various cultures which they were once a part of. Through the dynamic and fluid cultural experiences of TCKs, as fueled by communication, identity negotiation is a constant process that is required of TCKs. Considering the diverse interactions with people from different cultural environments, identity and self concepts are formed through interpersonal communication. Furthermore, communication is used intrapersonally as the TCK processes his/her own personal identity. Last, identity negotiation also occurs on a larger communal scale through organizational communication. To better understand the complexities of the TCK experience, the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) will be used as a theoretical framework. This is because the TCK identity is multifaceted in nature, thus, it requires constant negotiation between the identity gaps that CTI proposes. The next section will outline the facets of CTI and apply the framework to the TCK phenomenon.

Communication Theory of Identity

CTI proposes four layers of identity—personal, relational, enactment, and communal (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). These theorists contended that the internalization, externalization, and social enactment of identity are perpetuated by and through communication. The framework of CTI has been used in various studies dealing with cultural phenomena, such as multiculturalism. In a 2012 study, Hecht uses this framework to analyze the bi-cultural identity of Jewish-American persons. This study focuses especially on the communal expression of identity, and then examines the interpenetration of this communal layer with the personal, enactment, and relational layers. The breakdown of the layers of CTI provides a structure to dive in depth into this cultural phenomenon (Hecht, 2012). Similarly, using CTI to examine the TCK experience will allow for a deeper study of the personal, relational, and

communal layers, and consequently highlight their reciprocal relationship.

In dealing with a complex reality of the "third culture," TCKs struggle with communicating their identity completely and adequately, both to themselves and to others. CTI offers a practical and holistic framework to analyze the TCK experience. As facilitated through intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group communication, these layers interpenetrate one another as the identity is negotiated. That is, the layers are connected as they convey a singular identity and often overlap as well as contradict one another. Hecht and colleagues (2005) assert that this prevalence of identity gaps illustrates the constant tension between the layers of identity. It is in these identity gaps, or inconsistencies between the layers of identity, that TCKs will need to negotiate their identity. In respect to this, the theory highlights three layers of identity to understand the phenomenon of the TCK.

As this framework is applied to the TCK phenomenon, the most prevalent identity gap is seen between the personal layer and the relational layer. On the other hand, the commonalities between the personal layer and the communal layer serve as a means of positive identity negotiation. This paper will outline the importance of the "Third Space" as a form of positive negotiation between personal and communal layers. This is a crucial piece to identity negotiation as multicultural TCKs fail to identify with individuals of a singular home culture, which ultimately causes a significant gap between the personal and the relational layers. The next section will first explore how the multicultural hybrid identity contributes and influences the self-concept of a TCK. Second, it illustrates how identity is both negotiated and formed through relationships and subsequent relational roles. Third, it reveals how the "Third Space" is an important form of the communal layer of identity. Last, it investigates the interpenetration and identity gaps between the personal, relational, and communal layers of identity.

Literature Review
Personal Layer

The identity of a TCK is one that is ever-changing as it is intrapersonally negotiated across various cultural contexts. This can be seen through the personal layer of CTI, which refers to the individual's "locus of identity" such as self-concept, self-cognitions, and feelings about self (Hecht et al., 2005). Whereas most individuals develop their self-concept through a single socio-cultural environment, TCKs live transient lives in which cultural change is the only constant (Lijadi & Schalkwyk 2017). Through this high mobility and cross-cultural lifestyle, which promotes intercultural negotiation in the personal layer of self, a hybrid multicultural self-concept emerges (Lijadi & Schalkwyk 2017). This multicultural background enables TCKs to adapt to a range of cultures. Yet, the lack of full immersion into a singular culture prevents them to be accepted as a local in a host country. This is problematic as TCKs fail to be fully connected to any culture and identify to multiple cultures (Moore & Barker, 2012). Thus, within the personal layer, there is tension between the ability to adapt and the inability to accept in a given a host culture.

