Confused or multicultural: Third culture individuals’ cultural identity

Andrea M. Moore\textsuperscript{a}, Gina G. Barker\textsuperscript{b,∗}

\textsuperscript{a} Liberty University, United States
\textsuperscript{b} Coastal Carolina University, United States

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\textbf{A B S T R A C T}
This study examined the cultural identity of third culture individuals, defined as people who lived outside their passport country during their developmental years. A qualitative approach utilizing in-depth interviews with 19 participants from six different countries and with varied intercultural experiences was employed in order to explore their perceptions of identity, sense of belonging, multiculturalism, intercultural communication competence, as well as positive and negative factors attributed to their experiences of a life on the move. Results show that third culture individuals are more apt to possess multiple cultural identities or a multicultural identity than a confused cultural identity, as previous research had indicated. Additionally, results suggest that while they lack a clear sense of belonging, they are competent intercultural communicators and perceive their experiences as mainly beneficial.

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\textbf{1. Introduction}

Mcluhan (1962) correctly foresaw the world changing into a “global village.” Developments in transportation and communication technology have rapidly removed geographical barriers. As a result, the world is becoming more and more interwoven and interdependent. Globalization is not only a descriptor of an era, but also the dominant logic of many people’s lives. Children of corporate employees, military and government personnel, missionaries and aid workers are subjected to a wide variety of different cultures and experiences, as their parents move from one country to the next. These internationally mobile children and adolescents are known as cultural hybrids (Bhabha, 1994), global nomads (McCaig, 1992; Grasso, 2008), cultural chameleons (McCaig, 1996; Smith, 1996) and third culture kids (Useem, Donoghue, & Useem, 1963). Mainstream literature favors the term third culture kids, as it focuses primarily on the children of parents living abroad. Pollock and Van Reken (2009) offered this, often cited, definition:

A person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. . . . [He/she] builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into [his/her] life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background. (p. 13)

The definition is not limited to young people, however, nor does this research deal with children, but rather with these individuals as adults; therefore the term third culture individuals (TCIs) will be utilized. What makes the intercultural
experiences of TCIs unique is that they move between cultures before they have had the opportunity to complete the critical task of personal and cultural identity development (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). They blend their home culture with the host culture(s), thus becoming truly multicultural and achieving what has been labeled a third culture. This third culture is shared with others who have had similar experiences (Useem et al., 1963).

Much of the literature in this field (Bennett, 1993b; Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Gaw, 2007; Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Schaeetti & Ramsey, 1999), stresses the negative effects of a lifestyle of change and mobility, including difficulty acquiring a sense of identity and a sense of belonging, experiences of marginality and rootlessness, etc.

Meanwhile, research on biculturalism and multiculturalism (e.g. Adler, 1977; Baker, 2001; Berry, 2008) indicates that it is possible to successfully hold multiple cultural identities and truly feel at home in more than one culture. There is also a growing body of evidence that links biculturalism and multiculturalism to benefits such as increased intercultural communication competence and open-mindedness. Christmas and Barker (2011), for example, found that biculturalism was correlated with both cognitive flexibility and intercultural sensitivity.

Yet, despite the fact that TCIs, because of their culturally mobile upbringing, represent the very essence of multicultural beings in a global society, systematic studies of multiculturalism rarely include TCIs. In addition, Lytle, Barker, & Cornwall (2011) noted that while mainstream TCI literature addresses benefits as well as detriments of the third culture experience, most of these have not yet been empirically tested.

This study addresses the seemingly contradictory findings in regards to TCIs by examining the ways in which TCIs' intercultural experiences have impacted their identity as adults. A qualitative approach utilizing in-depth interviews with TCIs from different countries and with varied intercultural experiences was employed in order to gain a more complete and comprehensive understanding of how key concepts are inter-related and reflected in the third culture experience. The study explored TCIs' perceptions of their cultural identity, sense of belonging, multiculturalism, intercultural communication competence, as well as positive and negative factors attributed to their experiences of a life on the move.

2. Review of literature and rationale

As background for the study, literature related to intercultural adaptation, cultural identity, third cultural individuals, and multiculturalism was examined. This literature is generally based on a view of culture as a self-sustaining system that reproduces itself through communication and that consists of meanings, beliefs, values, and norms that guide behavior (Jandt, 2004). Culture undergirds every aspect of human activity, including the political, economic, social, and religious domains of society (Navas, Rojas, García, & Pumarejas, 2007). In essence, culture does not just surround an individual; it also impacts who he or she becomes.

2.1. Intercultural adaptation and cultural identity

Foundational to this research is the process of intercultural adaptation, defined as “individuals upon relocating into an unfamiliar cultural environment, establish (or reestablish) and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment” (Kim, 2002, p. 260). Underlying much of the early research on intercultural adaptation was the assumption that individuals were leaving and unlearning one culture with the goal of assimilating into a second culture more or less permanently. The native cultural identity would thus be replaced with a newly acquired one (Kim, 2002; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993).

Later work by Berry (1997, 2008) has highlighted cultural adaptation as a two-dimensional process in which the individual undergoes two independent processes of acculturation, or culture learning; one to the culture of origin and one to the host culture (Berry, Trimble, & Olmedo, 1986; Mendoza, 1984; Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980). Thus, it is possible for an individual to be highly acculturated to one, both, or neither culture (Birman, 1994, 1998). It should be noted that individuals do not necessarily acculturate evenly across every domain of society. Navas et al. (2007) found, for example, that assimilation is more likely to take place in relation to a host country's political and economic systems than to its value system. Berry (2008) recognized four different outcomes of the acculturation process and labeled someone who is highly acculturated in both home and host cultures an integrator. Bennett (1993a) saw individuals engaged in the integration process as constantly defining their own identity and evaluating their behavior and values in contrast to and in concert with multiple cultures. They incorporate aspects of other cultures with their home culture perspectives. The notion that it is possible for an individual to function simultaneously in two different cultures and alter his or her behavior to fit a particular cultural context is also articulated in the alternation model of cultural adaptation (LaFromboise et al., 1993). This model also assumes that it is possible for an individual to have a sense of belonging in two cultures without compromising his or her sense of cultural identity.

Cultural identity is believed to be an important factor impacting how individuals adapt interculturally. Casimir (1984) defined cultural identity as “the image of the self and the culture intertwined in the individual’s total conception of reality” (p. 2). Collier and Thomas (1988) saw cultural identity as validated from within a particular culture through interpersonal relationships, and suggested that it may vary in scope, salience, and intensity. Sussman (2000) argued that a cultural identity typically does not become salient until cultural transition commences.

Kim (2008) suggested that an individual who frequently experiences acculturation may achieve an intercultural identity, described as “an open-ended, adaptive, and transformative self-other orientation” (p. 364). A key element of this dynamic
and integrative cultural identity is a clear self-definition, which enables one to see past cultural stereotypes and focus on commonalities rather than on differences. A similar concept of an intercultural identity that is complex, but stable, and with a clear self-concept, was furthered by Sussman (2000).

### 2.2. Third culture individuals

One group that actively engages in intercultural communication during the span of their childhood and beyond is third culture individuals (TCIs), also referred to as third culture kids. The term was first coined by Useem et al. (1963), who described the third culture as a complex combination of an individual’s home culture and host culture(s), which amalgamated to form a third culture. TCIs develop “new types of selves” (p. 170), and thereby form a unique culture that is shared by all TCIs and reaffirmed in association with other TCIs. Although different definitions of TCIs articulate various levels of intercultural exposure (Cockburn, 2002), some studies (e.g., Lyttle et al., 2011) suggest that length of exposure is secondary to the age of exposure, i.e. during childhood and/or adolescence.