The complex and dynamic nature of the personal layer of identity is also seen through the unique concept of home, a place that is continuous rather than discrete. TCK's view "home" as a compilation of the places they lived in and connected with (Lijadi & Schalkwyk 2017). This directly relates to the personal layer of identity as home serves as a safe place to form a sense of belonging, which is a core element of a positive sense of self. Hence, the inability to relate to a singular home culture contributes to a major struggle for TCKs—lack of sense of belonging. As society often dictates home according to the passport country, TCKs have to succumb to the discomfort between the name of their passport country and their sense of home/s (Lijadi & Schalkwyk 2017). As such, in terms of the personal layer of identity, sense of belonging is a prominent struggle for TCKs as their sense of self is conflicted and varied.

In addition to the various attachments to different "homes", the limited time living in each country also inhibits the TCK from fully learning the nuances of the culture. This is a major

obstacle for TCKs as identity stability is sought after in these developmental periods prior to adulthood, where one's self-concept is molded (Moore & Barker, 2012). Thus, the constant moving of TCKs ultimately impedes the critical task of identity development—both personal and cultural (Moore & Barker, 2012). To reconcile this difference, the TCK's identity and concept of home is often more relational than geographical. Therefore, through the TCK experience, the personal layer of identity involves a constant negotiation of lack of sense of belonging coupled with the concept of rootlessness.

This lack of sense of belonging that deeply defines the personal layer of the TCK experience often results in a feeling of marginalization (Fail, Walker, & Thompson, 2004). TCKs experience a spectrum of exclusion, both in their passport and host countries. This spectrum can be generalized in two groups: encapsulated marginality and constructive marginality (Fail et al, 2004). Encapsulated marginality refers to feeling like an outsider in a country of residence and is unaffected by time, language, or other external factors. Constructive marginality is a more positive and enthusiastic approach to the lack of sense of belonging, where the abilities to feel at home in several cultures and to adapt quickly to new circumstances are emphasized. These feelings of marginality, whether encapsulated or constructive, help mold a self-concept within the personal layer of identity in the specific cultural contexts that TCKs find themselves in (Fail et al, 2004).

Relational Layer

As TCKs encounter individuals from the host culture, these communication exchanges can influence the TCKs' identity—positively and negatively. The relational layer proposes that identity is mutually negotiated and jointly formed through relationships. Hecht et al. (2005) proposed three levels in which relationship is the locus of identity: outside ascriptions, relational roles, and relationships as units of identity. The first level proposes that an individual's identity is constituted in terms of the other as one modifies their identity according to the ascriptions and categorizations of others (Hecht et al., 2005).

While the personal layer emphasized avowed identities, or identities originating from the self, this relational layer brings into effect of others' views on the individual through ascribed identities (Smith & Kearney, 2016). These identities could be any label, group, or categorization that is assigned to them by others (Smith & Kearney,2016). TCKs find that labels attributed to them, whether ethnic or cultural, are significantly formative in their view of themselves (Fail et al., 2004). This is dangerous as most categorizations are significantly incomplete and could refrain TCKs from communicating their entire identity.

Furthermore, TCKs will accommodate their descriptions of themselves, their background, and even their likes and dislikes to fit the audience's perception of their identity (Fail et al., 2004). This is due to the phenomenon of the "ascribed relational identity" where an individual develops and shapes his/her identity partially by internalizing how others view him/her (Jung & Hecht, 2004). For instance, a subgroup of TCKs called "hidden immigrants" are individuals who are assigned to a culture based on looks and accents that accord perfectly with the dominant culture (Smith, Virginia, & Kearney, 2016). Their concept of self that was crafted in the personal layer is not reinforced in the relational layer, causing a gap in their identity that needs reconciling. "Hidden immigrants" are just one example of the many identity gaps that arise between the personal and relational layers.

Moreover, the second level states that identity is formed through relational roles while the third level asserts that relationships are units of identity (Hecht et al., 2005). The second and third levels are similar as they both propose that identity is built through social labels and units in relation to others. In regards to the TCK's experience, the family is a prominent relational unit that serves as an anchor and source of stability (McLachlan, 2005). Thus, the family relationship unit is the heart of identity negotiation and interaction between the TCK and the places where they lived (Lijadi & Schalkwyk, 2017). Additionally, as TCKs negotiated new layers of identities, parents stressed on their responsibility to strengthen the family to manage relocation stress and transience

(McLachlan, 2005). Thus, it is evident that parents realize the need for TCKs to find identity through this relational unit.

Communal Layer

While a large identity gap remains between the personal and relational layers, the communal layer acts as a reconciliation of this identity gap. The communal layer is where the individual's identity is attached to a larger group identity. Often, group identities are formed through common characteristics and collective experiences as a supportive community is formed (Hecht et al., 2005). For TCKs, as illustrated through the personal and relational layers of identity, there is a lack of a constant community as change is the only constant. In respect to this, the communal layer of identity exists as part of those with similar transient experiences, which ultimately serves as a way to bridge the personal and relational identity gap. The communal layer of identity lies in the "Third Culture," as individuals with this unique multicultural upbringing can relate to one another's struggles on both personal and relational layers. (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008). This "Third Culture" or "Third Space" includes expatriate communities, international schools, and churches. Out of these three examples, international schools are the most eminent example of the "Third Space" as it is where the TCK spends most of his/her time interacting with relatable individuals. Within this deterritorialized community, where staff and students surpass cultural boundaries, identity negotiation takes place (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008). As TCKs return to their passport country, this "Third Space" provides a hybrid space for TCKs to create, share, and relate to meanings (McLachlan, 2005). It is through the "Third Space" where TCKs can reaffirm their multicultural identities through associations with others (Moore & Barker, 2012).

Additionally, the Third Culture community does not solely exist in an institutional form. Connecting with like-minded individuals who have experienced global mobility is another example of the "Third Space" (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008). In this "cultural no-man's land", which lies in between host and home cultures, TCKs are able to relate to the shared cultural ambiguity to overcome a

society that views cultural identities as discrete forms. Lastly, the need for the "Third Space" as the communal layer of identity also pertains to the TCK's future. Researchers found that professions that involve global lifestyles will be sought after by TCKs to maintain their belonging to the "Third Culture" (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008). This can be seen as an outcome of cultural rootlessness, as change is the only constant. Through this familiarity with change, the TCK find comfort through the Third Space. Therefore, the "Third Space" is seen to be a crucial aspect of the communal layer as a form of identity negotiation.

Identity Gaps and Negotiation

The personal, relational, and communal layers of CTI are all facets of a singular expression of identity. As such, they overlap and coincide with one another. This interaction is defined as interpenetration (Hecht et al., 1993). For example, a TCK's personal identity may cause him/her to find a communal expression of identity through a TCK network, which will in turn reinforce this same personal identity. This is an example of the interpenetration between the personal and communal layers. The interpenetration of layers in CTI is pervasive and crucial to a TCK's identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004). The dynamic aspect of this complex relationship is sorted out through identity negotiation. This is an ongoing process that individuals undergo as the saliency and overall communication of each layer changes throughout different phases and struggles of life (Hecht et al., 1993). For TCKs, the identity negotiation process is unique to each cultural experience. This may cause some to deny their third culture identity entirely (Smith & Kearney, 2016), while others retreat solely into TCK communities (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008).

This complex negotiation process leaves unresolved areas of identity—coined by Hecht and colleagues as "identity gaps". These are areas in which a communicated identity in one layer is not affirmed in another layer. Because communication is imperfect, inconsistencies and thus identity gaps are unavoidable (Hecht & Jung, 2004). While these dialectical tensions are omnipresent in identity, perpetuated identity gaps

often result in anger, unresolved grief, depression, anxiety, stress, and lack of friendship (Smith & Kearney, 2016; Davis et al., 2013). For TCKs, identity gaps often occur between the personal and relational layer, due to a multicultural depth that is not understood and often is not recognized or appreciated (Smith & Kearney, 2016). An example of this is the case of the hidden immigrants, where a multicultural self-concept is not reinforced in the relational layer (Smith & Kearney, 2016). On the other hand, non-dominant groups experience labeling and othering in relationships that are inconsistent with their personal identity (Lijadi & Schalkwyk, 2017). While these examples are negative effects of identity gaps on the TCK experience, the dialectical tensions are a crucial part of identity Negotiation.