Some of the greatest challenges that TCIs face are in forming their sense of identity and sense of belonging (Bennett, 1993b; Fail et al., 2004; Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999). When adults adapt to a new culture, they typically already have a sense of who they are and where they belong. TCIs, by contrast, move between cultures before they have had the opportunity to be socialized into their home culture and form a personal identity (McCag, 1996; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Their identity development is often disrupted and they have to focus on adjusting to new environments instead of gaining a sense of self (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). Another important difference between adults and children in this regard is that adults are more likely to encounter a host culture in a wide variety of contexts (Navas et al., 2007), whereas children are more likely to experience a host culture mainly in the context of social relationships, where they encounter different ways of thinking, communicating, and acting.

It has been reported that the mobile lifestyle of a TCI can result in a cluded sense of identity (Murphy, 2003), or a confused identity (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008; Cottrell, 2006). When returning to their passport countries, TCIs often perceive themselves as culturally marginal and terminally unique. They find that they do not fit into the cultural mainstream of the society that they have been raised to consider their own (Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999). This, in turn, may lead to loss and grief (Gilbert, 2008). Another common side-effect reported in the TCI literature is that of rootlessness (Bushong, 1988; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999; Wertsch, 1991). Fail et al. (2004) found that most TCKs either feel like they belong in multiple places or else nowhere.

TCIs are most comfortable around other TCIs (Cockburn, 2002; Greenholtz & Kim, 2009; Peterson & Plamondon, 2009; Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). Not only do they feel fully understood among those who have a similar mindset and worldview; TCIs also tend to feel part of a special in-group who grew up with a sense that they represented something greater than themselves, be it their country, government, or God (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). In addition, as a result of growing up in an international environment, TCIs typically possess a strong intercultural skill set, including fluency in multiple languages (Toukuama-Espinosa, 2003), ability to adjust easily (Fail et al., 2004), open-mindedness (Dewael & Van Oudenhoven, 2009), and interpersonal sensitivity (Lyttle et al., 2011). 

### 2.3. Multiculturalism

The concept of multiculturalism is based on the idea that an individual can successfully hold two or more cultural identities (Baker, 2001). In his important think piece, Adler (1977) characterized the “multicultural man” as a person whose identity is adaptive, temporary and open to change, rather than based on belonging to a particular culture. Such person, he said, “lives on the boundary,” is “fluid and mobile,” and committed to people’s essential similarities as well as their differences (p. 26).

The concept of shifting among identities was further examined by Sparrow (2000), who related this experience of one of the women she interviewed: “I think of myself not as a unified cultural being but as a communion of different cultural beings. Due to the fact that I have spent time in different cultural environments, I have developed several cultural identities that diverge and converge according to the need of the moment” (p. 190).

Additional dimensions of multiculturalism identified by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000) include cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, orientation to action, adventurousness, flexibility, and extraversion. The importance of flexibility, in particular, has been emphasized as critical to multicultural effectiveness (Arthur & Bennett, 1995; Hanvey, 1976; Ruben & Kealey, 1979; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997; Torbiorn, 1982).

Another prerequisite for multiculturalism is intercultural communication competence (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005), which is generally defined as the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately in a different culture (Wiseman, 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Intercultural communication competence is closely related to the concept of cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang, 2003). A culturally diverse society requires members to not only possess language skills (Northover, 1988), but also to negotiate, respect and integrate differences, thus promoting multicultural coexistence (Boulding, 1988; Chen & Starosta, 2004).

Two similar constructs are those of intercultural literacy (Heyward, 2002) and biculturalism (Benet-Martinez, Lee, & Leu, 2006; Ramirez, 1984). An interculturally literate person is competent not only to communicate but also to shift between different cultural identities and operate from the standpoint of an insider. Bicultural competence, according to LaFromboise et al. (1993), is marked by knowledge of the beliefs and values of two cultures, a positive attitude toward both, and

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communication competence in both. A bicultural person is not between two cultures, but rather a part of both (Phinney & Devich-Nevarro, 1997).

2.4. Research questions

From the review of the literature, it is evident that much of the research on TCIs has focused on the negative effects of a mobile and transitional lifestyle on their identity development. The literature on multiculturalism, by contrast, has highlighted the positive effects of acculturation in multiple cultures. Empirical studies of the multiculturalism of TCIs are few (Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009; Greenholtz & Kim, 2009) and a more complete picture and theoretical framework have yet to emerge. This research attempted to fill this gap by examining the cultural identity of TCIs to see how the two constructs relate and whether TCIs in fact have multiple cultural identities and may be considered multicultural.

RQ1: To what extent do third culture individuals experience a sense of confused cultural identity, a multicultural identity, or multiple cultural identities, respectively?

This study also aimed to understand the extent to which TCIs are able to successfully alternate between two or more cultural identities and be culturally literate in multiple cultures, as suggested by the acculturation models described by Berry (1997, 2008), Birman (1994, 1998), and LaFromboise et al. (1993).

RQ2: To what extent and in what ways are third culture individuals able to successfully alternate between two or more cultural identities and be culturally literate?

Finally, while mainstream TCI literature has described both positive and negative aspects of the third culture experience, empirical studies involving TCIs are still few in number and the need to more systematically document the impact on these individuals remains.

RQ3: What benefits or detriments from their experiences abroad during their developmental years do third culture individuals perceive as adults and in what ways have these experiences impacted their intercultural communication competence?

3. Method

In order to investigate the cultural identity of TCIs, a qualitative method was chosen. Qualitative approaches focus on studying phenomena that occur in natural settings. They provide detailed descriptions of socially constructed realities and the meaning assigned to particular experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The ability to seek in-depth understanding is the strength of this method, as the researcher “builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Because TCIs’ experiences are complex and diverse, a qualitative method is generally recommended (Fial et al., 2004; Sparrow, 2000). A qualitative method was chosen for this study also because the cultural identity of TCIs remains an under-researched area and the research questions called for an in-depth and holistic investigation, which a quantitative method would not be able to achieve (Cools, 2006).

This study employed a qualitative data collection method known as biographical phenomenology or life story interviewing. The purpose of phenomenology is to capture the lived experience of participants from their own descriptions (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Seidman (1991) noted, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 8). Using this method allowed participants to express themselves in their own words and through their own stories and to remain at the center of the research process, as interpretations are derived from participants’ descriptions or stories (Chaitin, 2004).

3.1. Participants

TCI participants in this study were recruited through snowball sampling and personal networking. Since no precise definition of TCIs exists (Cockburn, 2002), participants who had spent at least three of their developmental years (age 6–18), outside of their passport country were chosen. Middle childhood (ages 6–12) has been identified as the time when a rudimentary identity is formed and interpersonal dependence is grasped, while early adolescence (ages 12–18) is marked by comprehension of social norms and increased cognitive complexity (Newman & Newman, 2003). Six nationalities and 23 countries of residence, including all continents, were represented in this study. The sample consisted of 11 females and 8 males, 18–44 years old, who resided in their passport country or another host country. Six of the participants were children of missionaries, twelve were children of business employees, and one was a diplomat’s child.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The data collection protocol was designed to accommodate geographically dispersed and culturally diverse TCIs and to be convenient for the participants. Interviews were conducted November 2010–January 2011 face-to-face in public or semi-private locations in Virginia, U.S. and in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Additional interviews were conducted utilizing the online video-conferencing application Skype™. These interviews were similar to the face-to-face interviews in that the researcher and interviewee were able to interact through real-time audio and video transfer and participants felt comfortable in the privacy of their home. All interviews were conducted in English by the primary researcher and each lasted 30–45 min.
A semi-structured approach was used with open-ended questions that were few in number. The interviewees were first asked to give a chronological account of their intercultural experiences. Next, they were asked to describe how these experiences have influenced their sense of “who they are.” In discussing their acculturation, identity formation, cultural identity as adults, and ongoing movement among different cultures, participants were allowed to choose the vocabulary that seemed most appropriate to them. The interviewer, herself a TCI, sought to be sensitive to the emotional issues involved and to prevent any personal biases or theoretical conceptualizations of the topic from influencing the interviews. The interviews proceeded with questions about how participants perceive themselves as able to function in different cultural contexts and concluded with a discussion on where interviewees see themselves as belonging.