The focus of many studies of TCKs thus far is the resolution of these tensions, by exposing the recurring cycles of crisis and giving TCKs tools to press on in their identity negotiation processes. Some of these tools include increased education about their transition and social contexts, a platform to express their fears and concerns, and communities where they can be surrounded and understood (Smith & Kearney, 2016). However, no study has overtly used CTI as a framework for resolving these identity gaps. Moving forward, this study will seek to build off pre-existing tools and explore new ways to aid the identity negotiation process of the personal, relational, and communal layers.

Rationale

Having examined the three layers of a TCKs' identity in the literature review, it is clearly evident that identity negotiation is an ever changing process that adapts to the plethora of lived experiences. Furthermore, the identity layers are also seen to interpenetrate one another to resolve identity gaps through inter-layer identity negotiation. Through the literature review, there are several themes that emerged through the lens of CTI.

First, research showed that the TCK identity is multifaceted and ever changing as it is a reflection of the diverse intercultural experiences.

This was seen through the concept of home as a continuous place, one that is relational rather than geographical. Second, research showed how identity is formed through interactions with others. This can be a positive or negative experience depending on the invisibility of the TCK. However, through interactions with others who are unaware of this unique upbringing, there lies a large identity gap between the personal and relational layer. Third, the communal layer was seen to be the "Third Space." This is an institutional or relational space for individuals sharing similar multicultural experiences. Unlike the gap between the personal and relational layers, the personal and communal layers are more similar than different. This space functions as a safe place to reaffirm identities through common lived experiences.

The existing research on the social phenomenon of TCKs is mostly qualitative as researchers have sought to uncover the diverse narratives of TCKs. This phenomenon is relatively new as it is a product of globalization, thus, TCKs have not been researched through the application of a specific theoretical framework. By applying a communication theoretical framework like CTI, researchers will be able to breakdown the various layers of identity whilst understanding the relationship between the layers during identity negotiation. This framework will enable researchers to quantify their data through the categories of each identity layer.

This study is crucial as it will help researchers to understand the effects of globalization on a societal scale. First, it will uncover the unheard narratives of TCKs. Ranging from the number of countries lived in to the diverse geographical regions where TCKs come from, each story is unique in its own. Moreover, as today's society also sees an upward trend of interracial families, this research can also be applied to families with multicultural identities and roots.

Second, this research will serve as a means to challenge the societal norms of identifying individuals to a single culture—be it a birthplace or nationality. By understanding individuals who identify with multiple cultures, researchers will be able to identify ways in which greater society can

have a greater sense of acceptance and tolerance for such culturally ambiguous individuals. Considering the pertinence of this social phenomenon, the research question and hypothesis that will be used for this research study are seen below:

> *R1: How do TCKs reconcile their multifaceted layers of identities— personal, relational, and communal?*
> *H1: Uncovering common experiences through communication on a communal and relational level will lead to the strengthening of the personal layer of identity.*

Methodology

This study will seek to better understand the TCK phenomenon through the interplay of the personal, relational, and communal layers of CTI, using an interpretive approach to research. Interpretive research seeks to collect data from the subjective meanings that persons attribute to phenomena (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 2011). As seen through CTI, different TCKs negotiate their identities distinctly and at varying rates. An interpretive approach would thus be perfectly addressed as an in-depth study of this phenomenon, while allowing room for each individual to express their own lived experiences. In addition, interpretive research seeks to eliminate the researcher's bias, that will always be present at varying extents (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 2011). Therefore, an interpretive would allow for a less biased and in-depth study of the TCK phenomenon through this open-ended approach.

Study Design

The primary method through which the data will be collected will be through focus groups. This method caters to the need to collect varied, personal, and in-depth data from TCKs. To do so, the study will contain three distinct phases: an arbitrary focus group, a grouping by geographical region of host country, and a grouping by number of host countries.