Throughout each interview, the interviewer utilized active listening skills and verbal prompts to encourage the interviewee. Probing techniques and follow-up questions were employed as needed in order to obtain comprehensive data and to ensure that the interviewees’ accounts were properly and contextually understood.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The analysis was conducted by the primary researcher in several steps as outlined by Giorgi (1985). First, the entire data set was read for a comprehensive overview. Next, the data were analyzed while making notes in regards to elements of continuity, incongruity, and inter-related variables apparent in the individual responses as well as recurring patterns evident among transcripts. When analyzing the data, the researcher was cognizant that interviewees were not simply recalling facts, but interpreting their past in light of the present (Bergman, Eklund, & Magnusson, 1991). Finally, prominent themes emerging from the analysis were clustered, categorized, and interpreted with attention to the research questions and theoretical framework that guided the study. Excerpts from the transcripts were selected to illustrate and exemplify the various findings. At this point in the process, both researchers collaborated in reviewing the analysis. Each theme was compared to the original transcripts to ensure that they accurately reflected participants’ descriptions of their experience as stressed by Marshall and Rossman (1999) and that no disconfirming data had been overlooked.

4. Results

The most prominent themes emerging from the analysis of the 19 interviews with TCIs were their ability to shift identities depending on cultural settings; ability to blend different cultures into a single identity; lack of a sense of belonging; perceived benefits and detriments of the third culture experience; and competence to communicate interculturally.

4.1. Shifting identities

Seven interviewees described their ability to shift identities, adapt to different cultural settings, and being fully accepted in two or several cultures. One TCI said,

“I'm like a hybrid, right? I can function in both cultures. So I can go to Brazil and nobody would ever notice that I've been living in the U.S. for my whole life, and a lot of times here in the U.S. people are surprised when I tell them that I was born and raised in Brazil.

Participants spoke not only of their ability to blend into their various environments, but also of their ability to adapt internally. One interviewee elaborated, “In certain circumstances I'll think like a German, and in other circumstances I'll think like a complete British person, and then just I have my American moments.”

The first research question guiding this study – “To what extent do third culture individuals experience a sense of confused cultural identity, a multicultural identity, or multiple cultural identities, respectively?” – addressed the nature of TCIs’ cultural identity. Participants spoke of their ability to shift between identities depending on the cultural context, which translates as having multiple cultural identities which they alternate between. Such shifts in identity take place intuitively rather than as an intentional effort to fit in, and TCIs seem to take this capacity for granted. One participant explained, “It’s not like I think, oh, okay. I'm in Brazil. I need to act a certain way. It just comes to you naturally because that's what I'm used to. I don't even think about it. It just happens. Depending on where you are, you just act a certain way.”

The second research question asked, “To what extent and in what ways are third culture individuals able to successfully alternate between two or more cultural identities and be culturally literate?” It was obvious from the analysis that the TCIs in this study are able to successfully alternate between two or more cultural identities. This ability to shift between cultures with ease demonstrates intercultural literacy. TCIs possess the language proficiencies and communication competencies necessary for effective cross-cultural engagement.

4.2. Blend of cultures

Nine participants described their identity as a blend of the different cultures they have lived in. They are unable to separate them and, therefore, behave in a manner consistent with their blended identity regardless of the country they are in. They have incorporated elements of the two, or more, cultures they have experienced into a single, blended identity. One TCI said, “I have one identity, but I understand both cultures. I know how to put them together in one piece which is me. I know how to mix both of them in a way that I can adapt wherever I'm at.” Some expressed how their sense of identity does not come

from a particular country, but from the experiences they have gathered in each country that has made them who they are today:

I don’t feel like identity has to be you pertaining to a country. I see how you can pertain to several cultures, and feel identified with several cultures. I have sort of combined and blended different cultures into shaping my identity now. I definitely have a mix of cultures, and I think I like it more that way.

These findings demonstrate, in response to the first research question, that certain TCIs possess a multicultural identity as a result of having blended different cultural aspects into a single identity. These TCIs do not separate their different cultural identities in order to adapt to specific cultural contexts; rather, they behave in a way consistent with their multicultural identity regardless of where they are. Some of these TCIs have incorporated two cultures, while others have incorporated three or even more. This does not mean that they have a confused identity; they are very well aware and sure of their cultural identity, it is just different from most people’s single-culture identity.

Only one TCI in this study appeared confused about her cultural identity and during the interview expressed the sentiments of “not wanting to just put aside a certain culture,” but was, nevertheless, unable to reconcile the Hispanic and European cultures that she had experienced. Another participant spoke of an in-between state and how she did not define her cultural identity in relation to any of the countries she had lived in, but rather, described herself as “international.” A third participant identified herself as simply “American.”

4.3. Sense of belonging

A third prominent theme emerging from the analysis, although not specifically articulated in the research questions, is that of belonging. The experiences which have resulted in multiple cultural identities or a blended, multicultural identity described by the TCIs in this study have also caused some of them to lack a sense of belonging. Four participants talked about how they are able to adapt and fit into different cultural contexts and environments, but feel like they do not truly belong anywhere. For example, one TCI said, “I’ve never really felt like I belonged in any of the countries.” Another TCI said,

I don’t feel like I belong. I feel like a tourist when I go to my home country. Yet, I feel like I can fit in and adapt easily without having that sense of belonging or attachment to that culture. That’s what’s incredible about this lifestyle, that you can be sitting at a table with somebody from Brazil, somebody from Argentina, and somebody from the States, and switch languages in two seconds, and it’s not even a conscious effort.

Others talked about how they lack a sense of belonging because they feel different and do not fit it. One interviewee, who was born in the U.S. and had lived in four different countries, spoke of being “in-between.” Another TCI, who has also lived in four different countries, talked about not having a sense of home and explained, “It’s never just one place. There are little things that you’ll pick up everywhere you live, whether it’s values or traditions that you take with you everywhere you go, so you’re not 100% entirely at home anywhere.” Seven participants said they feel like they belong in two or three cultures; four identified a sense of belonging to a country other than their passport country; and two feel like they belong in their passport country. However, six of the TCIs in the study, despite their ability to shift cultural identities or blend cultures, still did not feel a sense of belonging to any specific culture(s) and several of them articulated a strong desire to belong somewhere.

4.4. Benefits and detriments

When asked whether TCIs perceive their experiences as mainly positive or negative, 15 out of the 19 participants answered emphatically that their experiences had been mainly positive. Another three described a combination of both positives and negatives, and one said it seemed like a negative experience at the time, but positive in retrospect. Those who identified the third culture experience as positive also mentioned some of the negative aspects, but it is worth noting that they came to light after follow-up questions drew particular attention to them. Detriments of the third culture experience include not having a clear definition of where you’re from, not being close to extended family, having to say goodbye to friends, the pain of leaving what is familiar, not growing roots anywhere, and lacking a sense of belonging, as discussed earlier.

However, most participants perceive their experiences abroad as more beneficial than detrimental. The most common benefits identified were the ability to adapt easier, speaking multiple languages, being able to communicate with more people, being aware of different cultures, having a broader worldview, and most predominantly, having an open mind. One TCI said about being open-minded, “I’m not socially paralyzed because I don’t know how to work or relate to other people with other points of view or from different backgrounds.” Another said, “It really opens up the person culturally and just increases tolerance and acceptance. You have a much broader knowledge that ‘Oh, not everybody thinks like me.’”

The third research question guiding this study was, “What benefits or detriments from their experiences abroad during their developmental years do third culture individuals perceive as adults and in what ways have these experiences impacted their intercultural communication competence?” As discussed above, participants in this study were very aware of how their experiences have impacted them. They spoke with clarity and assertiveness about both the benefits and detriments of a life on the move; however, they all agreed that the positives far outweigh the negatives, particularly the ability to understand.
adapt to, speak with, being aware of, and open toward people from different cultures. This leads to the last prominent theme and the second part of the research question, addressing intercultural communication competence.