The goal of this initial focus group phase will be to collect broad concepts and to begin identifying common themes relating to the

personal, relational, and communal layers of CTI. The participants will first be placed in arbitrary groups. Then, the researchers will facilitate a group discussion, aided by a guided interview format. The interview questions will be regarding host and passport cultures, personal feelings, peer relationships in the United States, and a communal sense of belonging. These questions are based off a Smith and Kearney (2016) study on TCKs and are meant to guide the interview process, but should not inhibit the organic flow of conversation. These questions are, but not limited to, the following:

- *How would you describe your identity?*
- *How would you describe your relationship with your American peers?*
- *How is this similar or different than with your host-country peers?*
- *What are your feelings surrounding the host culture?*
- *What were some challenges you faced and lessons you learned?*
- *What are your feelings surrounding the repatriation process?*
- *How are you able to express your identity?*
- *How would you describe your community in the United States?*
- *Do you have advice for TCKs who repatriate?*

The second phase of the interview process will divide TCKs among the geographical regions of the host countries they lived in. If a TCK lived in multiple cultures, he/she would join the group of the host country he/she most significantly identified with. The goal of this phase is to note the distinct struggles and nuances that may arise from a particular geographical region. While the first phase will highlight overarching themes of the TCK experience, this second phase will hone in on particular regional phenomena. In addition, creating a safe-space for TCKs to share amongst their peers may generate more genuine answers.

Finally, the third phase will divide the participants according to number of host countries they have lived in. While many would feel at home in a regional focus group, some individuals have such a great sense of rootlessness that they would

not identify with any one region or culture. The goal of phase three is to allow for these individuals to express themselves in a communal setting. This phase will also offer the opportunity to compare and contrast to phase two and see whether the most complicity and group satisfaction lies in regional or multicultural similarities. Similarly to phase two, this part of the study will be aimed at capitalizing on group dynamics to obtain the most holistic and authentic answers.

Sample

This focus group study will contain at least 50 university-aged TCKs, who are attending college in the United States, and have the United States as their passport country. In order to participate, these students must have spent at least three years in a host country during their developmental years. There will be no other requirements concerning country, reason for living abroad, or reason for repatriation; although a variety of these criteria will be expected. The sample will be gathered through reaching out to at least 3 different universities, and subsequently through snowball sampling, as many TCKs have broad networks. The goal is to reach a group of at least 50 TCKs, diverse in backgrounds, ethnicities, host-countries, and reasons for living Abroad.

Unit

As stated in the research question and the hypothesis, this study will seek to find out how TCKs reconcile their complex identities through the lens of three identity layers of CTI. It is anticipated that common experiences in the relational and communal layers will strengthen the personal layer and overall reconciliation of identity. As such, this study gathers information concerning mainly the personal layer in the first phase, and correspondingly, the relational and communal layers in the second and third phases. All throughout, however, the unit that is being measured are the experiences that have strengthened the personal, relational, and communal layers. This will lead to a greater understanding of the multifaceted TCK identity, and help the identity-reconciliation process of

these global phenomena.

Conclusion

The emerging phenomenon of Third Culture Kids and the "global village" is a direct result of globalization. As global interconnectedness continually increases, so will the number of this group of multicultural individuals, characterized by their hybrid identities of home and host cultures. Thus, it is important to build on the existing research of TCKs. To accomplish this, a theoretical framework such as the Communication Theory of Identity will be used to research this phenomenon. The proposed research question will directly investigate the relationship between three out of four layers (personal, relational, and communal) of identity during identity negotiation. This is essential as researchers will now have a formal approach to quantify their findings through the layers of identity. Researchers can uncover the importance of the "Third Space" for identity reconciliation, as proposed by the personal and communal layers of a TCK's identity. Moreover, they can examine the impact of identity gaps as seen through the personal and relational layers. Lastly, through the focus group design, unique relationships between the layers will also be uncovered.

Through the interpenetration and identity gaps of the personal, relational, and communal layers, it is seen how identity truly is a fluid and continuous process of formation. Therefore, as revealed through the theoretical framework of the Communication Theory of Identity, the phenomenon of Third Culture Kids truly is one that is complex yet important to research in this age of globalization. By navigating the complexity of the TCK identity through CTI, the adaptation of TCKs into host cultures will be facilitated. Though this research seeks to reveal untold narratives of TCKs, by identifying the gaps of identity, a following study could be used to provide solutions to aid constructive identity negotiation. The findings of this research also surpasses the TCK phenomenon as it can also be applied to other multicultural phenomena such as interracial individuals and refugees. This will be instrumental to an age where cultural boundaries are growing to be less

significant through globalization. We hope this proposal for research with TCK offers inspiration for future research with this unique and often misunderstood identity group.

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