4.5. Intercultural communication competence

TCIs in this study believe their experiences have helped them develop the ability to communicate effectively and act appropriately across cultures. One participant said, “You sense things, so you pick up on things quite easily.” They are sensitive to cultural differences and able to adapt easily when traveling to a country they have not lived in. Many expressed a desire to continue to travel, live abroad and/or befriend people from other cultures. Several expressed feeling restless when staying in a single country for too long. One TCI, who has lived in the Middle East, Africa and Australia since graduating from college, said, “It’s my identity. It’s part of who I am. And I think it’s affected me in the fact that I don’t want to live in America. I feel like overseas is part of who I am and [I] almost get this restlessness that I have to move.”

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the cultural identity of third culture individuals (TCIs) with particular attention to how their intercultural experiences have impacted their sense of identity, sense of belonging, multiculturalism, and intercultural communication competence.

The results indicate that TCIs are more apt to possess multiple cultural identities or a multicultural identity, rather than a confused cultural identity. Their accounts of shifting among multiple identities closely corresponds to the alternation model described by LaFromboise et al. (1993), which suggests that it is possible for an individual to fully participate in two different cultures. The findings confirm that it is possible for an individual to be fully functional and literate in more than one culture without compromising his or her sense of identity. The individual never loses his or her native cultural identity, but adopts a new one and is able to successfully alternate between the two. This identity closely corresponds to that of an integrator, as proposed by Berry (2008) and the ethnorelative stage of integration, as proposed by Bennett (1993a). The results of this study suggest that when TCIs alternate between cultural identities, they do so intuitively and with ease, as also reported by Sparrow (2000).

Adler (1977) and Boulding (1988) noted how intercultural communication competency promotes an individual’s ability to integrate cultural differences in order to transform oneself into a multicultural person who knows how to foster multiple cultural identities. TCIs in this study confirmed that growing up interculturally provided them with a strong intercultural skill set. While Adler (1977) described the multicultural person’s identity as adaptive, temporary and open to change, the cultural identities of these TCIs are adaptive and open, but not necessarily temporary. Their identity is shaped by the different cultures they have experienced, and they have internalized these different cultures and made them a permanent part of who they are. In that sense, they have acquired the kind of intercultural identity that was theorized by both Kim (2008) and Sussman (2000); one that is open-minded, adaptive and with a clear self-definition.

TCIs with blended identities are different from those with shifting identities in that the former are unable to compartmentalize their different cultural identities. They have integrated different elements from each culture, thus forming one multiculturality to which they adhere consistently regardless of the country, context, and culture they are in. The vast majority of participants described themselves as having a blended cultural identity or multiple cultural identities that they shift between, but not both. This finding adds to the existing literature on multiculturalism as well as third culture. It was beyond the scope of the current study to determine what causes a TCI to develop one type of identity rather than the other; however, this is an important direction for future studies.

The fact that many TCIs possess bicultural or multiple cultural identities does not indicate that they have a clouded cultural identity, as suggested by Murphy (2003) or experience confusion over their identity, as reported by Grimshaw and Sears (2008). Participants in this study clearly articulated their different cultural identities and described their ability to shift between them; in fact, to most participants, this ability came naturally and without any effort. Only one participant appeared confused about her cultural identity; one identified herself as American; and a third participant as international.

Pollock and Van Reken (2009) noted in their pioneering work that TCIs move between cultures before they have had the opportunity to complete the critical task of personal identity development. However, TCIs in this study did not express feelings of grief caused by a loss of security, trust, and identity, as reported by Gilbert (2008). On the contrary, many of them believe their intercultural experiences enhanced their childhood and enrich their lives even today as adults. The main benefits of the TCI lifestyle articulated by these TCIs include adaptability, cultural awareness, fluency in multiple languages, and open-mindedness. This is consistent with Dewaele and Van Oudenhoven’s (2009) study, in which both third culture and multilingual individuals scored higher on open-mindedness.

The findings also reveal that a sense of belonging to a culture and having a cultural identity are not necessarily one and the same. Participants described their ability to shift between different cultural identities or blend identities without necessarily feeling a sense of belonging to any of them. Whereas some have a sense of belonging to one or several countries, others do not feel that they belong in any particular country. Fail et al.’s (2004) research also revealed that most TCIs either have a multiple sense of belonging or no sense of belonging at all, which causes them to feel marginal to the mainstream. Greenholtz and Kim’s (2009) in-depth case study of a TCI’s cultural identity revealed a worldview that is simultaneously ethnocentric and ethnorelative. TCIs broad worldview is often at odds with that of those who have only experienced a single
culture (Cockburn, 2002; Peterson & Plamondon, 2009; Schaehti & Ramsey, 1999; Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009; Wertsch, 1991). In fact, the concept of third culture is founded on the notion that all TCIs share and are oriented toward a common culture that is unique to them (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

The concepts of biculturalism (Benet-Martinez et al., 2006; LaFromboise et al., 1993; Phinney & Devich-Nevarro, 1997; Ramirez, 1984) and intercultural literacy (Heyward, 2002) were also highlighted by this study. Bicultural competency is marked by knowledge of cultural beliefs and values of two cultures, a positive attitude toward both groups, and communication competency in both cultures. Intercultural literacy and cultural intelligence refer to the understandings, competencies, attitudes, and identities necessary for successful cross-cultural engagement. The interculturally literate person is able to consciously shift between multiple cultural identities and operate from the standpoint of an insider. Many of the TCIs in this study are bilingual; others are literate in more than two cultures. Participants did not necessarily identify themselves as literate in every culture they had lived in. Time, age, and level of exposure to a particular culture are likely intervening variables. They did, however, perceive themselves as sensitive to and able to easily adapt to cultural differences. This finding is consistent with those reported by Lyttle et al. (2011), who found that TCIs have heightened perceptual skills and increased interpersonal sensitivity as a result of intercultural exposure during their developmental years.

5.1. Recommendations for future research

Acknowledging the limitations inherent in a qualitative study, such as the inability to generalize the findings or replicate the exact research process, the results provide a nuanced understanding of the cultural identity of TCIs and suggest several new directions for research. Additional qualitative studies are needed to examine more closely the factors that cause TCIs to acquire a multicultural identity as opposed to multiple cultural identities. The notion of TCIs having a confused cultural identity should be explored further. Alternatively, a sense of identity and a sense of belonging to a specific culture may have been treated as the same construct in previous research, while this study was able to differentiate the two.

A new instrument with subscales for TCIs’ different types of cultural identities and related variables needs to be developed. The multicultural personality questionnaire (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000) is a useful tool for measuring certain aspects of multiculturalism; however, Dewaele and Van Oudenhoven (2009) only found a difference between their TCI sample and the mono-cultured control group in two of five subscales: open-mindedness and emotional stability.

Finally, the present sample included TCIs from the expatriate, diplomat, and missionary categories, but no military children. Future studies should take into account how these categories and factors such as socio-economic status, immersion in the host culture, as well as length and age of exposure, impact the third culture experience. Also, while the present sample represented a wide array of cultures, it did not take into account cultural differences or unique cultural components, which may have affected transition and adaptation. A more comprehensive study should take these into account.

5.2. Conclusions

This study explored the complexity of TCIs’ cultural identity as impacted by their diverse intercultural experiences. A differentiation between those TCIs who have acquired multiple cultural identities that they alternate between and those TCIs who possess a single, multicultural identity emerged as a key finding. In addition, a differentiation between a sense of identity and a sense of belonging was made, suggesting that it is possible to have one without the other.

Both the positive and negative aspects of the third culture experience remain rich areas to explore. The results of this study indicate that there may be more benefits to growing up interculturally than the TCI literature has indicated. Given the value that TCIs can bring to an increasingly globalized world, the academic community needs to continue to pay attention to this unique group that is growing in size. Parents providing the opportunity for their children to become multicultural beings should also be aware of the potential benefits, as summarized by one TCI in this study. “The one thing [being a TCI has] helped me the most with is relating to different people. It makes it a lot easier to adapt to new situations and environments, and just a lot easier to get to know somebody because you’re not just used to this one thing, you have multiple experiences.”

References


